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## Charting the Terrain of Latina/o/x Theater in Chicago

Priscilla M. Page  
*University of Massachusetts Amherst*

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CHARTING THE TERRAIN OF LATINA/O/X THEATER IN CHICAGO

A Dissertation Presented

by

PRISCILLA PAGE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of English



CHARTING THE TERRAIN OF LATINA/O/X THEATER IN CHICAGO

A Dissertation Presented

By

PRISCILLA PAGE

Approved as to style and content by:

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Jenny Spencer, Chair

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TreaAndrea Russworm, Member

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Harley Erdman, Member

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Wilson Valentín-Escobar, Member

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Randall Knoper, Department Chair  
English

## DEDICATION

For my one and only,

Brettney Louise Irene Young;

and in loving memory of

Patricia Louise Chavarin Page, 1948-2005.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Marquez's apartment for a month so that I could conduct the bulk of my interviews. My college friend Jessie Amoroso offered his home in Oakland, CA for a writing retreat in Fall 2017. Knowing that writing can be an unnerving and totally isolating process, Isabel Espinal and Carlos "Rec" McBride, and I met regularly to encourage each other to finish writing our dissertations. We shared food, exchanged ideas, and supported each other through over the course of a year. I must also acknowledge Professors Judyie Al-Bilali, Terry Jenoure, Megan Lewis, and Talvin Wilks have shared their love, laughter, and creativity with me. Their generosity and honesty makes me a better artist and scholar.

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ABSTRACT

CHARTING THE TERRAIN OF LATINA/O/X THEATER IN CHICAGO

SEPTEMBER 2018

PRISCILLA PAGE, B.A., CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY EAST BAY

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Jenny Spencer

There is a rich tapestry of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. Through in-depth interviews, I use first-voice narratives to construct four decades of Latina/o/x theater history with the artists who were founding directors and/or members of these companies: Latino Chicago, Latino Experimental Theater Company, Teatro Vista, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater Company. My aim with this project is to listen carefully to Latina/o/x artists in Chicago so that I can play a role in amplifying their voices as they articulate their experiences in this Midwestern city they call home. I organized my findings into three chapters and have kept the artists' voices and cultural products at the center. In "Chapter Two: The Contours of Color," I focus on the color line at the Goodman Theatre and Victory Gardens, and examine how Latina/o/x theater artists undo the Black/White racial paradigm that has been traditionally used to theorize Chicago. I focus on production histories, programming initiatives, and the role of theater critics in perpetuating exclusive practices at mainstream theaters. The third chapter, "The Warp and The Woof of Latina/o/x Theater," centers on approaches to theater making. I share their details about how the artists in this study organized their companies, their approaches to producing

theater, and descriptions of their productions. I draw out the ways that Latina/o/x theater is always oppositional and that includes its content, forms, and various contexts. In “Chapter Four: Crafting Culture Through Theater,” I look specifically at the concept of *latinidad* and examine how Latina/o/x artists use theater to create a cultural identity that is unique to Chicago. The artists in this study define the purpose of theater for themselves, share details about their lives and how they navigate their city, a place that many of them describe as highly segregated. My concluding thoughts about Latina/o/x theater in Chicago rely on the idea that Latina/o/x theater is always political and persistent. It is worthy of study, and our work belongs in theater history books, archives, and on stages as part of the cultural record of the “American experience.”

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Lolita gave me back my dreams, forced me to look at my own politics, and most importantly, fed my spirit and my soul. The journey of this play was a journey home.”

Migdalia Cruz, 1995

From 1991-1998, Chicago was an artistic home to eminent playwright Migdalia Cruz. Cruz, a prolific, award-winning Puerto Rican writer, was most recently recognized as a 2016 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow and is a recipient of the 2013 Helen Merrill Distinguished Playwright Award. Many of her plays celebrate Puerto Rican culture while simultaneously acknowledging the painful truths about the lived realities of many Puerto Ricans residing in U.S. urban centers. Most of her fifty plays are set in the Bronx, New York, where she spent the formative years of her life. She departs from this locale a few times. For her play *Salt*, inspired by John Ford’s *Tis A Pity She’s A Whore*, she employs the salt mounds stored on the periphery of Chicago and used for clearing roads in winter as the main setting of action. Chicago figures as a site in this play perhaps because of her longstanding relationship with Latino Chicago Theater Company where she was the writer in residence and received productions of twelve of her plays. Chicago was a second home for Cruz during the early part of her career and is currently home for

nearly 800,000 Latinas/os/x, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's estimate for 2015. This number represents 29% of Chicago's total population.<sup>1</sup>

Cruz, a venerated Nuyorican writer, was welcomed back to Chicago in 2016 when Urban Theater Company (UTC) chose to revive *Lolita de Lares* as part of their tenth season of work. The play chronicles the life of Lolita Lebrón centering on the sacrifices she made fighting for Puerto Rico's independence. Dr. Liza Ann Acosta, UTC ensemble member and dramaturg, describes Lebrón's most infamous action in UTC's program note. She writes, "In 1954, Lebrón led a group of men into the House of Representatives, unfurled a Puerto Rican flag, shouted "¡Viva Puerto Rico Libre!" and fired shots into the air. Her action led to her imprisonment and secured Lebrón's place as an unrelenting, controversial (to some), freedom fighter in Puerto Rico's history." Cruz depicts the broad spectrum of Lebrón's life that includes her childhood in Lares, her work with the Independence movement, and her time as a political prisoner in West Virginia, alongside the forays of a nightmarish Dream Tour Guide who highlights the colonial relationship that the US maintains with Puerto Rico.

With the 2016 production, Dr. Liza Acosta shared that UTC "revisits this play con gran emoción, [it is] a play that still resonates, perhaps with more urgency, as Puerto Rico faces a grave economic crisis and a historic challenge to its political status quo." Puerto Rico's colonial status and the ensuing economic turmoil on the island appear as topics of debate in the news almost daily as the US continues to control and define life on the island through economic policies that maintain its colonial rule over the island. The

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<sup>1</sup> United States. Census Bureau. [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov). Accessed 22 November 2017.

colonial history of Puerto Rico is not commonly understood on the U.S. mainland and the complex factors that contribute to the ongoing economic issues on the island are often misrepresented or oversimplified by newscasters in mainstream media.

Both Acosta and Ivan Vega, UTC Executive Director, acknowledge the connection between the 2016 production of *Lolita* and the 1995 production at Latino Chicago Theater Company (LCTC) in their respective program notes. Vega writes that this play “pays tribute to an important milestone in Chicago theater history from twenty-one years ago, with themes that still resonate with audiences today.” The connection is made even clearer with the casting of longtime actor Frankie Davila in the roles of Vejigante Tinto, Don Luis, and the historical icon Pedro Albizu Campos in this production. Davila was an ensemble member of Latino Chicago and performed in the original production in 1995. In fact, LCTC began their work on *Lolita* when Davila began independently researching Lebrón’s life. Davila crafted a performance piece titled *Dolores* based on those findings and they presented a workshop production in April 1993.

Urban Theater Company and Latino Chicago Theater Company are a part of an intricate constellation of Latina/o/x theater artists who have been making important theater in Chicago for the past four decades. This work has gone underrepresented as a part of Chicago’s theater history and our nation’s theater and cultural history. In 1979, Dennis Začek, artistic director of Victory Gardens, received a grant from CBS to “showcase Latino dramatic literature and artistic talent in Chicago.”<sup>2</sup> He developed a

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<sup>2</sup> Ramírez, Juan A. “Five Ways To Become A Part Of Chicago’s First Professional Latino Theater

Company.” Chicago: Latino Chicago Theater Company. Nd.

company of six actors who were Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican. They devised theater and their first piece was titled *Latino Chicago*, which they toured to schools and community centers. Two years later, these six actors became an independent group, and then in 1986, Juan Ramírez became the artistic director. In 1987, the company acquired an abandoned firehouse from the City of Chicago that became their home for about ten years. Ramírez' vision for the company included "the development of an ensemble of actors, the creation of a writer's collective and the structuring of a residency system using members of Chicago's thriving professional theatre movement as resident artists"(Ramírez). That Latino Chicago had humble beginnings, grew to become an independent theater with its own space, collaborated with and produced Midwest premiers of significant theater artists such as Cherríe Moraga, Milcha Sanchez Scott, Edwin Sánchez, José Rivera, Migdalia Cruz, Octavio Solis, and Luis Alfaro and created original work for almost two decades is important because Chicago remains a city where Latina/o/x theater is still largely invisible. These theater artists participate in what Jonathon Rosa calls the "remapping of Chicago"<sup>3</sup> as part of Puerto Rico and Mexico. In essence, they are reconstituting Chicago as "home" for many Latinas/os/x by taking up space and rendering visible, through theater, the complex lives of Latinas/os/x in Chicago.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosa, Jonathan. "Nuevo Chicago?: Language, Diaspora, and Latina/o Panethnic Formations" in *A Sociolinguistics of Diaspora: Latino Practices, Identities, and Ideologies*. Eds. Rosina Márquez Reiter and Luis Martín Rojo. New York: Routledge Critical Studies in Multilingualism, 2015. 31-47.

## Theoretical Framework

Latina/o/x theater is present in Chicago. It's thriving. It's contributing to the discourse of what it means to be Latina/o/x in the US. In a brief conversation with José Lopez, longtime activist and director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Humboldt Park, he shared his views about Latina/o identity and history. He asserts, "The practices of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and other Latinos here in Chicago really created the birth of a Latino consciousness."<sup>4</sup> He continues by sharing some of Chicago's history:

If you came to Chicago in the 1960s, you would find a Puerto Rican, Mexican, Cuban presence here. It was southeast Chicago where the steel mills were and the first Mexican community was established there. Then Puerto Ricans came to work in the steel mills, too. So, the alliances happen in a very organic way and it goes back for generations here.

Lopez has observed the historical patterns of migration and he links the experiences of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to their early labor history in the city. Since the 1960s, Latinos have created community in neighborhoods such as Pilsen, Humboldt Park, and La Villita. Their theater, and other cultural products, signals a form of resistance that I believe is inherent in all Latina/o/x theater. I employ what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o calls an "aesthetics of resistance" In his 1998 essay, "Enactments of Power,"<sup>5</sup> he discusses power and the state through a description of the prison system and the treatment of prisoners. In

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<sup>4</sup> Lopez, José. Personal Interview. July 2016.

<sup>5</sup> wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. "Enactments of Power" in *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams: Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

his metaphor, the prisoners are citizens who are completely controlled by the state. An “aesthetics of resistance” can be found in “everything that a prisoner does to create a physical, mental and social space for himself” (58). I exchange wa Thiong'o's “prisoner” for U.S. based Latinas/os and I draw on the connections I see between the infringements of our rights and the constraints on our expressions of citizenship and belonging in the US today. Under such restrictions, Latina/o/x artists at companies such as Latino Chicago, Aguijón, Teatro Vista, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater Company dare to create theater that upsets conventional notions about what theater is, how it should be created, who participates in it and what it can achieve.

The “aesthetics of resistance” extends to the spaces where Latina/o/x theater is produced as well. In Chicago, Latina/o/x theater occurs in venues such as clubs, art houses, storefronts, parks, and museums and occasionally in the larger mainstream houses like the Goodman. Much like artists of color in earlier generations and in different places around the U.S., many practitioners today choose to create their own spaces rather than clamor for the infrequent opportunities to be showcased as the only artist of color in a given season at a predominantly white institution. Many of the artists I interviewed spoke about the importance of owning their spaces and most of them achieved that goal and created an even greater sense of autonomy. Latino Chicago was able to purchase an abandoned firehouse from the city; Aguijón, Teatro Vista, and Urban Theater also all have their own physical spaces. Teatro Luna presents an interesting model as they do not have one space to call home, rather they move through various spaces in and around Chicago. These spaces include churches, community centers and downtown spaces such as the Instituto Cervantes, a cultural center founded by the Spanish government to

promote the teaching of Spanish language and the expansion of knowledge of Spanish-speaking countries throughout the world.

My research with Latina/o/x theater practitioners in Chicago serves as a critical genealogy that is linked to Barbara Christian's 1990 essay on Black Feminist Literary Criticism. In "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism" she reminds us that, "Much, of course, can be learned by all of us from all of us who speak, read, write, including those of us who look high. But as we look high, we might also look low, lest we devalue women in the world even as we define *Woman*." In this piece, she describes a chasm in culture and knowledge that she learns at an early age. "The highs," she explains are the "thought, language and behavior expected in school and church, and the low language persisted at home and in the yards and streets" (51). I extend her insistence on shifting our gaze to the low to include both categories women and people of color who create work outside of formal theater spaces. More specifically, I employ her ideas about the "low" to Latinas/os/x. Our definition of ourselves can only come from "the stories, the poems, the plays, the language of the folk" (55). It is imperative to study Latina/o/x theater where it is nurtured "as is" rather than where it produced and consumed as something exotic and/or tokenized. By listening to Chicago Latina/o/x theater artists where they reside, scholars can learn much more about what it means to be Latina/o/x today and can think differently about the nuances of latinidad as it has developed in a city where the ethno-racial and cultural boundaries operate in a somewhat more fluid way than other parts of the U.S. at different times.

By asserting the value of "the low," it is no accident, then, that I choose to look to Chicago as a significant site of Latina/o/x cultural production. Historically, Chicago has

endured a second-class standing in relation to New York despite its own legacy of a thriving arts and culture scene. In a scathing, and yet somewhat defining book, AJ Liebling, writer for the *New Yorker* and transplant to Chicago for one year, 1949-50, wrote a series of articles about Chicago that he later compiled and published as *Chicago: The Second City* in 1952. The nickname, delivered pejoratively, stuck. What he missed in his description of Chicago was the vibrancy of the working people in the eclectic neighborhoods that make up the heart of the city. From his description, Chicago's neighborhoods were "an autonomous dreariness," an "endless succession of factory-town main streets," and "a large expanse of juxtaposed dimnesses" (30). In fact, according to Liebling, "its middle and wealthier classes sought to escape its confines every evening, commuting en masse to the suburbs and abandoning the exiguous skyscraper core and the vast, anonymous pulp of the city, plopped down by the lakeside like a piece of waterlogged fruit." (30) Decades later, Lilia Fernandez takes up "the anonymous pulp" that Liebling denigrates in *Brown in the Windy City*.<sup>6</sup> Her assertions led me to focus on Latina/o/x theater in Chicago and to interview an array of artists including Teatro Vista's founding artists Henry Godinez and Edward Torres as well as current company member Sandra Marquez; Frankie Davila and Nilda Reillo Hernandez, members of Latino Chicago, Ivan Vega of Urban Theater, and Liza Ann Acosta and Alex Meda of Teatro Luna. Through their theater practices, these artists are creating the "rich new stories" that Fernandez calls for us to seek out and pay attention to in the conclusion of her book.

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<sup>6</sup> Fernandez, Lilia. *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Post-War Chicago*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

## **Mapping Chicago**

In this section, I describe two Latina/o/x neighborhoods in detail: Pilsen and Humboldt Park. I focus my attention on these two areas because of the Latina/o/x theater connections they hold. Pilsen is the site of the National Museum of Mexican Art, and Humboldt Park is home to the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Urban Theater Company. Carlos Tortolero, founder of the museum in Pilsen, provided substantial funding to Henry Godinez and Eddie Torres to launch Teatro Vista in 1991 and Urban Theater Company is a program of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center led by José Lopez in Humboldt Park. I have visited both neighborhoods multiple times in the past three years attending plays and conducting interviews. Even though I have not visited Little Village it is important to note a few details about the demographics there. It is known as the Mexico of the Midwest and is located in the South Lawndale area of Chicago. The early settlers were Eastern European and the Irish. By the 1970's, Mexican immigration began to increase there. Over the next four decades, the Mexican population of Little Village continued to grow and at the time of the 2000 census, the "Hispanic" population was 82%. The largest Mexican Independence Day Parade in the US takes place in La Villita.

### **Pilsen**

In Pilsen, Mexican culture is a clear and present force that expresses itself in public art, music, food, and performance. The Latina/o/x population in Pilsen is about 81% according to current census projections, representing about an 8% decline since 2000. This decline is a reflection of the changing demographics in the neighborhood. Pilsen is a relatively inexpensive place to live that has been recently "discovered," or as

scholar Wilson Valentin-Escobar would say “colombus-ed” by young, non-Latina/o/x people.

Fifty years after AJ Liebling’s book on Chicago, Richard Christiansen publishes *A Theater of Our Own: A History and Memoir of 1001 Nights in Chicago* (2004) and makes an even greater error with his erasure of the contributions of Latinas/os/x in Chicago’s theater scene. His book is described by actor Brian Dennehy as a “loving and joyous celebration of one hundred seventy-five years of Chicago theater” (x) but in this supposedly comprehensive collection, there is no record of any of the Latina/o/x theater companies that have been in existence for the past thirty years nor is there any acknowledgement of the contributions of any Latina/o/x artists save for two nods to Henry Godinez and the Latino Theater festival at the Goodman Theatre in two sentences near the end of the book (257 and 286). And, when addressing ethnic theater in Chicago, Christiansen writes:

Most of these once-vital ethnic and community theaters are now gone, but at 1807 S. Allport Street in the Pilsen community that in the early twentieth century housed thousands of Czech immigrants, Thalia Hall, a two thousand seat theater, still stands. Though battered and boarded up, it retains the impressive Romanesque archway over its main entrance on Allport (56).

Christiansen suggests that community-based, ethnically specific theaters are a thing of the past as he waxes nostalgic for Thalia Hall, a Czech theater in Pilsen. He constructs a master narrative that focuses on theater created by, for, about and near a specific, white ethnic community and notes that this space is now “battered” and empty. He tells us that

this type of theater was created in the early part of the nineteenth century. Through his omissions, his readers might believe that no racial or ethnic, community-based theaters exist in Chicago today.

That Thalia Hall had once been glorious and vibrant and was then boarded up by the time of his writing speaks to an even more glaring problem with Christiansen's chronicle of Chicago's theater history. He is unwilling to acknowledge the presence of people of color and the production of their culture in one of their neighborhoods. Pilsen remains a vibrant community today because of the decades-strong Mexican community that now defines it. This history is well-documented by Fernandez in her chapter titled "From Eighteenth Street to *La Dieciocho*: Neighborhood Transformation in the age of the Chicano Movement" (207-237). Fernandez writes, "Eighteenth Street became the physical center of the local Chicano movement. Yet the local movement was multivalent, multilayered, and heterogeneous." She also states that the movement was "inspirational and it gave the local activists tremendous momentum" (225).

Pilsen is home to the National Museum of Mexican Art. Founded originally as the Mexican Fine Art Center Museum in 1982, it is the "only Latino museum accredited by American Alliance of Museums"<sup>7</sup> in the U.S. Carlos Tortolero, the museum's founder and current president, was born in Mexico and moved to Chicago with his family when he was a young child. He worked as a history teacher in the Chicago Public schools where he eventually met Eddie Torres, then a student at Bowen High School in South Chicago. Tortolero left his teaching job to start the museum with an initial budget of

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<sup>7</sup> National Museum of Mexican Art. [www.nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org](http://www.nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org) Accessed 21 December 2017.

\$900. He and a small group of friends created a series of events and exhibitions in Pilsen. Five years later, the museum had a permanent home in Pilsen and changed its name to the National Museum of Mexican Art. Shortly after that, Torres and Teatro Vista co-founder Henry Godinez had started producing theater. Godinez remembers,

A teacher of [Eddie's] at the Mexican Museum invited us to do a play there. The only stipulation was that it had to be a Mexican play that dealt with Mexican issues. He offered financial support for *El Viaje de los Cantores* by Hugo Salcero. We worked with Raul Moncada who did the English language translation, titled *The Crossing*, as our first Teatro Vista production.<sup>8</sup>

Torres remembers, "Tortolero gave us \$10,000 to produce *The Crossing* in the new wing of the museum."<sup>9</sup> He says, "It was expanding at that point, and he gave us that money with the idea that he was helping our cause." In fact, their staged reading of *Broken Eggs* by Eduardo Machado and that production of *The Crossing* made up Teatro Vista's first season in 1991. Godinez directed the play and Torres performed in it as a member of the ensemble cast. This full production launched their company that is now nearly thirty years old. Today, the Museum prides itself on being "one of the most prominent first-voice institutions for Mexican art and culture in the United States" with one of the country's largest Mexican art collections (National Museum of Mexican Art).

Within walking distance of the museum, the Peter Cooper Dual Language Academy, a bilingual elementary school housed in a formidable brick building, is another

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<sup>8</sup> Godinez, Henry. Personal Interview. July 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Torres, Edward. Personal Interview. July 2016.

prominent institution in Pilsen. It stands out because it is currently covered with 2,100 square feet of mural panels that celebrate Mexican iconic leaders such as Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Frida Kahlo, and Diego Rivera. These murals, made of Venetian glass, were created by students under the direction of art teacher Francisco Mendoza in 1991.<sup>10</sup> I mention this school because on my walk through the neighborhood, it stands out as a clear expression of cultural and national pride and community-based public art project.

I am not sure if Christiansen was in the same neighborhood that I visited two summers ago when I spent the day viewing art inside the National Museum of Mexican Art and in public spaces in and around 18<sup>th</sup> Street. Christiansen is looking at the wrong things if he travels to Pilsen and the only thing he sees is the former site of a Czech community theater, a “battered and boarded up” relic. Or maybe he is unable to see the brilliant Mexican culture that is there. In any case, Latinas/os/x remain wholly absent from his account of theater history in Chicago.

Since Christensen’s 2002 publication, Thalia Hall has undergone a transformation that signals the gentrification of Pilsen and renewed efforts to erase the Mexican community there. In 2013, developers Will Duncan and Bruce Finkelman purchased the space, invested in a major rehabilitation of it and then opened it as a hipster bar and music venue named Dusek’s, after the original Czechoslovakian building owner. There is a plaque dedicated to him on the front of the building near the entrance to the bar. Duncan and Finkelman, the new owners, liken themselves to Dusek as they highlight his role in Czech community as a saloonkeeper who created a community space and a center for the arts. Their vision comes off less like a community space (given that the

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<sup>10</sup> See images and this description at <http://chicagopublicart.blogspot.com/2013/08/cooper-dual-language-academy-murals.html>.

community is Mexican) and more like an upscale bar that caters to young people who want to hang out in an “edgy” neighborhood. The current Dusek’s website advertises expensive cocktails and artisanal food alongside Indie rock bands who perform in the refurbished concert hall.

The new owners claim to be committed to diversity and to the preservation of the neighborhood but they don’t seem connected to the local Mexican community at all. They recently became embroiled in controversy surrounding the National Day Without an Immigrant action in Spring 2017. The management fired an employee who recently participated in this protest aimed at highlighting the labor of immigrants through their planned absence. When community activists took to social media to voice their support of the young man who was fired, the management started flagging those folks for censorship on sites like Facebook and Yelp. Christianesen’s view that no culture existed after the Czech people left is resurfacing today as evidenced by Dusek’s management who believes that they are not responsible or accountable to the Mexican community in Pilsen and who do not see themselves as allies to immigrant workers whom they employ. While the plaque that honors Dusek and the type of business conducted in this renewed space works to erase the presence of Latina/o/x people in Pilsen, there is an image of La Virgen de Guadalupe that stands prominently in a church garden directly across the street from Thalia Hall. La Virgen signals the persistence of the predominantly Mexican, family-oriented community in Pilsen.

### **Humboldt Park**

About five miles northwest of Pilsen is another historically significant Latina/o/x neighborhood: Humboldt Park. A giant, metal, public art structure depicting the Puerto

Rican flag marks the entrance to this neighborhood and many of the buildings on Paseo Boricua are decorated with murals portraying Puerto Rican cultural history and pride. Humboldt Park is 51% Latina/o/x (according to 2010 data) and is the site of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, founded in 2000, and Urban Theater Company, founded in 2005. Linguist Jonathan Rosa acknowledges that Humboldt Park is “formally and informally identified as Little Puerto Rico” and that “Paseo Boricua (Puerto Rican Promenade), the stretch of city blocks between the steel Puerto Rican flags, is popularly referred to as ‘un pedacito de patria,’ or ‘a little piece of the homeland’” (38).

Founded in 2005, Urban Theater Company is the only Puerto Rican/Latina/o/x theater company in this neighborhood. It is housed in a storefront with large windows looking out onto Division Street. There is a modest sign with the company’s name in one window and two large flags hang in another: the Puerto Rican flag and the flag for the small town of Lares, Puerto Rico, Lolita Lebrón’s birthplace. Lares is also the site of an important battle between Puerto Rico and Spain and has become a powerful symbol for the on-going Independence movement on the island. When you enter the lobby, there is a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Vejigante masks and costumes decorate the walls, there are Lolita t-shirts for sale, and there is a table with postcards and flyers for theater and local community events. This is all deliberate on Vega’s part. During an interview, he tells me, “The infrastructure here is family-oriented. I want people to feel like they are coming into our home.”<sup>11</sup> And in this atmosphere, he believes that the work of his company can “raise awareness concerning many of the social issues facing our diverse

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<sup>11</sup> Vega, Ivan. Personal Interview. July 2016.

backgrounds.” Like other places in the nation, Latinas/os/x have carved out space, articulating culture and expressing the complexities of their identities in neighborhoods such as Humboldt Park. Urban Theater is one clear example of this process.

Another important detail that Vega shared is his understanding of his place in the trajectory of Latina/o/x theater history in Chicago. During an interview, he described his experiences as a theater major at Roosevelt University where there were no other Puerto Ricans in his class. After graduating in 2001, he began auditioning and working at various companies in and around Chicago. Eventually he was cast as an understudy in Nilo Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics*. The production was directed by Henry Godinez and produced at Victory Gardens in 2003, the year it won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Even though he was an understudy for well-known actor (and now director) Eddie Torres, who is also one of the co-founders (along with Henry Godinez) of Teatro Vista, this opportunity was significant for him for many reasons. He remembers meeting Nilo Cruz, the first Latino to win a Pulitzer, and performing on both the Victory Gardens stage and the Goodman stage when the production moved to those larger venues. At that time, he met Madrid St. Angelo, who was also an understudy on that production, and they decided to found Urban Theater Company. He states, “We started Urban Theater Company to address the lack of opportunities for Puerto Rican/Latino actors. We wanted to showcase our voices as Puerto Rican actors.” Through his early professional experiences with artists like Godinez, Torres, and Cruz, he explains, “I learned to be relentless.” In 2008, with this same drive and determination, he approached Godinez and asked to be included in Festival Latino, the Goodman’s biennial festival dedicated to showcasing the enormous contributions of Latina/o playwrights of local, national, and international

acclaim. “We performed a compilation of scenes in the lobby of the Goodman.” In telling this story, Vega displays the same persistence that compels him to work hard and keep Urban Theater going in Humboldt Park today. He actively resists the notion that Puerto Ricans are invisible and he affirms the contributions of Puerto Rican/Latino theater artists here in Chicago. He concludes this story by sharing that Godinez recently invited UTC to partner with the Goodman to produce a concert reading of *School of the Americas* by José Rivera. Without sounding boastful or proud, he tells me, “They reached out to us to do that.” A guiding principle in his decision-making for the company is affirmation. By the end of our conversation, he tells me, “My responsibility is to make sure people know about us, about Puerto Rican history.”

In the past four decades, Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago have shared similar sentiments as those expressed by Vega. In a flyer for Latino Chicago Theater Company, their stated mission is “to bring a wide variety of bilingual productions to Hispanic and non-Hispanic audiences.” They continued that work until a fire consumed their theater in 1997. But their legacy of producing theater, training practitioners, and inspiring future generations of Latinas/os to tell their own stories in their own spaces continues through artists such as Ivan Vega.

Latina/o/x theater remains largely invisible in Chicago today. Liebling’s omission of a Latina/o/x presence and Christiansen’s negligence about Latina/o/x theater could both be understood as expressions of their own elitism, each focused their writing about the city and the theater produced there on the habits and the tastes of middle and wealthier classes. Liebling’s description of the city lumps everyone else: working people, ethnic people, Black people into the dreary image of “anonymous pulp.” His is an old-

fashioned idea about art and culture. He only seems to “look high” and doesn’t recognize that working class people of color make art and culture that is not so separate from our everyday lives. Christiansen, decades later, also ignores the contributions to the cultural fabric of Chicago made by Latina/o artists even though he reviewed Teatro Vista’s first full production at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Pilsen in 1991!

It is clear that Latinas/os/x in Chicago persist in art and culture making despite their lack of visibility in the mainstream. They enact the dictum set forth by Nuyorican poet and founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café Miguel Algarín when he described the necessity of Puerto Rican art in his 1981 essay “Nuyorican Literature.”<sup>12</sup> He writes that we must “establish a constitution for survival on top of tar and concrete” (91) and for him that constitution was forged through the art and the poetry of the artists of the Nuyorican Poets Café and the New Rican Village, both in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Lieblings’s omission of Latina/o people, specifically Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, speaks also to his lack of attention to the Chicagoans who lived and worked in the city; he completely ignored the people who contributed to the very fabric of the city through their labor. It is important to note that Lieblings’s negligence extends to African Americans as well. He makes no mention of the presence nor the significance of their contributions to the cultural landscape of Chicago despite their active presence in the city since its founding in 1837. Margaret Garb shares this history in *Freedom’s Ballot: African*

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<sup>12</sup> Algarín, Miguel. “Nuyorican Literature.” *MELUS*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Ethnic Literature and Cultural Nationalism (Summer, 1981), pp. 89-92.

*American Political Struggles in Chicago from Abolition to the Great Migration*.<sup>13</sup> She writes that “Chicago was—and still is—a city of neighborhoods, and though most city blocks in the nineteenth through the twentieth century contained a mix of nationalities, residents tended to classify each neighborhood with an immigrant group” (4). She continues, “Segmentation in the labor force replicated and reinforced segregation of racial and immigrant groups in the housing market” (4). She writes the complicated story of the cultural and political history of African Americans in Chicago and its part in the national discourse on race.

The segmentation of labor and housing segregation affected Latinas/os/x as well. Both Lilia Fernandez and Michael Innis-Jimenez, in his book *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago*<sup>14</sup>, describe the social, political, and cultural conditions of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in the early part of the twentieth century and focus on their livelihood, their community-building, and their activism. Innis-Jimenez discusses the “third space” that Mexicans created for themselves and how their “celebrations, sports venues, and mutual aid societies” helped them work against the ethno-racial discrimination they faced in Chicago (11). Latina/o/x theater artists today continue to create these types of spaces in Chicago and they remain a necessary and vital part of the ongoing process of delineating Chicago as home for Latinas/os/x today.

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<sup>13</sup> Garb, Margaret. *Freedom's Ballot: African American Political Struggles in Chicago from Abolition to the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Innis-Jimenez, Michael. *Steel Barrio: The Great Mexican Migration to South Chicago, 1915-1940*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

### Working Against Invisibility

“I’ve spent my whole life in Chicago being asked where I am from.”

Ana Castillo, *Peel My Love Like An Onion*, 1999

Latina/o/x theater in Chicago develops at about the same time as other parts of the nation and Latinas/os/x have a long history in Chicago. Scholar Lilia Fernandez expertly documents the history of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago in *Brown in the Windy City*. She describes their migrations, settlements, displacements and other movements throughout various neighborhoods. She presents case studies of the Chicago arms of the Young Lords Organization, Chicano organizing efforts, and the efforts of Mujeres Latinas en Acción. She highlights Mexican and Puerto Rican people who were visible and vocal agents for equity in the 1960s and 1970s and she concludes the book with a directive for her readers to look more closely and more carefully “into our past” so that we might “find rich new stories” that help us “make sense of those who are not only black or white, but perhaps ‘brown’” (268). By focusing on Chicago, Fernandez pushes us away from conventional thinking about Latinas/os/x presence in the US as primarily in California, the Southwest, Texas, Florida and New York. She details a longstanding Latina/o/x presence in Chicago that counters dominant narratives that rest on the assumption that Mexican and Puerto Rican people are recent arrivals and that cultural production such as theater is an even more recent phenomenon here.

When one turns their gaze from the neighborhoods in Chicago to the large, mainstream theater venues, the lens through which we look becomes very narrow. There are limited opportunities for Latina/o/x theater artists to perform on stages like the Goodman Theater, Chicago’s oldest and largest LORT theater. For example, from 1992

to 2002, the Goodman produced six Latina/o/x plays, three of which were solo performances by men: *Spic-O-Rama* by John Leguziamo in 1992 (co-produced by Latino Chicago), *Pain of the Macho* by Rick Najera (1993), and *Freak*, also by Leguziamo, in 1997. The three plays, also all written by men, were *Cloud Tectonics* by José Rivera (1995), *Straight as a Line* by Luis Alfaro (1998), and *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez (2000).<sup>15</sup> Their track record improves in the early 2000s when they begin hosting Festival Latino under the direction of Henry Godinez.

From 2003 to 2013, Godinez produced Festival Latino at the Goodman biennially. Godinez is the resident artistic associate, a theater director, and theater faculty at Northwestern. He is also one of the co-founders of Teatro Vista, one of the most prominent Latina/o theater companies in Chicago now in its third decade. Through his efforts as a curator, Godinez brought a significant number of Latina/o/x theater artists onto the Goodman's stage. These festivals, large in scope and vision, celebrated the enormous contributions of Latina/o/x playwrights of local, national, and international acclaim. The Goodman's commitment to Latina/o/x theater, through the leadership and vision of Godinez, speaks in concert with the work of Lilia Fernandez about the presence and the vitality of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago. And, through Godinez' efforts these communities were well represented in the Festival Latino in the Goodman's past ten seasons. In fact, the Goodman collaborated with Teatro Vista to move

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<sup>15</sup> Chicago Public Library. The Goodman Theatre Archive, Production History Files.

[www.chipublib.org/fa-goodman-theatre-archive-production-history-files-2/](http://www.chipublib.org/fa-goodman-theatre-archive-production-history-files-2/). Accessed 15 December 2018.

productions between the two institutions since the mid 1990s. Teatro Vista was founded in 1990 and their stated mission is to address “the lack of opportunities for Latino artists and other artists of color, and [explore] the new work of Latino writers that challenge not only the actor and director, but also the audience.”<sup>16</sup> The exchanges between Teatro Vista and the Goodman occurred naturally because Godinez was a founding member of Teatro Vista with Edward Torres in 1990.

Godinez moved to the Goodman in 1995. Prior to his arrival, the Goodman had never produced a full-length Latina/o/x play (save for the two solo shows by Leguizamo and Najera, in 1992 and 1993 respectively). In an interview, Godinez recalls approaching them, “I had read an article that the Goodman had received a million grant to diversify their audiences. They had been doing some amazing work with African American audiences. I asked, ‘What about Latino audiences? They said what do you want to do? We agreed that I would direct *Cloud Tectonics* in 1995 as a co-production [with Teatro Vista]. It was the first Latino play that the Goodman had ever produced.” He continues, “It was my intention to make my position one that would open the door for Latino artists and for Teatro Vista specifically.” To that end, Godinez and Torres partnered for each year of Festival Latino co-producing readings of *The Messenger* by Mayra Montero (2003), *El Grito del Bronx* by Migdalia Cruz (2006), *Little Certainties* by Barbara Colio (2008), and *El Nogolar* by Tanya Saracho (2010). In 2012, both theaters came together to co-produce *Fish Men* by Cándido Tirado (Chicago Public Library).

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<sup>16</sup> Teatro Vista. [www.teatrovista.org](http://www.teatrovista.org) Accessed 25 July 2016.

I attended the festival in 2004 and 2006, and I witnessed firsthand the communal power of theater each time. I have vivid memories of Luis Alfaro's solo performance *No Holds Barrio: An Intersection of Poetry and Performance* where he eats two boxes of Twinkies in one moment and drinks half a bottle of tequila in another on while sharing stories that comment on youth culture, sexuality, and consumerism from the 2004 festival. In 2006, I remember sitting in the audience during the staged reading of Migdalia Cruz's *El Grito del Bronx* and weeping while listening to the chorus of mothers who had lost sons to senseless violence in that play. Years later, I was thrilled when Northwestern University Press published *The Goodman Theatre's Festival Latino: Six Plays*, edited by Henry Godinez and Ramón Rivera-Servera with an introductory essay by each of them in 2013. This festival and the attendant anthology truly celebrate Latina/o/x theater and registers Chicago as a site for major Latina/o/x theater activity. The anthology is a useful tool for teaching Latinx theater, a task I have undertaken at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst since 2010.

In 2012 (a decade after I attended the festival), I visited Chicago to experience more Latinx cultural production there. On that trip, I saw firsthand that Chicago is truly a "city of neighborhoods." It is comprised of 77 distinct neighborhoods. The downtown section of Chicago, known as the Loop, primarily caters to business and tourism. Parking is expensive, traffic makes movement difficult and the shops and restaurants are mostly upscale, making them cost prohibitive to many people. I saw less diversity when I was downtown and I spent more money (mainly on food and parking) on the two occasions I was there. So, what did Festival Latino really accomplish in the past ten years? It granted Latina/o artists and audiences access to a downtown space. Yes, this is important. But,

what is the Goodman's track record when they are not producing the festival? Do Latina/o audiences think of the Goodman as a place where our culture will be affirmed rather than denied? Or, is it a place where we will be surveilled as outsiders or racially profiled? How accessible is the Goodman to working class people? To families? The single ticket price for a mezzanine seat is \$49 at the Goodman and parking in downtown Chicago ranges from \$4.00 to \$6.00 an hour. The Goodman rightfully responded to the thriving Latina/o/x communities in Chicago by hosting the festival and continues to support and produce Latina/o/x work today, but what more can we learn about the function of theater for Latinas/os/x if we turn our attention away from this large LORT theater and turn our attention to the surrounding neighborhoods? And how do factors such as space, place, race, gender and language impact the what, where, when, why, how and for whom Latinx theater is produced? Just because Latinas/os/x are largely invisible (when looking at the Goodman's ninety year history) in the mainstream, commercial venues, does not mean that they are not creating important theater that articulates the experiences of their daily lives through intense creative expression.

The erasure of Latinas/os/x in Chicago is an ongoing project that is not only confined to theater producers or other culture makers. Emily Badger, writing for the Washington Post, also contributed to this effort in the online article titled "Whites and Blacks are Living in Two Totally Different Cities."<sup>17</sup> She describes a recent poll that shed light on different experiences and perceptions of Chicago. The article used data from a

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<sup>17</sup> Badger, Emily. "Whites and Blacks in Chicago are Living-in Two Totally Different Cities." Washington Post. 9 May 2016. Accessed 3 June 2016.

survey to support the idea that Black people experience more hardship in Chicago than most Whites and because of this, Blacks and Whites have different views about the city. What's most interesting to me about the piece is that Latinas/os (labeled as Hispanics) were also surveyed but their experiences were not referenced nor were any Latinas/os interviewed to address the information present in the data even though White and Black residents were interviewed about the material. This more recent example illustrates the idea that Latinos remain invisible to mainstream society despite the fact that there are 55 million Latinas/os/x in the United States and that in Chicago, Latinos comprise 29 percent of the population. The persistence of Latina/o/x theater artists who make provocative work all across the city have inspired me to conduct this research, co-create in-depth interviews with them, and establish an archive that fills in the gaps and paints a more detailed and accurate picture of Latina/o/x theater in the U.S.

### **Scholarship as Resistance**

At the time of my writing this chapter, Porchlight Theater, a music theater company in Chicago, announced its casting for their production of Lin Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegría Hudes's *In The Heights*. They cast a white actor to play Usnavi, the lead character. Miranda originated this role and the character is written as a young, Dominican man from the Washington Heights neighborhood in New York City. Porchlight Theater made a deliberate choice to cast a role written by two Latina/o/x artists specifically for a Latina/o/x actor with a white actor, effectively whitewashing the play. I share this example to highlight another challenge that Latinas/os/x face at predominantly white institutions. Cultural specificity is often ignored and the status quo is not challenged at all even under the rubric of diversity. Predominantly white

institutions will select a Latina/o/x play in order to demonstrate, or “perform,” a politics of inclusion only to undermine their own efforts by casting white actors in roles specified for Latinas/os/x. How are values like diversity, equity, and inclusion employed when specific casting requirements that call for actors of color (in this case Latina/o/x actors) are disregarded by producers, artistic directors, and directors? If the leadership at Porchlight selected *In The Heights* in an effort to be more inclusive, then their casting choice reflects a gap in their vision and their practice. Hiring a white actor to play a Latina/o/x character erases our physical presence in a play that is specifically about our experiences and set in a specifically Latina/o/x neighborhood. It is often the case that people of color are not part of the decision-making process at predominantly white institutions and that is how our invisibility becomes perpetual. This is also how racial stereotypes about Latinas/os/x continually circulate because Latinas/os/x are not present to challenge these ideas and images before they are presented to a paying audience.

There was a social media hailstorm regarding the Porchlight production that drew national attention to this problematic casting choice. Diet Tran, associate editor of *American Theater* magazine, wrote a piece titled, “Whitewash ‘In the Heights’? Chicago, You Can Do Better”<sup>18</sup> and pointed out that, “There is no viable excuse for this kind of whitewashing anymore, least of all—in a city as diverse as Chicago—the ‘not enough actors’ excuse.” The company ultimately upheld their choice and publicly stated that they

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<sup>18</sup> Tran, Diep. “Whitewash ‘In The Heights’? Chicago, You Can Do Better.” *American Theatre Magazine*.

27 July 2016. [www.americantheatre.org/2016/07/27/whitewash-in-the-heights-chicago-you-can-do-better/](http://www.americantheatre.org/2016/07/27/whitewash-in-the-heights-chicago-you-can-do-better/) Accessed 30 August 2017.

“do not require potential employees to state their racial self-identification as part of our casting and hiring process. All actors who attended were considered based solely on the content of their audition” (Tran, par 6). Their defense is that they cast the best actor for the role. However, Chris Jones, a reviewer for the Chicago Tribune, observed:

For the record, I do not, based entirely on what I saw Tuesday, think this was the right role for [Jack] DeCesare, mostly because he does not command the stage as the authentic storyteller this particular story demands. DeCesare is very tentative, signaling that he wants to disappear into the ensemble and allow the focus to fall elsewhere. He also comes off as tight and tense. He is short on control and authority. And, just as important, he lacks joy.<sup>19</sup>

I share this incident, yet another example of the erasure of Latina/o/x characters onstage and what dramaturg and scholar Trevor Buffone calls a “gentrification of the text” to highlight the ongoing nature of exclusion and the particular ways this impacts Latinas/os/x theater artists and I am also using it a call to artists, activists, and scholars (myself included). We must keep doing what we have always done. That is, make our art in our living rooms, our parks, our social clubs, our bars, and our churches. Resistance and resilience are our greatest tools and they have served us time and time again. When our entire economic system collapses, and the end is surely in sight because we know that

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, Chris. “‘In the Heights’: Protests aside, Porchlight hasn't found its Washington Heights.” Chicago Tribune, September 14, 2016. [www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/ct-in-the-heights-review-ent-0915-20160914-column.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/ct-in-the-heights-review-ent-0915-20160914-column.html). Accessed 22 January 2018.

corporate democracy cannot sustain itself, our art and our integrity will remain intact, fortified (even) by the adversity we have been made to endure for so long. The dexterity we gain by making theater “outside of the box” (literally outside of the spaces like Porchlight and the Goodman Theatre and figuratively through unconventional work that challenges social, cultural and aesthetic norms) ensures that our creative expression will endure despite hardship or crisis. In fact, because of our ingenuity, we will be poised to continue making art and dreaming up new worlds. I see a direct connection between wa Thiong'o's “aesthetics of resistance” and ideas like Doreen Massey's about how we must look at space, place, culture and identity not as fixed entities but rather as fluid and constructed ones.<sup>20</sup> Latina/o/x theater, like all facets of our culture, our identity and where it is produced, is also fluid. It is able to be constructed anywhere in a myriad of ways for multiple purposes. It is as complex and as far-reaching as the entire scope of the human imagination. There is much more to be learned by studying the history of Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago.

### **Method**

For this dissertation, I contacted twenty Latina/o/x theater artists and completed ten in-depth interviews and five short interviews between 2014 and 2016. I selected these artists because they currently live and work in Chicago and they are each affiliated in some way with Latina/o/x theater there. Of the twenty artists I contacted, thirteen responded positively and agreed to be interviewed. Writer and performer Sandra Delgado met with me twice, once in 2014 for a short interview and once in 2016 for an in-depth

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<sup>20</sup> Massey, Doreen B. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

interview. Henry Godinez and Eddie Torres are co-founders of Teatro Vista, Miguel Lopez Lemus founded Latino Experimental Theater Company, Coya Paz co-founded Teatro Luna (with Tanya Saracho who was not interviewed), and Ivan Vega is one of the co-founders of Urban Theater Company (with Madrid St. Angelo who was not interviewed). Delgado and Sandra Marquez are members of Teatro Vista, Frankie Davila and Nilda Reillo Hernandez were members of Latino Chicago, Alex Meda is the current artistic director of Teatro Luna, and Dr, Liza Ann Acosta is a member of Teatro Luna and serves as the resident dramaturg for Urban Theater Company. Lastly, I conducted short interviews with Chicano performance artist Roberto Sifuentes, artist and activist Ricardo Gamboa, and activist José Lopez, none of whom are members of Latina/o/x theater companies. I interviewed Sifuentes to get his perspective on the city as a recent arrival. I was introduced to Lopez, director of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, during my in-depth interview with Ivan Vega at Urban Theater Company in Humboldt Park. Lopez is a cultural and political activist with a long history in Chicago. I interviewed Gamboa following his performance of *Space Age* at Free Street Theater. This group of fourteen Latina/o/x artists works across the disciplines of acting, playwriting, directing, and dramaturgy. In many cases they perform multiple roles at different companies.

I was unsuccessful in making contact with Rosario Vargas, Marcela Muñoz, Nydia Castillo, or any of the members of Aguijón, the oldest Spanish language theater in Chicago; Ricardo Gutierrez, current artistic director of Teatro Vista, or any current members of Teatro Vista. I also learned about two additional Latina/o/x theater companies near the end of my time in summer 2016, so I was not able to contact members of Vision Latino or Colectivo Paso. Despite these gaps in my research, I have

over twenty hours of recorded interviews that total approximately 200 pages of transcriptions. Taken together, the interview subjects tell a substantial story that has given me much to think about regarding theater, cultural production, lineage, connection, and Chicago as a place that both challenges and nurtures Latina/o/x theater artists.

I chose to conduct in-depth interviews as a way to begin to co-construct the important and yet still largely invisible theater being created by Latina/o/x artists in Chicago. For each in-depth interview, I compiled research on the artist and became familiar with their body of work. I constructed a set of questions that were the same for each artist and then I added a few questions unique to each artist. I conducted the interviews using an open-ended format that allowed for the artists to speak about whatever they wanted. I tried to apply a light touch as an interviewer and I let each artist speak freely with minimal interruption. I conducted an additional interview with Dr. Liza Ann Acosta to specifically discuss her work as dramaturg at Urban Theater Company on three Puerto Rican plays: *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water* by Carmen Rivera, *Adoration of the Old Woman* by José Rivera, and *Lolita de Lares* by Migdalia Cruz. This additional interview was subsequently published on [www.howlround.com](http://www.howlround.com) as part of the Latina/o/x Theater Commons. I have transcriptions of all of the interviews and have read through them multiple times to identify common themes and ideas. For this dissertation, I have organized excerpts of the interviews around three major ideas: The Color Line, Artistic Visions and Processes, and Latinidad.

In addition to conducting fifteen interviews over three years, I regularly attended Latina/o/x theater, visited cultural centers, and viewed Latina/o/x exhibitions at museums and galleries. In order to round out my study I spent two days in the theater and

performance archives at the main branch of the Harold Washington Public library in downtown Chicago in Summer 2015. What follows is the list of events and activities I participated in over the past three year summers.

2014:

*Generation Sex* by Teatro Luna at Instituto Cervantes

*Nerds, Sluts, (Commiss) and Jocks*, created by youth and directed by Coya Paz at

Free Street Theater

Chicano Poster Art exhibit at National Museum of Mexican Art

Murals, walking tour of Pilsen

Three short interviews: Sandra Delgado, Coya Paz, and Roberto Sifuentes,

2015:

I attended 2015 Carnival of New Work, produced by the Latina/o/x Theater Commons at DePaul. There were twelve staged readings of new Latina/o/x plays presented over three days.

- *Parachute Men* by Mando Alvarado (Los Angeles, CA),
- *Sweep* by Georgina Escobar (New York, NY),
- *Perfectamente Local/Perfectly Insane* by Magdalena Gómez (Springfield, MA),
- *the living life of the daughter mira* by Matthew Paul Olmos (New York, NY),
- *Más* by Milta Ortiz (Tucson, AZ),
- *Swimming While Drowning* by Emilio Rodriguez (Detroit, MI),
- *Mother Road* by Octavio Solis (San Francisco, CA)

- *Wolf at the Door* by Marisela Treviño Orta (San Francisco, CA)
- *Satyricono* by Migdalia Cruz (New York, NY),
- *Appeal: The New American Musical of Mexican Descent* by Amparo Garcia Crow (Austin, TX),
- *Siempre Nortecada* by Virginia Grise (New York, NY)
- *The Sweetheart Deal* by Diane Rodriguez (Los Angeles, CA)

*Just Yell: Leveling the Playing Field* by visual artist Cheryl Pope at the Chicago Cultural Center

Special Collections at the Harold Washington branch of the Chicago Public Library

Two In-Depth Interviews: Henry Godinez and Sandra Marquez

2016:

*Lolita de Lares* by Migdalia Cruz, Urban Theater Company

*Tilikum* by Kristiana Rae Colon, Sideshow Theater Company with Victory Gardens

*Space Age* by Ricardo Gamboa and Sean James Williams Parris

*La Havana Madrid* by and with Sandra Delgado staged reading at the Goodman Barrio Arts Fest at The National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture

Eight In-Depth Interviews: Liza Ann Acosta, Frankie Davila, Sandra Delgado, Nilda Reillo Hernandez, Miguel Lopez Lemus, Alex Meda, Eddie Torres, and Ivan Vega

Two Short Interviews: José Lopez and Ricardo Gamboa

This dissertation is my attempt to listen carefully to Latina/o/x artists in Chicago in order to amplify their voices as they articulate their experiences in this Midwestern city they call home. They represent a sample of the many who work in various ways to create provocative, powerful, and incredibly beautiful theater. I have organized my findings into three sections that have become the body of this dissertation. In “Chapter Two: The Contours of Color,” I focus on the color line as it has been drawn by mainstream institutions, namely the Goodman Theatre and Victory Gardens, and examine how Latina/o/x theater artists undo the Black/White racial paradigm that has been traditionally used to theorize Chicago. I focus on production histories, programming initiatives, and the role of theater critics in perpetuating exclusive practices at mainstream theaters. The third chapter, “The Warp and The Woof of Latina/o/x Theater,” centers on aesthetics and approaches to theater making with a primary focus on the artists describing their work in their own words. I share their details about how they organized their companies, their approach to theater making, and their descriptions of their productions. Latino Chicago, Teatro Vista, Latino Experimental Theater Company, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater Company are the focus of this chapter and I intentionally foreground the voices of the artists affiliated with these companies as they share their visions of Latina/o/x theater. I draw out the ways that Latina/o/x theater is always oppositional and that includes its content, forms, and context. In “Chapter Four: Crafting Culture Through Theater,” I look specifically at the concept of *latinidad* and examine how Latina/o/x artists use theater to create a cultural identity that is unique to Chicago. The artists in this study define the purpose of theater for themselves, share details about their lives and how they navigate their city, a place that many of them describe as highly segregated. There are contours

and even rough edges when we draw maps, and the political nature of Latina/o/x theater can definitely be complicated when the work moves outside of community-based settings, challenges long-held beliefs, and pushes aesthetic boundaries. My concluding thoughts about Latina/o/x theater in Chicago rely on the idea that Latina/o/x theater is always political and persistent. It is worthy of study, and our work belongs in theater history books, archives, and on stages as part of the cultural record of the “American experience.”

I gained a deeper understanding of the nuanced details that impact Latina/o/x artists regarding how and where they produce theater. I also learned that Latina/o/x theater artists can and do challenge notions of power with their work, regardless of where it is produced. In the case of Henry Godinez, artistic associate at the Goodman Theatre, and Sandra Delgado (independent playwright and performer), their goal is to increase the number of artists who have access to mainstream spaces and the financial resources that the Goodman provides. Godinez, and Delgado choose to work within a large, predominantly white institution and in those spaces their work counters the long-term invisibility of Latinas/os/x theater artists. By doing so, they participate within an oppositional framework to undo the decades-old color line at one of the largest and oldest theaters in Chicago. Juan Ramirez (Latino Chicago Theater Company), Ivan Vega (Urban Theater Company), Miguel Lopez-Lemus (Latino Experimental Theater Company), and Alex Meda and Liza Ann Acosta (Teatro Luna) take a more critical stance regarding the ethno-racial segregation in the city and they carve out autonomous spaces in neighborhoods like Humboldt Park and Pilsen throughout the city where they control the means of production and where their culture, politics, and aesthetics are centered. For the

artists who intentionally work outside of the mainstream theaters, they maintain that their commitment is to their communities. They create their work in neighborhoods, rather than downtown, close to these communities to increase accessibility for their audiences. By choosing to work this way, they often sacrifice financial stability. They bolster their resilience in service of art and community rather than in service to the Goodman Theater's neo-liberal agenda of corporate multiculturalism.

### **A Word on Labels**

“Our language has trapped us and liberated us.”

Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, 1999

In the three years that I have been working on this dissertation, there has been a major shift in language regarding the labels that we use to describe ourselves. I now find myself floating around certain words: Latino, an all-encompassing term as in “Latino Studies,” Latina/o a term that draws on feminist concepts to make Latinas visible in a discipline like “Latina/o Literature,” and Latin@ or Latinao, which are used for the same effect of equalizing gender in the written form of a word that originally had a “masculine” default (Latino). Latinx is the term that currently signifies gender inclusion and is gaining momentum in usage across the U.S. This can be seen with its adoption by members of the Latinx Theater Commons, hosted by Howlround and Arts Emerson. Latinx is not without its problems and I have not seen common usage of it outside of academic settings at this time. The tension that arises between the terms “Latino” and “Latinx” comes from tension between Spanish and English languages. Swarthmore College students Gilbert Guerra and Gilbert Orbea put it this way:

[Latinx] effectively serves as an American way to erase the Spanish language. Like it or not, Spanish is a gendered language. If you take the gender out of every word, you are no longer speaking Spanish. If you advocate for the erasure of gender in Spanish, you then are advocating for the erasure of Spanish.<sup>21</sup>

In a recent conversation, Andrea Thome, theater artist and director of the México/US Playwrights Exchange at the Lark Play Development Center, simply offered, “It sounds very gringo to me.” Both statements signify an attachment to a Spanish-language word, “Latino” and the rejection of the word “Hispanic.” The label “Latino” came into popular usage as an answer to the term “Hispanic,” which was created by the US census and applied to Spanish speaking people in the United States. This word is problematic because it links all brown, Spanish speaking people to Spain (which for many of us is our colonizer) and is actually a misnomer. It erases our indigeneity and it is a word associated with the state. The term Latino gained traction in the 1990’s and it is a Spanish sounding word as in latinoamericano. For Spanish speakers, the “o” means all of us and could also mean “he” or “him” depending on context. As resistance to rendering the universal as male, in the 2000s we started using the terms “Latina/o” and “Latin@” to work on gender inclusion. In the past three years, Latinx has given rise as a label that resists the gender binary. At the same time, it moves us away from the Spanish language as the word is really incomprehensible to most Spanish speakers especially outside of the US. Lastly, at

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<sup>21</sup> Guerra, Gilbert and Gilbert Orbea. “The Argument Against the Use of the Term ‘Latinx’” in *The*

*Phoenix*, Swarthmore College. November 19, 2015. Accessed 15 December 2017.

Cornell, Northwestern, and Colombia, students and scholars have chosen to use Latina/o/x as the name for their identity-based groups. I think this is effective for the printed word and so I will use it throughout this dissertation when I am writing about Latina/o/x people in my voice and through my observations. Because this dissertation relies heavily on first voice representation, I will always use the labels that each interview subject chooses for themselves. I will also use terms as they appear in my research (material culture such as newspaper articles, brochures, ads, posters, etc) when quoting that material.

Personally, I identify as Chicana, Latina, biracial, and bicultural. I am working through my personal use of the term “Latinx” in conversation (which feels less like Spanish to me when I say it) and I will use Latina/o/x in my writing.

### **Names of Places/Neighborhoods**

Throughout this dissertation I will use the names of neighborhoods and sections of Chicago that each interview subject uses. In some cases, this will mean that I will not use the “proper” or more “recognizable” names of places. This is intentional as I am arguing that Latina/o/x people are mapping the city in their terms. I will describe the areas and geographic boundaries in the ways that the people I interviewed them describe them to me and I will use their terms throughout this dissertation. This is in direct reference to places such as La Villita, Pilsen, Humboldt Park, Wicker Park, and the South Side.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CONTOURS OF COLOR

When people outside think Chicago, they don't think "Latino." You know?

Ivan Vega, 2016

#### Chicago and the Color Line

There is a color line in Chicago that creates a racial binary between Blacks and whites. Emily Bladger's article in the Washington Post conveniently confirmed my understanding of this dominant narrative as I set out to complete the bulk of my research in Summer 2016. During my in-depth interviews I included a reference to her piece and asked each artist to respond to her particular erasure of Latina/o/x people and to reflect on their experiences in the city. Through their responses, I gained a deeper understanding of how color lines are drawn both on and off the stages in Chicago. Seven out of ten people interviewed mentioned segregation when they described Chicago even if they conveyed positive attitudes about the city's diversity. Dramaturg Liza Ann Acosta's response illustrates the invisibility that she has experienced and the impact of the Black/white racial binary on ethno-racial groups in Chicago. Regarding my question about the Washington Post article, she shared:

They forgot us. They really erased Latinos completely from the narrative in Chicago. They erase a lot of different immigrants, actually. I live in a neighborhood where you have Orthodox Jews and Pakistanis, and you have Indians, and you have Africans, Croatians, Serbians, and Bosnians. You know, and Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. And it goes on. There's

actually a group from Russian, ex-Soviet Republicans from Kurdistan.

There are all of those and more. I think there isn't a space for the multiplicities of identities or experiences here in the city. And in certain communities those identities are the majorities in those neighborhoods, right? So, it's very interesting that Chicago is so polarized in that way.<sup>1</sup>

To illustrate her point about negative attitudes toward Latinas/os/x, she described an early experience upon her arrival to the city. She asked a white colleague at North Park University about different neighborhoods and the response was, "Well, here is the nice part and there are the Mexicans, the Latinos, or whatever." This statement indicates that "the Mexicans, the Latinos, or whatever" do not live in the "nice" neighborhoods.

Chicago is not a predominantly white city (even if mainstream theater there seems to tell another story) and it enjoys the nickname the "The City of Neighborhoods." This is an apt name because there are so many distinct neighborhoods that retain racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. It is also true that many Chicagoans remain in their neighborhoods for generations and maintain a deep sense of pride about their ethnic, racial, cultural, and geographic roots in the city. At the same time, geographic lines become seemingly impenetrable borders when one factors in (a lack of) access to housing, education, jobs, and transportation. Actor and writer Sandra Delgado sees the divisions clearly. She shares:

It is about money. It's intentional, on the part of the city government and the banks to keep certain populations from becoming homeowners. Redlining is at

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<sup>1</sup> Acosta, Liza Ann. Personal Interview. June 2016.

the root of the problems we're seeing. It was happening in the Black communities, and it was happening to Latinos, even more so in the Puerto Rican community according to the research that I've done. We also see segregation with education and how tax dollars are allotted to certain neighborhoods. So you've got a neighborhood like Englewood, which is one of the poorest in the city. It looks like a battle zone, you know. It is one of the poorest neighborhoods because the residents are paying so little taxes. Those are the schools that need the most help, the most money. But they don't have an active parent organization because people there have to work. I think most people don't understand that and I think the media plays into it. I mean I can't watch the news because of the way they portray things. I'm sorry but it's always the "gang violence," the "black on black violence." The media perpetuates stereotypes without question and people just accept those stereotypes at face value without digging deeper into the root causes.<sup>2</sup>

Delgado has done extensive research on the presence of Latina/o/x communities in Chicago as part of her creative body of work that honors her parents' cultural contributions to the city. She was developing *La Havana Madrid*, her most recent and most ambitious project to date, during summer 2016. *La Havana Madrid* is the name of the nightclub that her parents frequented on the North side of Chicago in the 1960s. The play, of the same name, celebrates Latina/o/x culture and highlights both the structural challenges that Latinas/os/x have historically faced and the successes and pride of the community. The play enjoyed successful runs at Teatro Vista and the Goodman in 2017.

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<sup>2</sup> Delgado, Sandra. Personal Interview. June 2016.

Delgado moves between community and commercial spaces with relative ease and maintains a sharp critique of power dynamics even as she navigates these spaces as an artist. She actively works against the ethno-racial binary that seems to define Chicago and she makes visible the experiences of Latinas/os/x through theater.

Chicago was founded in 1837 and less than five decades later, Mexican American migrants from the Southwest and Mexican immigrants arrived to work “in the railroad and agricultural industries.”<sup>3</sup> Activist and organizer José Lopez recalls that the first Spanish language Catholic Church, dedicated to La Virgen de Guadalupe was formed, shortly after the influx of Mexicans and Mexican Americans to South Chicago.

Southeast Chicago is where the steel mills were and that is where the first Mexican community was created in Chicago in the early 1900’s. They end up in South Chicago. Our Lady of Guadalupe was established as the first Mexican Catholic church in Chicago in 1928 [it was established in 1923, then re-built at its current location at 3200 east 91 Street in 1928]. Later when Puerto Ricans begin to escape their agricultural working conditions from areas like New Jersey and New York, they ended up in the steel mills, too. They established a Puerto Rican community here.

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<sup>3</sup> Valerio-Jiménez, Omar, Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez, and Claire F. Fox. *The Latino/a Midwest Reader*.

Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

Despite a longstanding presence in the city, Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans remain invisible in the mythology of the city. On the City of Chicago's website<sup>4</sup>, there is a section dedicated to Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a free black man (believed to be of Haitian descent), who is memorialized as the first "non-native" permanent resident of Chicago. According to the site, he settled in Chicago in the late 1770s and left by the 1790s. Du Sable's recognition is important and he rightfully has a presence throughout the city. Artist, educator, and writer Margaret Taylor Burroughs founded the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art in 1961 and she, along with the founding members, changed the name to the Du Sable Museum of African American History in 1968. They were concerned about the lack of representation of African American arts and culture in museums and schools. Burroughs had firsthand knowledge about what was being taught through her experience as a teacher for over twenty years at the Jean Baptiste Point DuSable High School (founded in 1935). The Du Sable Museum and school are both located in Chicago's Southside. (Sadly, the Du Sable School closed in 2016.) Additionally, his home was added as a National Historic Landmark in 1976; in 2009, sculptor Erik Blome was commissioned to create a bust of Du Sable that is located on Michigan Avenue; there is a city park named after him; and the Michigan Avenue Bridge (that connects the Loop to the Near North Side) was renamed for him in 2010. These public markers erected in homage to Du Sable exist in a cityscape with more than 300 monuments, sculptures, and fountains.<sup>5</sup> Du Sable's visibility throughout the city is the

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<sup>4</sup> City of Chicago. [www.cityofchicago.org](http://www.cityofchicago.org). Accessed 5 November 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Chicago Park District. [www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/features/artworks](http://www.chicagoparkdistrict.com/features/artworks). Accessed 23 November 2017.

result of ongoing efforts by African American scholars, artists, and activists who contribute to the documentation of Black arts and culture in the city.

In contrast to the public acknowledgments of Du Sable, Humboldt Park is the only Latina/o/x neighborhood that can be found using the search function on the Chicago Park District website. Once on the Humboldt Park page, the list includes a statue and the historic home of Alexander Von Humboldt, a German explorer; Fritz Reuter, a German writer and political figure; Leif Erikson, a Norwegian explorer, as well as monuments dedicated to nature and animals particular to the area. The site excludes Puerto Rican public displays such as the 60-foot tall, steel flag sculptures at Paseo Boricua, the statue honoring political freedom fighter Pedro Albizu Campos, and the mosaic mural dedicated to baseball player Roberto Clemente located at the high school of the same name on Division Street. Du Sable's presence alongside the European colonizers is a simple illustration of the Black/White color line in Chicago and how this binary operates through art in public spaces. Without a doubt, Du Sable's inclusion in the city's narrative is due to the recovery efforts of African American historians who have done the much needed re-visioning work to write African Americans into the history books in Chicago.

Scholars Margaret Garb, George E. Lewis, and Harvey Young are three contemporary authors who collectively tell the story of Black Chicago. In *Freedom's Ballot*, Garb dedicates her first chapter to John Jones, a wealthy African American abolitionist who was elected to the Cook County Board of Commissioners in 1871, making him the first African American elected official in Chicago. She continues to write the complicated story of the cultural and political history of African Americans in Chicago and their part in the national discourse on race. George E. Lewis offers a

detailed chronicle of the legacy and ongoing efforts of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Music (AACM), an organization created by jazz musicians with working-class and inter-racial roots, in his book *A Power Strong Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (2008). Through oral history interviews, Harvey Young and Queen Meccasia Zabriskie have co-authored an account of Black performance in Chicago with their 2014 book: *Black Theater is Black Life: An Oral History of Chicago Theater and Dance*. Lastly, journalist Ethan Michaeli has written *The Defender: How The Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* dedicated to sharing the this longstanding paper's role in drawing African Americans to Chicago, and more generally the north, and chronicling their experiences in this city.

This brief review of recent literature on Black history in Chicago does not present any surprises as Black Studies and the rise of Black scholarship since the 1960s has produced historians who have dedicated their time and resources to address racial gaps in history. This mirrors national trends where Black scholars have been leaders in excavating Black cultural history, race history, and conducting cultural studies as part of major recovery and re-visioning projects. Latina/o/x scholars, like our activist counterparts, have learned much from Black Studies (and have done work done within this field and alongside Black scholars) and our work, through Chicano Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, and Latina/o/x Studies has followed as these fields developed in the 1970s and 1980s. This project is part of an ongoing effort to widen the frame to include the contributions of Latina/o/x theater artists as part of the fabric of Chicago's history.

In this chapter I will look specifically at the history and practices of the Goodman Theatre and Victory Gardens, two large, predominantly white institutions and how

Latina/o/x theater artists navigate those spaces, specifically when, where, and how they choose to work there and/or collaborate with them. By analyzing the productions histories and the programming efforts of the Goodman and Victory Gardens, I am setting the stage for a conversation about first voice representations by Latina/o/x artists who control the means of theatrical productions. In this context, the Goodman and Victory Gardens become the backdrop for the variety of Latina/o/x artists who make theater throughout the city and have contributed to the cultural fabric of Chicago for more than four decades.

I will also look at the relationship between Latina/o/x artists and theater critics in Chicago and how gaps in cultural understanding, explicit racial bias, and narrow definitions of the what constitutes [good] theater has led some Latina/o/x artists to create theater intentionally outside of the mainstream. This chapter serves as a foundation for chapter three where I will describe the aesthetics and practices of Latino Chicago, Latino Experimental Theater Company, Teatro Vista, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater.

Three years ago, when I set out to research and write about theater in Chicago, I held an assumption about the Goodman and I saw things in “black and white” (pun intended). That is to say that aside from the Latino Theater Festival, I didn’t think the Goodman really supported Latina/o/x theater artists and that their track record for supporting Black theater was in much better shape. I also saw the story in terms of good and bad meaning that I saw the Goodman as a large institution that participated in the creation and consumption of ethnically specific theater (Latina/o/x) for white mainstream audiences and that the Goodman did very little to nurture, support, or sustain Chicago-based Latina/o/x artists. This, of course, was an outsider’s simple assumption. To be sure,

there are inherent problems at the Goodman but through my in-depth interviews I have learned that things are not always black and white and that un-doing the color line at a large institution like the Goodman is an on-going project that moves slowly and incrementally. At the same time, many of the Latina/o/x artists that I interviewed see themselves as protagonists in their own narratives. Juan Ramirez and Nilda Reillo Hernandez of Latino Chicago, Miguel Lopez Lemus of Latino Experimental Theater Company deliberately chose to found their companies in Latina/o/x neighborhoods while Teatro Vida, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater maintain financial and creative autonomy and choose to work with the Goodman on co-productions and for Festival Latino. Taken together, these companies contribute to the larger project of resisting invisibility in Chicago and triangulating conversations about race in the city.

**The Color Line at the Goodman**

“The stage is whiter than the city”

Time Out Magazine, July 2006

In July 2015, I sat down with actor/director Sandra Marquez. She has been an ensemble member of Teatro Vista since 1998 and served as their associate artistic director from 1998 to 2006. Marquez, who is also on faculty at Northwestern University, joined Steppenwolf’s theater ensemble in 2016 and directed *Fade* by Tanya Saracho at Victory Gardens in 2017. During our conversation, she told me Teatro Vista’s creation story. Eddie Torres was a recent graduate from Roosevelt University who had started auditioning in the city. In 1989 he was cast in a small role, along with Henry Godinez who played Belville, in the Goodman Theater’s production of *The Rover* by Aphra Behn. As an ensemble member, Torres was asked to play a “Native” that led to him donning a

coconut bra and a grass skirt for comedic effect. While the two actors were backstage, Torres looked at Godinez and said, “There’s got to be something better than this.”<sup>6</sup> Within a year, they established Teatro Vista, a company dedicated to “creating opportunities for Latinx artists and other artists of color and to exploring the new work of Latinx writers that challenge not only the actor and director, but also the audience.”<sup>7</sup> Today, Teatro Vista is now known as “Chicago’s preeminent Equity Latinx theater company producing full scale, Latinx theatrical productions in English.” (www.teatrovista.org)

*The Rover* by Aphra Behn was written in 1677 and originally set in Naples, Italy at Carnival time. The Goodman used the 1986 adaptation by John Barton that transposes the play from a specific place (Naples) to a non-descript one: a Spanish Colony in South America. This small but significant change made it easy for the director to concoct a scenario where a young, brown-skinned Puerto Rican man could be asked to wear a coconut bra and grass skirt as the butt of a joke. It is no surprise that after this experience, one of the few professional acting opportunities afforded to Torres, that he went on to found his own company.

In the Goodman Theatre’s ninety-year producing history there have been scant opportunities for Latina/o/x actors to perform there and prior to 1992, few Latina/o/x playwrights had been produced there. Interestingly, between 1949 and 1982 the Goodman produced 16 plays by Spanish playwrights. Between 1953 and 1973, they produced Federico Garcia Lorca seven times: *Blood Wedding* (2), *Yerma* (3), and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (2). Playwright Gregorio Martinez Sierra received seven

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<sup>6</sup> Marquez, Sandra. Personal Interview. June 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Teatro Vista. [www.teatrovista.org](http://www.teatrovista.org). Accessed 25 July 2016.

productions while the Quintero Brothers and Jacinto Benevente received one production each. Moving outside of Spain, there are four outliers in their extensive production history: *Return to Earth* by Mexican playwright Miguel Lira in 1949; *Los Soles Truncos* by Puerto Rican playwright Rene Marques in 1959; *Many Loves* by William Carlos Williams in 1970; and *Miss Margarida's Way* by Brazilian playwright Roberto Athayde in 1982.<sup>8</sup>

Athayde's work is an anti-fascist play that enlists a female actor to play Miss Margarida, the domineering school teacher whose job is to enforce her rules on the school children, the audience (plus one male actor). Estelle Parsons played Miss Margarida at the Goodman, a role she performed on Broadway in 1978. While it is significant that they produced *Miss Margarida's Way* perhaps to highlight a form of resistance through theater particular to Latin America, the choice to cast Estelle Parsons works against any agency that Latina/o/x people have in telling our stories. With *Many Loves*, Williams explores sexual desire and social taboos around fidelity. The play was "admirably performed" by the Living Theatre in repertory in 1959 and was published in 1961.<sup>9</sup> Williams is an interesting figure in Latina/o/x literary history because he is a bicultural writer whose work resists any of the easy markers of ethno-racial and cultural identity. None of the cast members were Latina/o/x in this production either. In contrast, Marqués is a very important Puerto Rican writer of the 1950's whose most famous play is

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<sup>8</sup> Chicago Public Library. The Goodman Theatre Archive, Production History Files. [www.chipublic.org/fa-goodman-theatre-archive-production-history-files-2/](http://www.chipublic.org/fa-goodman-theatre-archive-production-history-files-2/). Accessed 15 December 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Fedo, David A. "The Meaning of Love in William Carlos Williams' 'A Dream of Love.'" *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 23, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), pp. 169-190.

actually *La Carreta*, *The Oxcart*, that depicts the story of an agricultural family who moves to San Juan and then to New York only to be completely disillusioned about their life in the US. In *Los Soles Truncos*, he uses the plight of three sisters, Hortensia, Inés, and Emilia, to explore the social and political conditions of Puerto Rico. The play begins just after Hortensia's death as the remaining sisters make a decision to end their lives and destroy their family home. Scholar Margarita Vargas observes, "No longer able to preserve the house and pay their taxes, the sisters burn themselves, the house, and their remaining belongings to the ground rather than surrender their last piece of property to the government."<sup>10</sup> Lastly, Miguel Lira's play from Mexico is an affirming story of an indigenous family from Tlaxcala. It is an homage to his birthplace that Patricia Ybarra writes about his work in her book *Performing Conquest: Five Centuries of Theater, History, and Identity in Tlaxcala, Mexico*.

I include this arc of the Goodman's history to acknowledge their efforts to include Spanish and Latin American playwrights in the past seven decades. However, it is important to note that the two Latin American plays were performed with white actors thus erasing brown bodies from their stage. That leaves two plays in eight decades where the critical perspectives of Mexican and Puerto Rican playwrights (Lira and Marqués, respectively) were presented on the Goodman stage. This history is the backdrop for Henry and Eddie's meeting backstage as actors in *The Rover*. They made things better when they founded Teatro Vista just one year after that performance. By forming their

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<sup>10</sup> Vargas, Margarita. "Dreaming the Nation: René Marqués's *Los soles truncos*." *Latin American Theatre*

*Review*. Vol. 37 Number 2. Spring 2004.

own theater with the explicit mission of employing Latina/o/x actors and producing plays by Latina/o/x playwrights, they made a bold step in carving out a space for Latina/o/x cultural production and they continue to work against the erasure that has attempted to ignore the presence of Latinas/os/x in Chicago for at least ninety years.

### **Commercial Theater's Color Problem**

The Goodman Theater is a member of the League of Resident Theaters of which there are 72 nationally. Members of LORT provide equity contracts and industry-standard pay for actors, directors and designers. LORT was established in 1966 as an association to link producers and managing directors who could easily share information, ideas and resources. From their website:

LORT administers the primary national not-for-profit collective bargaining agreements with Actors' Equity Association (AEA), the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society (SDC), and United Scenic Artists (USA). We also deal directly with personnel and management issues involving theater staff, artists, and craftspeople. LORT members communicate collectively via LORT Counsel's office in New York.<sup>11</sup>

To some, working as a practitioner at a LORT theater is a benchmark of relative success. These same people look to New York's Broadway as the ultimate achievement for a theater artist. High visibility, big budgets for productions and stable paydays for artists all work to make both Broadway and the LORT system highly coveted achievements. As the idea of sustaining one's life as a working artist slips further and

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<sup>11</sup> League of Resident Theaters. [www.lort.org](http://www.lort.org). Accessed 21 December 2017.

further out of reach for most people today, work in these arenas becomes more and more valued. For these reasons, Festival Latino, the biennial gathering hosted at the Goodman and curated by theater director Henry Godinez for nearly two decades, can be viewed as tremendously successful. During that time, 44 Latina/o/x plays have been developed, showcased, and produced on the Goodman stages. The success of Festival Latino is also tied to the increasing visibility of Latina/o/x playwrights and performers who have been historically absent from the dominant narrative of theater history in the United States.

Latina/o/x theater artists are noticeably absent from Broadway houses making its enduring nickname “The Great White Way” a pointed comment about the racial divide in American theater. This phrase was coined at the dawn of the twentieth century and is a reference to the bright lights that illuminate the theater district at all hours of the day and night producing a magical and even dizzying buzz for theatergoers. Within the span of 14 blocks, W. 40<sup>th</sup> Street to W. 54<sup>th</sup> Street (spanning 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue to 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue), there are forty theaters with seating capacity of 500 or more. This relatively small section of one city is often viewed as the performing arts cultural capital of the United States. It is the site of large-scale productions presented to massive audiences in an incredibly dense section of the city. According to The Broadway League, 13.3 million people attended Broadway plays in the 2015-16 season, contributing to gross earnings of \$1.37 billion this year.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Broadway League. [www.broadwayleague.com/research/grosses-broadway-nyc/](http://www.broadwayleague.com/research/grosses-broadway-nyc/). Accessed 20 November

By the 1960s, the nickname “The Great White Way” began carrying negative connotations as the social justice movements in U.S. erupted and people of color became much more vocal about race-based exclusionary practices in all facets of our society. Notably, Douglas Turner Ward penned a piece for the New York Times in 1966 titled “American Theatre: For Whites Only?” in which he pointed out the dearth of Black playwrights being produced on Broadway and the persistence of stereotyped representations of Black lives in scant productions. Ward wrote specifically about African Americans and professional theater. I extend his critique to include the extremely limited representations of Latinx playwrights on Broadway. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez expertly chronicled the troubled presence of Latina/o/x theater artists on Broadway in his foundational text *José, Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway*. In his essay “An Octopus With Many Legs,” he states “Although it may appear incredible, only four Latino plays have ever crossed over [to Broadway]: *Short Eyes*, *Zoot Suit*, *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* and, most recently John Leguizamo’s *Freak*” (110). Since the time of Sandoval’s observation, it is even more incredible that only three additional Latina/o/x playwrights have joined the ranks of those original four: Nilo Cruz, *Anna in the Tropics* (2003), Quiara Alegría Hudes and Lin-Manuel Miranda, *In The Heights* (2008) and *Hamilton* (2015), also by Miranda. In 2006, Esther Kim Lee published a comprehensive book titled *A History of Asian American Theater* that includes a detailed chronology of major events in Asian American theater history. From her timeline, there are only two productions written by an Asian Americans: the Tony Award-winning *M. Butterfly* (1988) and *Flower Drum Song* (2002), both by David Henry Hwang. Young Jean Lee will be the first ever Asian American woman playwright produced on Broadway with her

play *Straight White Men* in 2018. While there is significant scholarship on contemporary Native American theater, namely Birgit Däwes' edited collection *Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History* and S. E. Wilmer's *Native American Performance and Representation*, Lynn Riggs, Cherokee, is the only Native American playwright who has ever been produced on Broadway (in 1931) despite an ever-expanding body of work by this group. Not surprisingly, there is still much work to be done regarding the invisibility of people of color on the "Great White Way." Its double entendre will undoubtedly continue well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The exclusion and the misrepresentations of people of color persist beyond Broadway. In fact, the resident theaters across our country mirror the same practices and promote what Ward calls "diversionary theater" created for the bourgeoisie (93). He writes that its "main problem is not that it is too safe, but that it is surpassingly irrelevant" (93) and he continues, as he highlights that Broadway and mainstream American theater by extension, only accommodate "the Negro playwright...peripherally into this spectrum" (93). I understand Ward to mean that theater producers (especially on Broadway and in the LORT system) increasingly place a premium on entertainment at the expense of wrestling with complex issues such as race, racial tension and the various forms of racialized and economic violence that contemporary playwrights of color often address in their work.

Predictably, none of 72 LORT theaters are racially or ethnically specific in their missions. In fact, these larger theaters often compete for the same dwindling economic resources as the historically smaller, racially and ethnically specific theaters in their respective cities. St. Louis Black Repertory Theater's recent financial struggles (which

were exacerbated by the loss of their artistic home) and Penumbra Theater’s recent turmoil as that organization transitioned from its founding director to new leadership exemplify this one-sided battle for funding. It is also important to note that few of the LORT theaters employ people of color in leadership roles; few have good track records for producing work by women and people of color. In fact, the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis was under fire in 2012 for its overwhelmingly white, all-male roster of playwrights. In the face of much warranted public scrutiny, Joe Dowling, artistic director at that time, stepped down from his position in 2014. Joseph Haj, the Arab American theater director now at the helm at the Guthrie, has addressed the race and gender gap in his first full season by including works by women and people of color. In an interview about his inaugural program, he stated, “‘Plural voices make the work better’ and added, ‘This is a season of breadth and depth that does a lot of the things we’ve been talking about.’”<sup>13</sup> Of the nine main stage productions in the 2016-17 season, Lydia Diamond’s adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Kate Hamill’s adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility*, Mike Wiley’s play *The Parchman Hour: Songs and Stories of the ’61 Freedom Riders* and Karen Zacarías play *Native Gardens* will each have full productions. It remains to be seen how the audiences respond to this work and if Haj will maintain his position and continue to produce a plurality of voices at the Guthrie.

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Goodman**

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<sup>13</sup> Haj, Joseph. “Succession and Diversity Must Go Hand in Hand.”

[www.americantheatre.org/2017/08/31/succession-and-diversity-must-go-hand-in-hand](http://www.americantheatre.org/2017/08/31/succession-and-diversity-must-go-hand-in-hand). Accessed 18 December 2017.

In a national framework, the biennial Latino Theater festival at the Goodman Theatre is, indeed, a significant accomplishment. The Goodman's commitment to Latina/o/x theater, through the leadership and vision of Henry Godinez, speaks in concert with the recent work of Lilia Fernandez and her detailed chronicle of the history, the presence and the vitality of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago in her 2012 book: *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Post-War Chicago*. And, through Godinez' efforts these communities have been represented in Festival Latino in the Goodman's seasons since 2000. In fact, the Goodman has collaborated with Teatro Vista, the most prominent Latina/o/x theater in Chicago, to move productions between the two institutions since the mid 1990s because of the ongoing professional relationship between Godinez and Edward Torres and the subsequent artistic directors at Teatro Vista.

I asked Godinez about his work as a director at the Goodman. In 1995, he directed *Cloud Tectonics* by José Rivera, a co-production between the Goodman and Teatro Vista. He then directed *Red Cross* by Sam Shepard (a one-act play) in 1997 and in 2000, he was invited to direct *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez in 2000. This is a seminal play written by the founder and artistic director of El Teatro Campesino. Valdez worked alongside Cesar Chavez on the picket lines in Delano, CA, using theater to advance the efforts of the Grape Boycott, the unionization of the farmworkers, and to instill cultural pride in the Mexican families who lived and worked on the farms in the central valley of California. With *Zoot Suit*, Valdez tells the story of Henry Reyes who was falsely accused of murder in Sleepy Lagoon in 1943. The murder led to massive deportations in Southern California and the arrest of four innocent men. Ivan Vega, artistic director of Urban Theater Company, recalls the Goodman's production and the opportunities it provided to young

actors like him: “When I was at Roosevelt University, I auditioned for *Zoot Suit* – that was after I had worked with Henry on *Camino Real*. It was exciting, you know, to leave class early and walk over to the old Goodman. At that time it was at the Art Institute. That was something to work at those places.”

Godinez reflects on the political climate after he directed *Zoot Suit* and the reasons he decided to produce Festival Latino. He shares:

The reason for the festival was because the last [Latina/o/x] production had been *Zoot Suit*. We had huge turnouts of Latino audience members at that time. Then we moved locations. Then 9/11 happened. I was directing *A Christmas Carol*. They programed the season in the new space.

Everything became very safe in 2001 because of 9/11. I said the Latino audiences won't be able to find us. I had seen Teatro Avanti in Miami and brought back the idea of a festival. Robert [Falls] thought it was great. We partnered with the International Hispanic Festival to present two international Spanish-language theater companies. We also brought in Culture Clash, Aguijón, and Teatro Vista. One grouping represents our roots and one represents our future. We are a combination of our heritage and the present reality in this country.

Godinez has worked consistently to present Festival Latino, to develop new plays by Latina/o/x playwrights, and to share resources consistently with Teatro Vista. He and Torres partnered for each year of Festival Latino co-producing readings of *The Messenger* by Mayra Montero (2003), *El Grito del Bronx* by Migdalia Cruz (2006), *Little Certainties* by Barbara Colio (2008), and *El Nogolar* by Tanya Saracho (2010). In 2012,

both theaters came together to co-produce *Fish Men* by Cándido Tirado. These efforts can be read as major advances for the promotion of Latina/o/x theater at a LORT A institution. Certainly, the Goodman's track record is much better than any of their equals across the country. And because of the concerted efforts, led by Godinez, young actors like Ivan Vega have had important opportunities that shape their careers as theater artists. Vega also gives credit to Dennis Začek and Victory Gardens. He shares:

Dennis Začek was fantastic. I'm grateful to have worked on *Anna and the Tropics*; it was my first understudy role. It was 2003. That's how I met Madrid St. Angelo. We were both understudies. So I brought him into the fold as one of the founders of Urban Theater Company. It was such a thrill to work with this Pulitzer Prize winning playwright. You know, he was Cuban and we were all Latino actors working on this play. I couldn't be in it, but I was there at every single rehearsal. I didn't want to miss anything. By the time I was ready to go on I knew the villain well. Then the show was extended and it moved to the Goodman. I had a chance to perform at the Goodman.

Vega served as the understudy of Edward Torres, actor, director and artistic director of Teatro Vista. It clearly impacted him to be a part of a Latino production and to be able to perform at the Goodman.

While I raise some critical questions about the efficacy of Festival Latino and the larger scope and impact of this project on the city and the wider conversation about Latina/o/x theater in the US, it is important to note that some Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago value these efforts and benefit from exposure on a mainstream platform. Writer and performer Sandra Delgado credits the Goodman as a large institution that "walks the

walk.” She adds, “They commission Latino playwrights. Two of the Goodman’s playwrights’ unit members were Latinas. The Black community and the Asian community are represented. They have the new education center called the Alice. They support Collaboraction’s work with the Peace movement. They are one of our sponsors. They get it. In my opinion, no other theater company in Chicago is doing it.” She adds:

With the Goodman, I’ve gotten to know all these incredible Latino playwrights and that primed me to actually become a writer because I’ve sat in on so many of those rooms. And I shut up and listened and I really internalized all of that as an outsider artist. All of a sudden, I’m a playwright now. And again I have this outsider mentality. I didn’t study playwriting. I don’t have an MFA from a fancy schmancy place, but I have over twenty years of what I’ve internalized about what makes a good play.

For Ivan Vega, Festival Latino at the Goodman presented a challenge in that his company Urban Theater was not invited to perform at the early festivals. Through Vega’s tenacity that all changed. He recalled:

We got into the Goodman festival even though they were fully booked. They were like, you can have the lobby space and it could be really cool. I said, ‘This was us, this was who we are.’ So, we performed a compilation of scenes from plays that we’ve produced over the years and some others, and then we added some music. We performed in the lobby by the coat-check. The audience members were in the second balcony, on the staircase, and sitting on the floor. It was really a great experience. I think it was at that point that they

began to really see us. We really made it happen in the lobby and it was well received. And then we were able to be a part of the festival again. And then recently when they did the work of José Rivera, we ended up partnering with them and doing *School of the Americas* here. It was a nice surprise to hear from them. It was nice to be acknowledged for what we're doing in Humboldt Park.

Perhaps Henry Godinez' longtime collaborator Eddie Torres sums up the interplay between large mainstream institutions and the myriad of theater and performance activities that happen throughout Chicago best. He notes the racial dynamics as well as the different strategies employed by Godinez and Juan Ramirez:

It is just that “[Henry] is this white guy who is Latino.” You know what I mean? He was like, “I am Latino and I think there is a way to work this system in a different way.” Latino Chicago fought a lot. I think Henry tried to work his way around things in more of a savvy and political way. Both of those approaches need to happen. We need the fighter and we need the peacemaker, too. We just need to know that the person infiltrating the system is part of who we are. And that gets difficult because we don't always know what's really going on. Even though I was angry and frustrated [when Henry left Teatro Vista for the Goodman], the first thing that came out of his mouth was this: “Look, I'm going to the Goodman. They're letting me come in there, and I think it's a really important opportunity for all of us as Latino actors to walk through that door and I'll be the one holding that door open.” To me, that

meant that I needed to develop this ensemble of actors at Teatro Vista. I needed to continue producing and then we could meet at some point. Then we did. Teatro Vista ended up doing shows at the Goodman. We ended up doing shows at Steppenwolf. And Teatro Vista ended up doing shows at Victory Gardens and part of that was a mode of survival and part of it was based on the talent we developed.

The Goodman is a part of the mapping of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago because of the efforts and drive of Henry Godinez who has helped to shift the culture of the Goodman in a more inclusive direction. Latina/o/x artists move to and from their home institutions such as Teatro Vista and Urban Theater and gain meaningful experiences because of the interplay between institutions. However, my questions about who has access to the Goodman stand. Through the efforts of Henry Godinez in his work as an artist and an advocate, he has increased the visibility of Latina/o/x artists through the festival, co-productions, and fully supported productions. However, as scholar Adrian Burgos points out, in his 2007 book *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line*, "Inclusion does not signify equality." So the larger question remains, "What more is needed to make the theatrical landscape of Chicago equitable?"

### **Challenging the Color Line at Victory Gardens**

Victory Gardens, a playwright-centered, professional, non-profit theater located in the North Side (near Lincoln Park), provides another approach to inclusion with a clearer focus on equity. Through the efforts of current artistic director Chay Yew, Victory Gardens appears clearer in its focus on equity and more successful with their efforts in this arena. Yew, playwright and director, took the helm at Victory Gardens in 2011. Five

years before his arrival, the company sold its original building on Lincoln Avenue and then renovated and moved into the Biograph Theater (also located on Lincoln Avenue). This elegantly restored movie house has its share of notoriety. It is the site where bank robber John Dillinger was shot and killed by FBI agents while he was watching a gangster flick in 1934. Many of the Chicagoans I met seemed to know and want to share the mob's history in their city with me. This was an enormous undertaking for a thirty-year old company that was founded by a small group of theater artists with a modest budget of \$1000 in 1974. In 1978, Dennis Začek became the artistic director there and he "committed to presenting a racially integrated season."<sup>14</sup>

From the play titles and playwrights produced in those early seasons it seems that Začek had a hard time fulfilling his mission of diversity. However, he was instrumental in the founding and initial support of Latino Chicago Theater Company. In 1979, he received a grant from CBS to commission a play of the same name that would "showcase Latino dramatic literature and artistic talent in Chicago." (Latino Chicago promotional flyer, 1987) With the funding, Začek "developed a company of six actors representing Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican heritage." (flyer) This company wrote and performed *Latino Chicago* for "Hispanic and non-Hispanic audiences" in 1979. Začek worked closely with Juan Ramirez, who would take over leadership of Latino Chicago (the company) under the auspices of Victory Gardens and then, in 1986, Ramirez led its transition to an independent company. Začek's role in the development and support of LATC makes him an important figure in the history of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago.

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<sup>14</sup> Victory Gardens. [www.victorygardens.org](http://www.victorygardens.org). Accessed 27 December 2017.

*Latino Chicago* toured to area schools in 1979 and 1980. The company performed at Bowen High School in South Side Chicago where actor/director Eddie Torres was a student. In our interview, Torres recalls:

They actually came far out to bring some culture to an area that probably still needs it. They had everyone. Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, you know. That was the one thing that I remember. I knew about Mexican culture because I grew up in it, but I'm Puerto Rican, ok? And the cultures that I was exposed to in high school were gang cultures. I didn't know anything else. But when these guys from Latino Chicago came along, I'm like there's this whole plethora of people who I would come to know as Latino people. These guys basically got me interested in something that to this day I'm still a theatre artist; I'm a director; I founded a company. All of that, to me, is a big deal. We always say: 'Wow, if we can change one person's life with theater, it's worth it.' That "one person" was me a long time ago.

If Dennis Začek faced challenges creating a racially inclusive institution at Victory Gardens (something a review of the forty-three year production history suggests), then Chay Yew's leadership appears to be ushering in bold advances of Začek's vision. Yew made sweeping changes to the playwrights' ensemble upon his arrival and received tremendous public pushback from disgruntled (white) artists, theater critics, and some audience members. In 1996, Začek instituted the playwrights' ensemble as a group of resident writers whose work would be developed and produced regularly at Victory Gardens. This group of writers was not diverse from the outset and by 2011, the

ensemble consisted of 14 playwrights, three of whom were people of color. Yew reduced this number from 14 to four (one of whom is a resident of Chicago). The original four were (all men) Philip Dawkins, Marcus Gardley, Samuel Hunter, and Luis Alfaro. The current roster has grown to eight artists and this list reflects greater racial, cultural, and gender diversity: Luis Alfaro, Marcus Gardley, Tanya Saracho, Naomi Iizuka, Ike Holter, Laura Schellhardt, Philip Dawkins, and Samuel D. Hunter ([www.victorygardens.org](http://www.victorygardens.org)).

The two news articles published about Yew's leadership "At Victory Gardens, A Bitter Uprooting" by Deanna Isaacs (Chicago Reader, December 5, 2012) and "'Opening Doors' Means Rattling Some Cages" by Patrick Healy (New York Times, November 21, 2012) point out a provincialism with seemingly racist overtones. Both journalists highlight Yew's "outsider" status in their discussions of his leadership. Yew was born in Singapore and has lived in the US since he moved here to study at Pepperdine University and Boston College. To his credit, Yew embraces the pushback and affirms his approach to diversity. In Healy's article, he states:

Artistically, I feel that I'm just building on Dennis's mission of doing new plays, socially conscious work, and a nod in the direction of diversity. Who are the new writers? Do we challenge a little more with different styles? Can we talk about race in a more direct way, instead of the colonial way, from the white point of view? How do we converse honestly? How do we reflect Chicago?

He later adds, "I can be — to a fault — uncompromising about opening those doors in the way I want to" and "If you cross an ocean to pursue the life you want, you are going to do the things you want to do." Yew's direct actions and his determination have pushed

Victory Gardens forward with regard to racial and cultural equity. In addition to changing the roster of ensemble playwrights, he instituted the “Resident Theater Program” to formalize the relationships that Victory Gardens has historically maintained with smaller “storefront” companies in the city. These include ALTA Chicago, Definition Theatre Company, Rasaka Theater Company, Sideshow Theatre Company, and Teatro Vista. Through these partnerships, they are supporting an incredibly diverse group of Chicago-based theater artists. Since 2011, Yew has provided resources (time, space, and productions) directly to artists of color through the playwrights’ ensemble and the resident theater program. He has put into practice what Začek aspired to do. Yew is making strides in racial, cultural, and gender inclusion while also working towards equity in the theater. The 2017-2018 season is racially and culturally diverse. Additionally, all five of the plays are written by women and two out of five will be directed by women.

In Summer 2016, Sideshow Theatre Company presented a staged reading of *Tillikum* by poet, playwright, and performer Kristiana Rae Colón (also a founding member of Teatro Luna) at Victory Gardens. This new play takes an imaginative look at the infamous orca whale that killed three people while in captivity at Sea World. Colón renders the whale human-like and the audience views the world through his eyes. He is majestic and imprisonment destroys his spirit. I witnessed a simple and profound moment in the theater at that reading. As with most new plays, Colón and director Dawn Renee Jones wanted to hear responses from the audience. Dramaturg Isaac Gomez facilitated the post-show discussion and at one point, a young African American man stood up and shared his reflection. He said, “This is my first time at a play and this really reminds me of my experience with incarceration.” The room was filled to capacity with young people

of color and the artistic team created the space for this play to be shared and they created the space for this young man to make this simple statement in a roomful of strangers. It was another testament of the power of theater for me and I felt affirmed in my beliefs about theater as a tool for social transformation.

To coincide with Mexican playwright Tanya Saracho's production of *Fade*, directed by Sandra Marquez, Yew presented the Chicago International Latino Theater Festival in Fall 2017. This I am sure builds on the long-term relationship that Victory Gardens has shared with Teatro Vista and is a product of their connections to ALTA and Teatro Vista as resident theater companies. Because Victory Gardens is located in a neighborhood rather than downtown in the theater district, and because Yew and the Victory Gardens' staff have made more ongoing efforts with artists and audiences of color, the impact of this festival may be very different from Festival Latino at the Goodman Theatre. The Victory Gardens Festival seems to be part of ongoing and distinct efforts to support Latina/o/x theater artists in meaningful, rather than tokenized, ways.

### **Theater Critics and Latina/o/x Theater**

Latina/o/x theater artists are taking the reins in a myriad of ways: founding their own companies, taking over spaces throughout the city, infiltrating the larger, predominantly white institutions, collaborating, and co-producing throughout the city. Companies like Latino Chicago and Latino Experimental Theater Company valued autonomy while companies like Teatro Vista and Urban Theater Company understand that they can leverage resources through collaboration with larger institutions such as Victory Gardens, Steppenwolf, and the Goodman Theatre. Teatro Luna writes and produces original work throughout the city and has just launched their Los Angeles base

as they continue to embody feminist forms of leadership and organization. Teatro Luna's innovation is that they remain completely autonomous and not tied down to any one place in Chicago as they create their work across two different cities in the US. As these artists tackle theater's color line in Chicago by producing Latina/o/x theater, the reception of their work reveals another barrier.

Several artists I interviewed addressed the lack of cultural competency exhibited by theater critics in Chicago. In 2006, Novad Parsi and Christopher Piatt wrote about the lack of diversity on stages throughout Chicago for *Timeout Magazine*. The takeaways in that piece focused on diversifying the pool of actors available to perform in the ensembles at companies like Steppenwolf Theater and producing plays by playwrights of color. The same magazine recently revisited this topic with a new author: Kris Vire in a piece titled, "Why Is Theater In Chicago Still So White?" (December 7, 2016). Since then, Coya Paz, artistic director of Free Street Theater, has raised concerns about the lack of theater critics who understand and respect diverse cultural forms of theater. She writes, "I don't always trust critics to understand the cultural context that shapes the work we make." During my interviews, I listened to grievances from Liza Ann Acosta, Eddie Torres, Nilda Reillo Hernandez, and Miguel Lopez Lemus regarding cultural disconnect, implicit bias, and outright ignorance on the part of critics who reviewed and refused to review Latina/o/x theater over the last three decades. Clearly, there is a gap between the production of Latina/o/x theater and the reception of that work that is compounded by a lack of cultural competence among many of the critics in Chicago.

When I attended Carnival, hosted by the Latino Theater Commons at DePaul University in July 2015, I happened to sit down next to theater critic Kerry Reid. We

struck up a conversation while we waited for the performance to begin. Carnival was a jam-packed weekend of new plays staged as readings at DePaul to celebrate and showcase the diversity of Latinx playwrights working at a national level. Reid introduced herself and I shared some of the details of my research on Latina/o/x theater in Chicago with her. She proceeded to share a memory about Heddy Weis and Latino Chicago. In the mid-90's, She remembers seeing a statement by Heddy that there were no Latino plays being produced in the city. Days later, according to her memory, Juan Ramirez, artistic director of Latino Chicago, took out a full page ad in the Chicago Reader and listed everything they were producing that year. She remembered the tag line as, "Read Your Email, Mija." Latino Chicago Managing Director Nilda Reillo Hernandez confirms the story for me, "Nilda: Yes, we did that. We said, 'This is what we've been doing; this is who we are.' When we took that ad out, the critics started coming. The Reader, the Tribune, they were all coming."<sup>15</sup>

Latino Chicago company member, Eddie Torres, provides a few more details and clarifies the tag line: "Latino Chicago did a very risky thing and it was significant. They took out an ad in the Chicago Reader and they listed all the shows that they did for that year. I think it was a full-page ad. The big thing was a message to the critic: 'Please read your mail, Heddy.'"

If getting Latina/o/x theater artists onto the stages of mainstream institutions can be considered a success, then getting mainstream critics to review the work can also be viewed the same way. But, as Coya Paz questions, what gets lost when those critics lack

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<sup>15</sup> Reillo Hernandez, Nilda. Personal Interview. June 2016.

certain competence about Latina/o/x theater history, cultural practices, and theatrical forms? The following examples illustrate the tension surrounding the labor of making Latina/o/x lives visible through theater when critics misinterpret and misunderstand the work. Through theater reviews, mainstream (and mostly white) writers enforce perplexing and inconsistent boundaries around what Latina/o/x theater is. Liza Ann Acosta recalls seeing *Icarus* by Edwin Sanchez at Teatro Vista in 2001:

This reviewer and I, apparently, we saw two different plays. Because the whole time [in his review] he's referring to the "illegal" immigrant family when never once in the play was their status ever mentioned. The play wasn't about their status at all. It was just a family. So, you see? That's part of it, even though we're many, or some, or more than we used to be, making theater or art here in the city, our efforts to make ourselves visible to a particular audience is constantly being made invisible because they don't see us. Even if the play is in freaking English. Because their prejudice is so great, they can't even understand the words because the work doesn't conform to their ideas. And that's the problem that I have.

Acosta shared another example of criticism levied at her writing in *Generic Latina*, produced by Teatro Luna also in 2001:

I wrote a piece about my experience as a teacher in Sweden for *Generic Latina*. I was supposed to be the *American* teacher there because I'm from *America*. But when my colleagues found out that I was Puerto Rican, my specific identity, they, my colleagues and not the students, would sing "I Want to Live in America" and they would perform it when they saw me. So I

decided to teach *West Side Story* and *Zoot Suit* to my Swedish students and talk to them about these plays so that they could understand why, in the United States, this would be such a significant issue. I wrote about it all of this for *Generic Latina* and the reviewer complained, 'I'm so tired of *West Side Story*.' Basically, she was tired about the complaints about Puerto Rican representation. She was tired of this argument about that play. She also wrote, 'Furthermore, Stephen Sondheim had a Latina wife.' And I was like, 'He was the composer, not the writer of the lyrics.' The lyrics are highly offensive, especially when they come from someone who isn't in the culture. *West Side Story* is extremely problematic. If I want to talk about it, I'll talk about it. It is my experience and so it is in the play. And the fact that he had a Latina wife, husband, or whatever doesn't make that person less racist. It's equivalent to the argument 'I have a black friend.' I get passionate. I get very angry when I see how critics receive our work.

Her last example of the challenges she sees with white reviewers deals with language. She recalls attending Festival Latino at the Goodman and while she is fuzzy on the title of the play, she has some distinct memories about her experience.

It was in Spanish. I think they were Basque or Catalanian. I think it had supertitles. It was a beautiful production and I cried. It was this re-visioning of burning books, and the only one book left was 1001 Nights. It was about protecting this book. It was just beautiful and the reviewer was like, "Who does the Goodman think is attending these shows? It was in Spanish." And I was so angry. For a long time it was like this. The theater reviewers, not all

of them, when they review Latino plays, they are problematic. I'm sorry, they may say that they have the credentials, but it doesn't always show in the things that they write. And I read this stuff and it makes me feel invisible.

Both Acosta and Miguel Lopez Lemus have experience with critics who attempt to demarcate what is and what isn't "Latino" in their reviews. Acosta recalls, "The reviews say something like 'It didn't have pizzazz, it isn't sassy enough.' To me, this is another way in which the reviewer has the power to make us invisible again because we did not conform to a particular identity they imagined." For Lopez Lemus, he found it laughable that one critic wrote that his work was not "Latino."<sup>16</sup> He recalls a review that claimed his piece *Voces y Cuerpos* "lacked latinidad" and he understood this to mean that the piece was not "Latino enough." He explains further, "Some people have a concept of what Latino culture is and if you do something classical then you are not Latino. I don't know, maybe if we had a mariachi band maybe her point of view would have changed." His thoughts about theater criticism match those of Coya Paz. He tells me, "We have to create our own critics. We have to get educated people who know about theater. And then they can come and they can give you a critique."

My goal in this chapter has not been to create a teleology of progress (that is a common oversimplification) but to rather set the stage for a nuanced conversation about Latina/o/x theater production in a city that renders Latina/o/x artists invisible onstage and off. Latina/o/x theater production exists outside of and beyond the scope of large,

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<sup>16</sup> Lopez Lemus, Miguel. Personal Interview. June 2016.

predominantly white institutions intentionally and has persisted for decades. While it is important to note the contributions of people like producer/director Dennis Začek at Victory Gardens, who genuinely wanted to create roles for Latina/o/x artists where he saw a dearth of opportunities, and Henry Godinez, founding artistic director of Teatro Vista, who has undertaken the role of champion for Latina/o/x theater at the Goodman, it is equally important to note that these two men are individuals, albeit with incredible legacies. What have their efforts done to transform the institutions? What will their institutional legacies be once they leave their leadership positions? More importantly, what happens when scholars intentionally turn our focus away from mainstream institutions that have historically excluded people of color? In the next chapter, my gaze shifts to Latina/o/x theater artists outside of “the Loop” where Chicago’s theater district is located, in neighborhoods and communities where Latina/o/x audiences have greater access to their work.

Latina/o/x theater in Chicago is produced throughout the city and can be found in a variety of places. Free Street Theater, led by Coya Paz, is housed in a historic fieldhouse run by city’s park division in Wicker Park. As a program of the parks division, Paz moves productions throughout the city. Most recently, Free Street is working with playwright and performer Ricardo Gamboa to produce *Meet Juan(ito) Doe* at a storefront in Pilsen which will later move to Victory Gardens as part of the Latino Theater Festival in Fall 2017. Teatro Luna was in residence at Instituto Cervantes downtown “in the loop”, Urban Theater is located in Humboldt Park on Division Street, and Aquijón resides in the Cragin Neighborhood, west of Humboldt Park. Teatro Vista’s offices are in Lakeview and they often present and co-produce their work at Victory Gardens, near

Lincoln Park. Theater director Miguel Lopez Lemus founded Latino Experimental Theater Company in Elgin (far west of the city) in 1986 and then moved the company to Little Village, a predominantly Mexican neighborhood closer to the center of Chicago. Latino Chicago, 1979 to 1999, was based in Wicker Park; their first residence was the basement of the Flatiron Arts Building and then they moved to 1625 N. Damen Ave a few blocks away to the firehouse that they purchased from the city. The firehouse is now a Pot Belly Deli, a fact that several artists who I interviewed pointed out to me as a statement of loss and a signal of the changes in that neighborhood.

### **Conclusion**

There is a range of responses from the interviewees regarding the perceptions of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. These move from affirmative experiences to the limitations of the scope of work in the city. Dramaturg Liza Ann Acosta states, “We have this gift here of Latino theater in a way that has developed in its unique and very particular way of being Latino. It’s even in our diversity of companies. I don’t think it’s a phenomenon that has necessarily developed anywhere else like this. I’m just fascinated by that.” According to Edward Torres, co-founder of Teatro Vista, things didn’t always happen easily. He recalls, “There were battles. Making Latino theater significant in Chicago was hard.” He also affirms what my research tells me; there is more documentation about Latina/o/x theater in other regions of the U.S. He states, “You know the East Coast definitely has a great story and the West Coast definitely has a great story. As far as the Midwest, our story began a lot later.” When I share information about Proyecto Teatral (the earliest Spanish language theater program that I learned about in the Chicago Public Library), he is unfamiliar with their work. I point out that they put Chicago on the map with their

production of *Los Mendigos* in 1974. This means that Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago were creating work alongside other Latina/o/x theater companies and projects in other places in the U.S. This production falls within the timeline of the efforts of Chicana/o/x theater artists in California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas; Cubans in Miami and New York; and Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans in New York in the mid-1960's and 1970s. As he listens to my ideas about the presence and the significance of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago, he reflects:

It just took a long time to get recognition. Sandra Marquez got the Jeff Award for best supporting actress in 2014. Before that, Teatro Vista got best play for the show that I directed: *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Diety* by Kristofer Diaz in 2010. Whether it was Latino Chicago or Teatro Vista, it took a while. These things can still get better and I like to credit Teatro Vista and Latino Chicago because they fought a lot of that battle. Then at some point Latino Chicago decided not produce anymore and then the firehouse was gone. Then, it was just Teatro Vista and we carried the banner for a long time.

Alex Meda, theater artist, writer, and producer of Teatro Luna, adds:

Chicago has made huge strides. I think in the last ten years, the amount of young talent that the small scale Latino theater scene has been incubating is exciting. I'm so proud of that and our legacy. However, I think we have to solve many things. We perpetuate a system that doesn't encourage young people to look around and to understand context and our place in the global scale. And that's very dangerous. That's why our aesthetics aren't where

they need to be in Chicago for Latino Theater. I think America as a whole - Dianne Rodriguez talks a lot about this - our field isn't looking internationally, whereas everybody else is very international. There is a constant exchange of ideas and politics, and that is part of our theater's problem in our country. I think we can look at Chicago as a microcosm of that. So again, I can celebrate the successes and the amazing things we're doing and the sacrifices, but I can also say we're part of the problem that is a myopic perspective. It's a real part of why we as Latinos are not in bigger places of power in regional and commercial outlets. That's it.<sup>17</sup>

Miguel Lopez Lemus, founder of Latino Experimental Theater Company, states, "Theater in Chicago continues to be infantile. It does not have maturity. And you have theater companies that are attached to organizations. I see the same thing with film festivals here. They tie themselves to colleges in order to survive and that is ok, but it creates limitations." He expressed strong ideas, based on his experiences leading LETC, about funding, censorship, and autonomy. He stated:

I don't think that what we [Latina/o/x theater artists] do is any different from what the Goodman or Steppenwolf does. And yet, I've been told by the union that what we do is not professional. But, what we do is professional because we have professional actors. And the quality of work is how you count professionalism. It does not have to do with whether we are in the union or not. I don't have a union card. I am pro-union and everything. I worked in a

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<sup>17</sup> Meda, Alex. Personal Interview. July 2016.

factory for almost forty-seven years, and I'm always been pro-union. I've always been for a union. But in the case of art... I'm still looking for that word. We don't have to ask for...validation is the word. We do not need to ask for validation of our work. It is as valid as anybody else's. And the quality of theater has nothing to do with the huge stage or lots of lights. It has to do with the quality of the artwork. Latinos do not need validation from the big theater companies but there is a kind of a culture here that if you don't play at those houses or if they don't give you the space then that you're not making it. It happens to actors. They say, 'Oh, I'm finally working at the Goodman.' What's the difference between working at the Goodman and working at Aguijón? Go put your heart into Aguijón. Start your own companies. Everybody complains, 'Oh, Hollywood doesn't recognize us.' I say, 'We don't need Hollywood to recognize us. We don't need to wait for Hollywood to recognize us. We need to start our own companies, our own production houses. Our own theaters, our own movies.'

His impulse for autonomy and his creation of Latino Experimental Theater Company matched those of the founders of Latino Chicago, Teatro Vista, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater. The artists who create Latina/o/x theater at these companies actively work to undo the color line that persists in Chicago and challenge the racial binary that dominates the conversation about race and culture in the city. In effect, they remake the city in their own images both onstage and off in neighborhoods throughout Chicago.

## CHAPTER III

### THE WARP AND WOOF OF LATINA/O/X THEATER

You cannot go and put your spoon in somebody else's pot.

Miguel Lopez Lemus, 2016

#### Introduction

The earliest record of a Spanish language theater workshop and production that I have found took place in 1974 in the Lakeview neighborhood which is just north of downtown. El Proyecto Teatral Latino de Chicago was a program of the Jane Addams Center. They produced a play titled *Los Mendigos* by José Ruibal. The program and press release for this play are written in Spanish and English. This record, held at the Chicago Public Library, confirms my thoughts about the presence and the activity of Latina/o/x theater artists earlier than most accounts have led me to believe.<sup>1</sup>

The bilingual program offers insight into the politics, culture, and aesthetics of El Proyecto Teatral. The front cover of the program is written by hand, most likely so that the title and playwright's name can be presented in a large script. The rest of the program appears to be typed out. Different sections are separated by a dark line that is thicker than the words on the page. The accent marks for words and names are written in by hand. On the back page, there is an invitation for people to join Proyecto Teatral. The opening line at the top of the page asks, "Quiere ud. ser una estrella?/Do you want to be a star? At the

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<sup>1</sup> Proyecto Teatral Latino. *Los Mendigos* Promotional Flyer. May 1974. Chicago Public Library. Print.

Accessed 28 July 2015.

bottom of the page, “de todos modos, si Ud. quiere servir a su comunidad por el medio de teatro y divertirse a la vez, llámeme a Miriam Solon a 549-1631 o 549-0037/Anyway, if you want to serve your community through the theatre and have fun at the same time, call Miriam Solon at 549-1631 or 549-0037. Inside the program, one also learns about the playwright. José Ruibal was a Spanish writer who was exiled for his political views. He wrote *Los Mendigos*, *The Beggars*, while living in Uruguay in 1967. He returned to Spain after some time and was imprisoned there. Upon his release he moved to Spain. The play is written in the style of a Galician folk tale and it is compared to Aesop’s Fables. The actors play multiple roles that range from beggars to different types of animals to robots. Live musicians, who wrote an original score for the play, accompanied the actors onstage. This group chose to produce a play that relies on symbolism to offer up social criticism and they selected a playwright whose commentary landed him in prison during Franco’s rule of Spain. The bilingual program and press release signal inclusion for Spanish and non-Spanish speakers. And the message on the back cover of the program explicitly states that theater is a vehicle for community connection and service. These ideas persist throughout Latina/o/x theater today, in Chicago and across the nation.

The DIY nature of these items speaks to the determination of Miriam Solon and the members of Proyecto Teatral to make their own theater. Their print material is written in Spanish and English but from what I gather the play was presented in Spanish, on the program, the title of the play remains in Spanish and there is no translator listed as part of the production. The company received funding from the Illinois Arts Council, The Hull House Association, Model Cities CCUO, Horizontes Hispanos, The Church of the Atonement, the Lawndale Boys Club, and Mini College. Proyecto Teatral, like Latino

Chicago, was a member of Chicago Alliance for Performing Arts, CAPA. This company was in residence at the Jane Adams Center Hull House and the piece was presented in the Lake View neighborhood.

Just one year later, Miguel Lopez Lemus founded Latino Experimental Theater in 1975 in Elgin, Illinois (about 35 miles from Chicago) with a similar impulse to offer Spanish language performances to the growing community of Latinas/os/x in that area. LETC was a program of Elgin Community College. Four years after that, Dennis Začek responded to the lack of acting opportunities for Latina/o/x actors by starting Latino Chicago as a program of Victory Gardens. Latino Chicago was a project of Victory Gardens for five years until 1984 when it became an independent company. Lopez Lemus moved LETC to Little Village in Chicago in 1984 and once again found support in a community college there. This decade, then, can be described as an early phase of Latina/o/x theater where projects and companies got their start with some institutional funding either through larger, more established companies, non-profits organizations, or colleges. The efforts of these early artists leave an imprint on the ongoing Latina/o/x theater that continues in Chicago today. Their endeavors to build community through theater and render themselves visible as expressive and creative members of the city set the stage for the ongoing presence of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. In our interview, Eddie Torres discussed his direct connection to Latino Chicago as the first place where he trained and worked professionally. Ivan Vega spoke to me about his artistic lineage and connections to Torres as well as Henry Godinez, two artists he continues to look to as role models. Nilda Reillo Hernandez described the connections she sees across the

generations, namely between Ivan Vega at Urban Theater and Juan Ramirez of Latino Chicago:

They are doing work that Latino Chicago used to do and I don't see anyone else doing that. I love their shows, I love what Ivan is doing. You know, whenever he struggles, he's not afraid to ask, 'Hey, do you know who can help me?' And we are willing to help out. Once, Ivan told me, 'I have a problem. I need to put in an extra bathroom for the audience.' I said, 'Talk to Juan. He probably knows somebody who can help.' And what did Juan do? Juan asked him if all the pipes and materials were there and then he said, 'I'll be there tomorrow.' And then Juan built him a bathroom in one day. It's just these little things that don't seem important. We're talking about a bathroom. But it is important. They got an audience coming to see their show and they only got one bathroom. They needed two, so Juan built one for them.

Even though Juan Ramirez declined to be interviewed, I have a sense of his determination through stories like this one and others from several of the artists I interviewed. During his time as artistic director at Latino Chicago, he demonstrated a sense of independence and creative freedom that sometimes put him at odds with other Latina/o/x artists, the wider theater community, and the city of Chicago. However, the image that persists is one of his support, in large and small ways, of upcoming generations of Latina/o/x theater artists.

In this chapter I describe the organizational structures, artistic processes, production histories, as well as audience and critical reception of the work by five

Latina/o/x theater companies: Latino Chicago, Latino Experimental Theater Company, Teatro Vista, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater Company. I will share descriptions of their work gleaned from my in-depth interviews as well as archival print material such as theater reviews, posters, and programs. Each of these five companies has distinct missions that guide their work and they were built by Latina/o/x artists with unique visions, different experiences, and varied perspectives about the function of theater, the process of making theater, their understanding of culture, community, and identity. These five companies represent nearly four decades of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. In the cases of Teatro Vista, Teatro Luna, and Urban Theater, they consistently produce theater today. Latino Experimental Theater Company is less consistent and Miguel Lopez Lemus appears to work more regularly with artists and companies as a set designer and visual artist. Most recently, Lopez Lemus presented a workshop at De Paul University in 2016. Latino Chicago began as a project of Victory Gardens in 1979 and closed its doors in 1997, shortly after an electrical fire destroyed their building. This company served as a foundational organization that helped to launch the careers of future Latina/o/x artists. This is definitely true for Rosario Vargas, founding artistic director of Aguijón Theater, the oldest Spanish language theater in Chicago, and Eddie Torres, who co-founded Teatro Vista in 1989. Teatro Vista became an artistic home and site of development for younger generations. Playwright Tanya Saracho, founding member of Teatro Luna, and Ivan Vega, founding artistic director of Urban Theater, each worked with Teatro Vista at early points in their respective careers. Teatro Luna and Urban Theater Company, founded in 2000 and 2005, can be considered the third generation of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago and they are now only two of several Latina/o/x companies that have been created in the

last ten years. Additionally, Latina/o/x artists continue to work at mainstream companies such as The Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Victory Gardens.

Scholars Ramón Rivera-Servera and Alberto Sandoval Sánchez both use the apt image of an octopus as a way to understand the complexity of Latina/o/x theater in the U.S. In his chapter, “An Octopus with Many Legs: U.S. Latino Theater and Its Diversity,” Sandoval Sánchez cites Chicana performer Ruby Nelda Pérez as coining the term in conversation with him at Festival Latino in San Francisco in 1993. He extends the metaphor in his chapter and demonstrates how this “monstrous image” (103) works as a tool to better understand Latina/o/x theater. He shares that the body, the head, the tongue, as well as the many tentacles in constant motion can be understood as the multiple languages, perspectives, histories, and politics that contribute to the making of this thing called Latina/o/x theater. With this in mind, I carry his metaphor forward with my work. Rather than try to codify Latina/o/x theater aesthetics (a fool’s errand), I will describe these companies in order to share their approaches to theater making and to render them visible to the larger fields of Latina/o/x theater and American theater today. By sharing detailed descriptions of their work, I aim to draw out larger ideas about how their work contributes to ongoing ideas of what Latina/o/x theater is and thus contributes to the construction of Latina/o/x cultural identity. My descriptions and observations will then lead to my last chapter that situates the work of these companies in the context of latinidad and how the cultural products of these Chicago-based companies add new dimensions to some longstanding concepts of latinidad.

### **Latino Chicago Theater Company**

Nilda: I gotta tell you a funny story. We were doing *Short Eyes* [by Miguel Piñero] and we had a real life firefighter in the cast: Cedric Young. Early on, we joked about what we were going to do if he got called to a fire. We were like, 'We'll just have to deal with it. We'll see when we cross that bridge.' And then it happened on the night when the critics were supposed to be there. We got the call that he was not going to be coming in on time because he was fighting a three-alarm fire. It was one of those moments. We had already gotten the audience seated. Juan and I looked at each other and said, 'So what do we do?'

I said, 'Well, I have liquor in my office.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.' I said, 'We can open a couple of bottles of wine and just talk with the audience.'

So Juan made the announcement that one of our main actors was going to be late because he was fighting a fire. He said, 'We're going to be delayed. We're not sure exactly how long. Is everybody okay with that?' We thought if anybody had a problem that would have been fine. We would have given them tickets to come back on another night. We talked with the critic and they were fine with it. So we said, 'We would like to give you something while you wait.' And so we did. We gave everybody something to drink. We had a donation jar, but we said, 'No, we're not accepting donations. We're just going to give everyone something to drink.' And so we had a party. People were sitting down; people were standing up. We let

people stand near the stage. They were careful with their drinks. People were in the lobby. We put some music on and people were having a good time. As soon as Cedric walked in, everybody turned and gave him a round of applause. They applauded him as he arrived. He responded, 'I'm ready.' And let me tell you, he's a wonderful actor and it was one of the best shows he ever gave. He was just amazing. Everybody's energy was so high. The audience loved it. We got a great review out of it. We were getting great reviews no matter what, but it was just wonderful that Cedric was able to do the show that night. And afterwards, people were still hanging out with us. They were talking with him and everything. It was a great time. Those were great times we had.

Nilda Reillo Hernandez joined Latino Chicago Theater Company in 1985. This was four years after the company left Victory Gardens and Juan Ramirez took over the leadership as its own independent company. Hernandez trained and performed with them and eventually became the managing director. When we met to talk about Latino Chicago, she recalled her first role, "a gypsy on roller skates," and two trips that the company took together in the early days. They traveled to Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1984 and then to the Teatros Nacionales de Aztlan (TENAZ) Festival in San Antonio, Texas, in 1985. These trips influenced the acting style and the approach to theater that Latino Chicago would come to be known for over the next twelve years. She recalls:

We were looking to see what Latino Chicago could be. We wanted to find a style of theater and we found it in our sister company Grupo Cero in Cuernavaca, Mexico. It was Commedia del Arte, based on carpa, which is

tent theater. We learned to make masks and to combine dance, music, and everything. With carpa, the actors would go to the fields in Mexico where people were working. The theater was like a human magazine or newspaper. They would perform stories that the workers were not aware of; the actors would share what was going on. They would use movement, masks, and music. That's how people learned. But when the police showed up, the actors would have to leave right away.

Actor Frankie Davila also traveled with the company to Cuernavaca and he recalls the larger-than-life style of theater that he witnessed there. "We were just blown away by their theater. They would just go out to a plaza somewhere and they would just walk around, with all the kids in the front, and the parents standing in the back. They just create a show in the plaza."<sup>2</sup> Witnessing this type of theater and the sense of community that it fostered undoubtedly had an impact on the company. When Hernandez described Latino Chicago's early days in the firehouse theater on Damien Ave in Wicker Park, she conjured a public scene similar to Davila's:

When we moved in, it was a horrible neighborhood. I mean we had our cars broken into a couple of times, but we dealt with it. We decided to make our presence known there. We said, 'Let's do everything there.' The board meetings were there; the proposal writing, the rehearsals, the meetings, whatever it was, we did it there. The firehouse was our focal point because it was our own space. And as soon as all of our work was

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<sup>2</sup> Davila, Frankie. Personal Interview. June 2016.

done, we would bring out the boom box and the chairs. People would be walking by, going from bar to bar or restaurant to restaurant and we called it the Riviera. The cars, the streets, they were the beach. All the people walking by were the fish. There were so many different people. There was a girl who was a flamenco dancer. The actors would hang out with us and do little shows. All impromptu. And people loved it. They would stop by and we would invite them to have a drink with us. We would tell them who we were and they became our friends. They would come to our shows and they would tell other people about us. They would say, 'Oh, we thought this was a firehouse but it's a theater space.' It was amazing. After the rehearsals, we would just hang out; we would be playing music with guitars and congas, whatever it was, we just got together. That's who we were. That's what people eventually started looking forward to, after every show, especially on Fridays and Saturdays. After some time, the audience members knew who we were and they would hang out with us. It was just wonderful. I really miss those days.

The sense of community that Juan Ramirez, Nilda Reillo Hernandez, Frankie Davila, and other Latino Chicago company members, cultivated in the neighborhood extended to the stage as well. In 1991, they invited Grupo Cero to Chicago to work with them on a devised piece called *Puffin*, described as an “original ecological fable about a community of puffins and sea gulls.”<sup>3</sup> There is

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<sup>3</sup> Kogan, Rick. “WTTW’S ‘Teatro Popular’ raises the curtain on the rewards awaiting performers beyond the applause.” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 March 1991.

a documentary about this trip and the performance. Ramirez and Hernandez, as artistic and managing directors, brought people into the theater as audience members and as actors. With Hernandez' description of the Riviera, I imagine that the boundaries between the stage and the street easily dissolved. Their artistic exchange with Grupo Cero led to the development of their own aesthetic. Davila described his impression of acting style they embraced:

We really loved that style and the rawness of it. We would just find stuff that people threw away and we would make something out of it. That style of theater it lends itself to really crazy props. If I had a comb, the comb was this big [he spreads his arms out]. It was three feet long, and then you comb your hair with it. We used Styrofoam to make these big headpieces in the pompadour style.

We would just be very creative.

Latino Chicago members coined the term "cartooning" for their approach to theater and they employed it in many of their productions. Juan Ramirez addressed serious social, cultural, and political issues and found ways to use humor and aspects of physical theater to draw audiences into the work. With their larger-than-life acting style, their training in Commedia del Arte and carpa, and their cultural exchanges with Grupo Cero, they crafted their own approach to theater making that appealed to a variety of people, many of whom lived in Wicker Park and who came into the theater because of their impromptu performances and gatherings on the street in front of the firehouse.

Their acquisition of the firehouse is important because it illustrates their persistence and their vision of transformation for the Wicker Park neighborhood. They claimed the Firehouse as their own, painted a mural with their logo on the front of the building, and made public space for social gatherings, community building, and theater. Hernandez recalled:

Juan found the best place ever; it was an abandoned firehouse on Damien Avenue. At that time [1987], the city was offering a lot of places for a dollar. We went for it right away. We went to the city and said, ‘We want this place because we want this area to thrive.’ The city agreed to it but there were these politicians who were kind of crooked at the time. We struggled a bit at first. We were supposed to get the place for a dollar a day for five years. At the end of the five years we would end up paying \$35000 for the whole firehouse. And it would be ours. When I went to the city to get the paperwork taken care of and pick up the keys, they said, ‘Come back the next day.’ This happened a few times. Well, there was a forum with Mayor Harold Washington that we attended. We were told to write our questions down in advance so that he could address them. Of course, one of the politicians who was with him looked at our question about the firehouse and said, ‘Oh no, we may not get to your question.’ There were about 15 of us, company members and board members there. When Mayor Washington finished answering questions (of course, ours was not asked), Juan stood up and said, ‘We’re having a problem here. We were told that our question would not be asked today and it’s important to

us.’ Mayor Washington said, ‘What is your question?’ Juan replied, ‘We are trying to acquire the firehouse and we’re being told that we can’t get access to it.’ So Washington called us up to the front right away and we all went up. And as we all went up, his bodyguards rushed to him. We weren’t going to do anything, of course, but they just freaked out and then Mayor Washington told them to stand back. He talked to Juan, and he said: ‘Here’s the person I want you to talk to. Ben Reyes. He’s my right hand man. He will make sure you guys get what you need. And if you don’t, you come see me.’ So the next day we talked to Ben Reyes, and we ended up meeting Mayor Washington in his office. He was all for giving us the space. So I went back to the office to get the key, and of course, they tried the same thing: ‘We cannot find the key’. I said, ‘I heard this before. I’m gonna sit here and wait for it.’ And I called Juan. Juan was upset and he called Roberto Caldero, who was working for the city. And he called Luis Gutierrez, the congressman, who played a big part in helping us get the space, too. He was one of the politicians who helped us. Five minutes after I got off the phone with Juan, they had the key for me but they were like, ‘We don’t have copies.’ I said, ‘That’s ok. I can make copies.’ And I left. I hopped back on the train and headed straight to the firehouse.

Hernandez and Ramirez had a clear vision of their work and what they needed to accomplish their goals at Latino Chicago. They also understood Chicago’s politics and the corruption that permeated throughout. They attended a public forum to gain direct

access to the Mayor which then led to connections to city officials and state representatives. This story exemplifies their grassroots strategies for organizing and the positive results of their efforts. After acquiring the space, they did indeed transform it and they participated in the transformation of the neighborhood. Their direct actions and their focus meant financial security for the company.

Ramirez also took a very direct stance regarding who the intended audience was for their work and what the company was trying to accomplish with it. The tag line for the 1991-92 season (that appears across the top of the their season brochure) reads: “The Difference Between Hispanic and Latino Lives on Our Stage.” It is important to note that the early 1990s mark a significant shift in language and perspective regarding Latina/o/x identity. These differences can be observed by looking at two published works alongside Latino Chicago’s 1991-92 season brochure. The first document of this era is *Hispanic Theater in the United States and Puerto Rico*, a Ford Foundation report compiled by Joanne Pottlitzer (July 1988) and the second is Alberto Sandoval Sanchez’s 1993 essay “A Chorus Line: Not Such a ‘One, Singular Sensation’ for U.S. Puerto Rican Crossovers.” Pottlitzer is an Anglo American writer, director, and translator who conducted primary research on Hispanic theater for the Ford Foundation in 1984-85. Her findings were then published in a slim 85-page text, where she tackles 100 years of the Hispanic culture, theater history, and theater activity, and concludes with recommendations for networking, training and development, and ongoing support. This report was commissioned by an institution and created by someone with outsider status regarding the Latina/o/x. The tone, the lack of nuance, and the omission of details signal Pottlitzer’s position throughout the piece. Juan Ramirez signals something different with

the stance he takes using the term “Latino” to describe the work of Latino Chicago in their season brochure and rejecting the term “Hispanic.” The choice to use “Latino” a Spanish-sounding word, as in “latinoamericano,” rather than “Hispanic,” a word whose root links us to Spain and is therefore an inaccurate and even offensive term (as Spain colonized parts of the Americas) is echoed by the scholarship of Alberto Sandoval Sánchez, also in the early 1990s. Latino is the name that Latino people choose for ourselves and signals self-determination. Ramirez understands the power of naming and displays his resistance to hegemony with the tagline for the season brochure in 1992.

This concept of resistance is underscored by the image on Latino Chicago’s brochure, designed by Alejandro Romero. At the center of it, there are two women highlighted inside of a white box. One woman can be read as literally white, her hair and body are the color white, in contrast to her mirror image, a woman seated next to her with dark hair and dark skin. The dark woman appears to have a belt of ammunition across her chest and a rifle in her arm, resting across her lap. She resembles a soldadera from the Mexican Revolution, a clear and recognizable symbol of resistance. The placement of a soldadera in this marketing piece is a statement of gendered resistance. Soldaderas appear in popular art and have been the subject of popular songs. The choice to use this image is directly connected to gender balance in the season of six plays that year. This season included *Miriam’s Flowers* and *Lucy Loves Me* by Migdalia Cruz, *Shadow of a Man* by Cherríe Moraga, *Man of the Flesh* and *Prospect* by Octavio Solis, *Floorshow: Doña Flor and Her Trained Dog* by Edwin Sanchez. Many theater companies continue to be called out for the lack of gender parity in their seasons to this day. While the company did not expressly state that gender parity or feminism were their priorities, they employed Nilda

Reillo Hernandez as the managing director and they regularly produced women playwrights. These plays tackle such issues as: memory, loss, spirituality, sexuality, family and dysfunction, and cultural practices and beliefs, and reconciliation. In these six plays, Ramirez as curator put together a season that reached into the depths and explored the complexity of Latina/o/x identity in far-reaching ways and he proclaimed these as “Latino” and not “Hispanic” plays, asserting first-voice naming and rejecting institutional labels. This close reading of the season brochure illustrates the oppositional stance that Juan Ramirez and Latino Chicago made publicly and unapologetically.

The anecdotes I share from members of Latino Chicago illustrate a commitment to community, both on the stage and off the stage, as a way of working, an oppositional stance to the construction of identity imposed onto Latina/o/x artists, and an acting method connected to *carpa*, Mexican street theater. This approach to acting can also be read as oppositional to the standard American realism and magic realism that became a sort of pigeon hole for Latina/o/x artists in the 1990s as the term moved into common usage. It is also important to note that Ramirez supported the creation of new work as in the case of *Dolores*, a piece about Lolita Lebrón devised by the company, and the subsequent play *Lolita de Lares*, commissioned by Latino Chicago, written by Migdalia Cruz and produced in 1995. From the 1991-92 season, there is a clear mix of Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, and Cuban voices and this is consistent throughout the company’s 16-year history. As Eddie Torres shared in his interview, the company was very mixed racially and culturally. This practice is the focus of my next chapter as I draw out the personal experiences of Latina/o/x theater artists to show how, through their craft, they are remaking concepts of *latinidad* on their own terms.

## **Latino Experimental Theater Company**

Miguel Lopez Lemus grew up in what he called “an incredible neighborhood” in Mexico City surrounded by artists. His father made his living hand-coloring photographs and ran a studio amidst a group of international artists fellow artists in Colonia Condesa. This culturally diverse borough of Mexico City was populated with French, German, Jewish, and Spanish people. He remembers being introduced to classical music at a young age and venturing to the opera with his older brother. He started college in Mexico and began studying philosophy, painting, photography, and sculpture. One day, in 1974, his brother arrived at his door and asked, “Do you want to go to the United States?” Lopez Lemus stated, “It was 8 PM and I asked my brother, ‘When?’ He replied, ‘The bus leaves at 9.’ I decided to go even though I only spoke Spanish and French. I was 18 years old.” Within a year, Lopez Lemus founded the first iteration of his company Grupo de Teatro Experimental de Elgin where he produced theater for eleven years as a resident company at Elgin Community College. Elgin is about 35 miles northwest of Chicago. In 1986, he changed the name to Latino Experimental Theater Company and moved the organization from Elgin to Little Village in South Lawndale area of Chicago. Reflecting on the company and his mission, he stated, “In 1986 I decided that the company should go to Chicago in order to continue our growth. I had big plans for the company. We had been touring and I felt it was important to take theater to places it where it doesn’t usually go.” Little Village is known as the “Mexico of the Midwest” and, according to the 2000 census, the “Hispanic population is 82%.” I imagine that the courage and tenacity that it took for a young Mexican man to travel to the U.S. at age 18 are two of the traits that helped drive Lopez Lemus to continue his work in Chicago. I reviewed the Latino

Experimental Theater Company website and found that they have not produced work consistently since the late 1990s. Instead, Lopez Lemus works with companies like Aguijón and has led workshops and performances at colleges and universities in Chicago. Despite this, he shared clear views about his approach to theater and how it should function in a community. He stressed the experimental nature of his work and the connections he sees between experimentation and artistic freedom. I asked him about the aesthetics of his company and he responded:

I don't want to be limited by one style or form or shape. People have not seen everything so they need to see all different types of things. It's ok if you limit yourself to cartooning style, but why would you do that? The culture is not limited. This is very important. Mexican culture, Latino culture is not just one type of culture. It's not just musica de tropical. We have great classical composers. There are amazing influences, German and Italian, for example, in Latin America. Mexican culture is something complex. It's not just rancho music. I have always been an advocate of this view. My work reflects this and it comes from growing up in Mexico City. It's very open-minded there and very high class. That is very important to know. Different forms of art are important, as are different forms of expression. Why limit the theater to one form? So at Latino Experimental Theater, we do everything and we call it experimental because we love experimentation in all the arts. I know the traditional techniques because I studied theater, but I love to break away.

Since 1986, he has consistently written for, directed, and produced *Voces y Cuerpos* in and around Chicago. He works with poetry, translation, and large-scale puppets. Another important aspect of Lopez Lemus' work is his belief in access to arts even if it looks different from Juan Ramirez populist approach. I see connections to Lopez Lemus' early life as a naturally curious boy who loved opera. He is versed in classical music and opera so those forms of expression have an impact on his aesthetics.

He shared:

Juan Ramirez has his own style. He's doing more of a Pueblo style with cartooning and masks, which is fine, you know. It's a style and it works; it's very effective in communicating with the masses. But I think all art is effective. You just have to allow it to be. You know, earlier when we were children, the Mexican Phil-orchestra always played at Palacio de Bellas Artes. We were just kids and we asked, 'Why don't you guys go out and play for the people?' They told us, 'Oh no, no one will not understand.' Now that's the problem, the idea that people are not going to understand high art because they not educated. I have always been against that. If you present it, they will love it and they will understand it. To understand classical music, or good theater, or good poetry, or any good performance you have to experience it and then it will touch you.

Perhaps his proximity to Ramirez pushed him to make different aesthetic choices and maybe his own interest in classical forms and the boundaries he could push

from there led him to craft the style of Spanish language, poetry, dance, and dramatic events that he came to be known for with the *Voces y Cuerpos* series.

He takes a provocative stance on language, one that mirrors a divide I have witnessed in Latina/o Studies circles, which is an insistence that Spanish language is common to all U.S based Latinas/os/x. One colleague states that Latino Studies must have a Spanish language requirement because it is the language of our grandparents. My maternal grandfather and my mother did not teach us Spanish because of the negative consequences it brought to them, in particular, my mother would be hit with a ruler by her teachers if she spoke Spanish in the Oakland Public Schools in California in the 1950s. In some ways, language is both a key component of culture and something that divides rather than unites many of us. Generational differences and differing ideas about assimilation that compete with national and cultural pride contribute to the range of experiences that Latinas/os/x have with language. Nonetheless, Spanish language is a priority for Lopez Lemus and his creative work. He believes, “Latino culture, in all its ethnic diversity, does have a common language: Spanish. While Spanish-speaking authors, playwrights, and poets have played an important role in the history of Latin America and Spain, their voices have rarely been heard in the United States.” While I agree with him that there is an enormous gap in the circulation of Spanish language literature in the U.S., I also believe that an insistence on Spanish language erases the contributions of English and Spanglish-language theater that is primarily produced in the US and equally ignored by the mainstream.

I learned a great deal about *Voces y Cuerpos III* by reading Achy Obejas’ Chicago Tribune review in which she also surveys the landscape of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago

at that time. She writes that Aguijón and Latino Chicago are contributing to a “renaissance of sorts in local Spanish language theater.”<sup>4</sup> She cites each as having an understanding of just who the local Spanish-speaking audiences are, namely “recent arrivals and on the lower end of the economic ladder.” In order to draw these audiences into their respective houses, Juan Ramirez and Rosario Vargas offer “bargain prices” and introduce each show with information about its writer and context. She also shares that they often incorporate music and dance into their offerings. She shares this information as a set up for her critique of Miguel Lopez Lemus’ work. From her description of *Voces y Cuerpos*, the piece contains elements that can be viewed as racist, sexist, and ableist. According to Obejas, there seems to be a disconnect between the content of the work and the intended audience. He devises performances from Spanish canonical playwrights and poets and presents the work largely in Spanish. By his own words and because of his experiences with fine arts as a young boy in Mexico, he sees this as a natural fit. Obejas sees the insistence on Spanish language as divisive and isolating for many Latinas/os/x who may or may not comprehend Spanish, especially younger audiences. The classical nature of the poems presented in *Voces y Cuerpos* also seemed at odds with the working-class Spanish-speakers and Obejas points out in her review that the theater in Pilsen was nearly empty the night she attended. Lastly, she questioned his decision to use the word “experimental” to describe the company. She didn’t see much range or experimentation of form in this performance. But she did cite some standout performances by dancers Julia Mayer McCarthy and Yolanda Velazquez, and she found Lopez Lemus to be an

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<sup>4</sup> Obejas, Achy. “Theater Review of *Voces y Cuerpos* III.” *Chicago Tribune*. 21 June 1991.

“engaging writer and actor.” Obejas also noted some other challenging characteristics in previous iterations of *Voces y Cuerpos*, that included problematic racial and gender representations. Her reviews flag the transnational nature of these problems and she views the work as reifying racial and gender stereotypes. In particular, she saw the import of colonial issues, specifically colorism from Latin America to the US without an awareness of how colorism and racism are linked and have been examined critically by many artists and scholars in the U.S.

I include Obejas’ views alongside Lopez Lemus own words about his work to mark a transnational conversation about latinidad and the ideas and experiences of U.S. based Latinas/os/x. Achy Obejas is a critically acclaimed novelist and translator who worked as a journalist for the *Chicago Tribune* for nearly a decade. That her work often deals with the internal conflicts of being Latina in the US sharpens her critique of Lopez Lemus. As a cultural insider, she is aware of the facets of the Latina/o/x community and writes clearly about the gaps that she sees in Lopez Lemus work. Her criticism seemed to have little bearing on him as he has continued to produce *Voces y Cuerpos* (even if it has been intermittent) as recently as 2016. It appears that he is oppositional on all fronts, resisting norms from both inside and outside of the Latina/o/x community. His work exemplifies his commitment to a clear and determined vision, shortcomings and all. This extends to the wider theater community in Chicago. In his words:

I don’t think we what we do is any different from what the Goodman or Steppenwolf does. I’ve been told by the president of the union that what we do is not professional. It has nothing to do with professionalism. What we do is professional because we have professional actors. And the quality of

work is how you count professionalism. This has nothing to do with whether we are in the union or not. I don't have a union card. I am pro-union and everything. I worked in a factory for almost forty-seven years, and I've always been pro-union. But in the case of art, we do not need to ask for validation of our work. It is as valid as anybody else's. And the quality of theater has nothing to do with a huge stage or lots of lights. It has to do with the quality of the artwork. We do not need validation from the big theater companies to say "Oh our work is good." But we have a culture that seems to say that if you don't play at those houses or if they don't give you opportunities then you're not making it. It happens to actors who will say, "Oh, I'm finally working at the Goodman." What's the difference between working at the Goodman and working at Aguijón? Go and put your heart into Aguijón. Start your own companies. Everybody complains, "Oh, Hollywood doesn't recognize us." We don't need Hollywood to recognize us. We don't need to wait for Hollywood to recognize us. We need to start our own companies, our own production houses. Our own theaters, our own movies. We have our own cameras and we know how to use them.

Lopez Lemus has a fierce commitment to self-determination going so far as to refuse grants from the city, state, and federal government because of the constrictions that many funders place on artists and the work they create once they receive funding. "My website says: 'We will take funding without any strings attached.' The last grant I got from the city I gave it back because they were trying to put restrictions on the way I used it. They

were trying to tell me what to do with my theater.” With this uncompromising stance, Lopez Lemus affirms artistic freedom as his ultimate value. From my vantage point, this stance comes at a high cost, one that limits his ability to work regularly as a theater artist.

Juan Ramirez, Nilda Reillo Hernandez, and Miguel Lopez Lemus each served as artistic leaders at their respective companies and paved a way of making theater that resists dominant forms and exists in largely autonomous ways outside of mainstream theaters in Chicago. Their claiming of space and the creation of independent artistic voices served as examples for artists such as Eddie Torres, Sandra Marquez, Sandra Delgado, Tanya Saracho and Ivan Vega. This independence is best stated by Lopez Lemus:

You know we really put the restrictions on ourselves. That’s it. We stop ourselves. Nobody told me to do theater and I did not ask anyone for permission to do it. To the people who have been critics, I say: “I never asked you for permission to do the things that I’m doing. I’m doing these things because it’s what I want to do.” Kids have to learn that today. Artists got to learn that. Just go do it, don’t wait. Don’t wait. And don’t ask for permission because they are gonna say “no.”

### **Teatro Vista**

I have already shared the creation story of Teatro Vista and some background on Eddie Torres, one of the founding artistic directors who studied and worked with Juan Ramirez at Latino Chicago after he graduated from Roosevelt University. Henry Godinez, now an artistic associate at the Goodman, co-founded the company with Eddie after their fateful participation as actors in *The Rover*. Since 1990, the company has

established itself as a professional ensemble with considerable credits such as *Anna in the Tropics* by Nilo Cruz (2002), *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Diety* by Kristofer Díaz (2010), and *Fishmen* by Cándido Tirado (2012) as well as significant co-productions with the Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Victory Gardens. If we plot these companies on a spectrum, Latino Chicago and Latino Experimental Theater Company can be placed on one end where community, autonomy, and free expression are held in the highest regard. While these are also values at Teatro Vista, it is clear that visibility, recognition, and professionalism (meeting Equity standards) are also priorities for them.

Godinez and Torres started Teatro Vista with support from the Mexican Museum and produced two plays in their first year: *Broken Eggs* by Eduardo Machado and *The Crossing* by Hugo Salcero. Their choice to produce *The Crossing* was influenced by Carlos Tortolero, director of the Mexican Museum, who asked that they select a play from Mexico. Since that time, Teatro Vista has produced over 60 plays, 16 of which were world premieres, and 14 that were Midwest premieres. They see themselves as an integral part of the fabric of theater in Chicago and value their relationships with other (larger theater companies) where they can co-produce work. This leveraging of resources affords them bigger budgets so that they can increase production values and reach larger audiences. They also believe in non-traditional approaches to casting to showcase Latina/o/x actors in a range of roles thus pushing the boundaries of the politics of representation and ideas about universality, a concept that is often coded for whiteness. Recent examples of this include productions of *A View From The Bridge* by Arthur Miller (2013), *Romeo and Juliet* (2015), and *Grapes of Wrath*, adapted by Frank Galati (1993). When asked about their approach to theater, Godinez shared:

We thought there was a broader spectrum of work to be done at that time. We had some philosophical differences with Latino Chicago. They were committed to continuing Latino work that was subversive, edgy. We were interested in all new work but we also wanted to present plays from the Spanish Golden Age and Shakespeare. We wanted to bridge the gap between Latino and non-Latino audiences and artists and we wanted to collaborate with the larger companies. We were multi-ethnic; we had African Americans, Anglos, and Latinos across the spectrum. There are not rigid boundaries across difference among Latinos here in Chicago. Maybe it is because we are in the center of the country and we really are mixed. We thought if there is the Goodman and Steppenwolf, why can't there be Teatro Vista and Latino Chicago? Our vision was to be a bridge and we were itinerant so we were always moving around and they had a space, the firehouse.

Their sense of community developed differently because the theater company moved from site to site to present their work. My observation is that their community is defined from the inside out and is exemplified by their ensemble structure. The functioned in many ways like a collective. When selecting which projects to move forward, the ensemble would sit and read plays aloud together. While Godinez expresses the range of plays that they focused on, canonical works as well as new plays, their commitment to Latina/o/x actors meant challenging casting norms and employing color conscious casting choices. This ensured the development and support of Latina/o/x actors. Sandra Marquez, director and performer, recalled, "My first show in the city was with Teatro Vista. It was

*Santos y Santos* by Octavio Solis in 1996. I remember that first week of rehearsal. It was the first time that I wasn't the only brown woman in the room. I couldn't sleep because I was so excited." Having the opportunity to work on a new play by a Latina/o/ playwright with a group of Latina/o/x theater artists was a rare experience for Marquez that is echoed by Ivan Vega's experiences five years later when he is the only Puerto Rican actor in the theater department at Roosevelt University.

Sandra Delgado, a Teatro Vista ensemble member, writer, and performer, spoke to me about the ongoing commitment to new plays at Teatro Vista. She shared:

They have this wonderful program called Semillero, which is a playwriting group, and they just finished one cycle where they had six playwrights. I went to see some of the readings. There is something special happening because they are supporting playwrights at all different experience levels. One of the writers was a woman who had never written a play before and it was amazing! I really felt their support of these writers. I applied for their next cycle and got accepted. We had our first meeting yesterday. There's this incubator specifically for Latinos. With the last cycle, there are now six more Latino plays out there in the universe. Now the development cycles are 18 months long and they actually expanded the group to eight writers. There's eight of us so there will be eight new Latino plays. So I love this because this isn't something that we had in Chicago before. And I think that in the next few years, we're going to see the results of this program.

Delgado has created *La Havana Madrid* with support from Teatro Vista and the Semillero program and at the Goodman where she was a member of the Playwrights Unit in 2015-16. She was one of four writers who met regularly and worked closely with Goodman staff members on her play about Latino culture and nightlife in Chicago. The Goodman hosted a concert reading of *La Havana Madrid* in Summer 2016. She moves easily between both organizations and her work exemplifies the best aspects of collaboration between Teatro Vista, a culturally specific theater, and the Goodman, a large, downtown commercial theater. *La Havana Madrid* was artistically and commercially successful, key points for the Goodman, and it maintained a sense of community that is deeply valued at Teatro Vista.

Their itinerant nature and their ensemble structure posed challenges even if these things also afforded them certain opportunities and allowed for a certain kind of artistic freedom. Sandra Marquez recalled her early days at Teatro Vista:

Everyone was doing everything. Everyone had multiple skill sets. We had a stage manager who would also run lights and work on the backstage crew. We would read plays in our living rooms and then decide which ones to do. There was not a lot of infrastructure then.

Shortly after her first production, Marquez joined the ensemble as the associate artistic director. In this leadership role, she worked with the company to establish some organizational practices that included hiring a managing director and clarifying job descriptions for company members. They also considered purchasing a space, a move that would have followed Latino Chicago's model. Marquez:

We never owned our own space. We tried three times and every time something happened. A developer approached us at one point. We met with some consultants. We did a feasibility study. Then we tried to have a Zocalo at an old church in Pilsen but those developers lost their funding. Some people in the company really wanted a space, others wanted to focus on other things. Some of us thought maybe every midsized company that went ahead and got a building had to shift their focus. For those companies, it became about keeping the building. So after getting my heart broken three times, I thought I didn't want to focus on getting a building anymore.

As the company focused on professionalization and continued to grow artistically, providing opportunities for Latina/o/x writers, directors, and performers, the organization faced financial challenges. This is something that Alex Meda, current artistic director of Teatro Luna, also addressed in her interview. It speaks to the fragility of these Latina/o/x companies that aim to serve their communities in the face of structural and institutional racism. Marquez reflected:

I worked for eight years in that job and I always kept my part time job teaching at Northwestern. Eddie had a full time job. We had to keep things going. I took two years off from acting to keep the company going. After eight years of volunteering my time I realized I had to step down. I couldn't keep going financially.

I believe that the financial challenges contribute to the ongoing rendering of Latinas/os/x as invisible in Chicago. If Latina/o/x companies are not valued, do not receive culturally

responsible theater reviews, and if their work is not considered “professional,” then they have a much more difficult time getting grants from mainstream institutions. These institutions validate places like the Goodman and thus ensure that financial support (large grants) and cultural capital (in the form of reviews) circulate in a few large, mainstream, commercial venues. Eddie Torres spoke about visibility:

No one has ever taken the care to say “Let’s feature Teatro Vista or Urban Theater or Sandra Marquez or Henry Godinez.” Our primary artists have affected the landscape of theater in Chicago period. Latino artists have been putting up a fight for over 25 years here. And really, if you don’t know the history of theater in Chicago and the Latino theater community here, then you should make a better effort to find out.

One solution to the economic challenges that Teatro Vista faced came in the form of collaborations and co-productions with larger theater companies in Chicago. Eddie Torres spoke about his roots at Latino Chicago and his ongoing relationship with the Goodman through their work with Teatro Vista. He described the tensions he saw between Juan Ramirez and Henry Godinez from his vantage point as they played out in public. Torres:

There was a kind of rivalry that I could never be a part of because I was always a part of both Teatro Vista and Latino Chicago. I understood that we needed the fighter [Juan] and the peacemaker [Henry]. And I was frustrated when Henry decided to leave Teatro Vista. But the first thing that came out of his mouth was this: “Look, I’m going to the Goodman. They’re letting me in there, and I think it’s a really important opportunity

for all of us as Latinos to walk through that door and I'll be the one holding it open." So I decided that while he did that, I was going to develop this ensemble of actors at Teatro Vista. Eventually, Teatro Vista ended up doing shows at the Goodman. We ended up doing shows at Steppenwolf. We ended up doing shows at Victory Gardens. Part of that was a mode of survival for us and another part of it was based on the talent we had developed. Latino Chicago was still viable. They were doing their thing. We were doing our thing. And you know, Henry was at the Goodman, trying to break a few of those doors down. And he did. So you know, it was really fascinating. We were trying to survive, trying to get funding, to make our mission clear. We tried to do as many productions as possible and to give as many opportunities to Latino actors as possible at that point.

In their twenty-seven-year history, Teatro Vista has remained committed to producing new plays, training and developing young playwrights and actors, and producing work that addresses the complexity of Latina/o/x lives in the stage. Godinez described their mission as reflecting both the "roots" of Latina/o/x history as well as the "wings," that is, the future of the culture. The company has been successful in their efforts for nearly three decades largely because they have found ways to successfully collaborate with large theaters in Chicago. In particular, the relationship that they have cultivated with the Goodman Theatre, vis a vis Henry Godinez, has supported them in terms of relative visibility through regional recognition. Eddie Torres and Sandra Marquez have implemented a sense of professionalism that persists to this day and has

contributed to the company's steady growth. Teatro Vista holds a place of prominence in Chicago as the leading Latina/o/x equity company in Chicago today.

### **Teatro Luna**

Tanya Saracho, writer and performer, and Coya Paz, writer, director, and performer) met in 2000 in Chicago. They shared concern over the lack of opportunities for Latinas in theater in their city and in the wider national landscape. Together they co-founded Teatro Luna as a feminist collective organization. From their website:

We came together because we realized that the stories and experiences of Latina/Hispana women were undervalued and underrepresented not only on the Chicago stage, but beyond. We were also concerned that the few parts written for Latina women often went to non-Latina actresses. We felt that we had to do something. Our answer was Teatro Luna, Chicago's first and only all-Latina theater.<sup>5</sup>

Motivated by the lack of complex roles available to women like themselves, they created original work using first-voice representation and a collaborative process. In an article about *Machos*, a piece about masculinity that Teatro Luna performed in drag in 2007, Paloma Martinez-Cruz and company member/dramaturg Liza Ann Acosta wrote, "They hoped to establish a safe space in which Latina women could transmit their stories, express problems unique to their heritage, and actively respond to discrimination."<sup>6</sup> They

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<sup>5</sup> Teatro Luna. [www.teatroluna.org](http://www.teatroluna.org). Accessed 28 July 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Martinez-Cruz, Paloma and Liza Ann Acosta, "El Macho: How the Women of Teatro Luna Became Men" in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2012.

describe Teatro Luna's work as a form of "anti-oppression theater" that attempts to "denaturalize the binary construct of woman/man that habitates 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). They also note the political moment, the early 2000s, as a time of transition for Latina/o/x theater, best described by Maria Teresa Marrero, author of "Out of the Fringe? Out of the Closet: Latina/o Theater Performance in the 1990s," who states that Latina/o Theater as a project first worked on political and national inclusion and later gender and sexuality came out of the closet" (284). Teatro Luna's repertoire serves as an example of Latina feminist theater that undoes the gender binary and "endorses gender instability as a liberatory project" (294).

My interest in the company dates back to 2012 when I began crafting my research agenda. I realized that their work was part of a vital conversation about Latina representation and that they were unique in their geographic location in Chicago. At that time, I was frustrated by the lack of scholarship on Latina feminism and performance that led to misconceptions about Latina theater. It seemed to me, and this still rings true, that current, dominant culture conversations about Latina performance focuses on the "newness" of each Latina artist and seems to perpetually announce the moment of her "arrival." I began researching and writing about their work in relation to Teatro de las Chicanas, a feminist group of Chicanas from Southern California, founded in the 1970s. These two teatros connect across time and place as they both worked to upset conventional ideas of creative process as well as the nature of cultural and political organizing. By focusing on history and genealogy, I wanted to place an emphasis on the

ongoing nature of Latinas in theater as a whole. This project shifted to include a larger group of Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago when I realized the lack of scholarship on the innovative and important work being undertaken by there.

Las Lunáticas, as the women of Teatro Luna call themselves, organized primarily to raise the visibility of teatristas latinas. Their sense of sisterhood and solidarity united them across cultural, ethnic, and national lines in ways that were substantially different from Teatro de las Chicanas who were all Chicana. The original Teatro Luna company members were self-described as “pan-Latina” and included Colombiana, Mexicana, Puertoriquena and Chicana members. Teatro Luna has offered opportunities for its members to write, direct and perform in creative work that expands rather than limits or stereotypes their experiences. In the last seventeen years, through twenty-two original works, they have pushed boundaries of form and content and made significant contributions to the field of Latina/o/x theater.

It is important take a closer look at the work of Teatro Luna in relation to the earlier efforts of Teatro de las Chicanas. Las Chicanas, the group of students at San Diego State University, invited their mothers to campus and performed their original play *Chicana Goes To College* for them. This exemplifies their need to assert themselves and the value they place on education within la familia at a time when it was not common for young Chicanas to aspire to higher education. They also hosted “el seminario de las madres,” a conference that their mothers participated in, as part of their efforts to raise their visibility on their college campus claiming it as their rightful place and embodying the feminist mantra “The Personal is Political” with the play that exposed the challenges they faced as first generation Chicanas in higher education.

Thirty years later, Las Lunáticas write and performed *S-E-X-OH* and moved the conversation to the Latina body in terms of sex, sexuality, and sexual identity with an emphasis on the body and sex positive messaging. The personal as political, then, is a common refrain but with a very different textures and tones. And, as Alberto Sandoval Sanchez has stated, the very job the latina teatrista is to shock and scandalize the audience. With *S-E-X-O-H*, Las Lunáticas do exactly that as they share sex positive stories about their bodies, their desires, their sexual drives and their explorations of sex that include sex work. In the decades from Las Chicanas' early efforts to Las Lunáticas' productions of the early 2000s, the platform for visibility has shifted from colleges to a broader public sphere.

Alex Meda, current artistic director of Teatro Luna, met Coya in 2006 when she became an intern at Teatro Luna.

It took about a year for anyone to email me back. Finally I sent a kind of stern email to like every company member that said, 'I've been trying to work for free for your company for a year. Are you real?' I was like such an asshole, such an entitled nineteen year old. thinking that I was going to save this company by volunteering my time. Coya Paz sent me an email saying, 'Sorry, you don't understand. We're a small outfit. Thanks for your persistence, let's meet.' So we met for coffee and I was excited because Coya was incredible; she was well versed and well-spoken in terms of activism that the theater community could do and the impact the work could have for real people. I was just really taken from the beginning about that so I started to intern. Then the internship period ended and I

wanted to stay, and they wanted me to stay. That was the beginning of a really long journey. It was 2006. So that's a long time.

Just three years after Meda joined Teatro Luna, there was collapse in the organization that led to a major leadership transition. The year 2009 marks a new beginning for the company. Their process is different because they are run as an ensemble that generates new work. Resident dramaturg Liza Ann Acosta shared:

It was very difficult to recover from that transition. We had a lot of meetings and we had a lot of healing to do. Some of the members tried to stay, but it just got to the point that they felt "this has been so tainted that we have to leave." A few members stayed longer than others and eventually, it was just Alex and me. Part of our recovery process was to learn from our mistakes. We didn't want to have an artistic director and we understood the importance of collaboration. We learned that from Tanya and Coya and we felt it was worthy of continuing. We asked ourselves lots of questions, "What did we learn? What happened that we don't want to happen again? What happened that was good and that we need to make happen. What is our plan?" We spent a lot of time asking ourselves questions. Alex felt strongly and said, "We have to keep this going somehow," especially since the ensemble really wanted to keep going. So, Alex got us a space just south of Irving Park so that we could be on our own. We spent a lot of time trying to figure out what it was that we needed to do in order to heal and in order to keep creating a safe space. We needed to create a safe space where everyone was heard and valued.

We spent a lot of time creating that. It didn't always work. You know, we're human! There were lots of growing pains, I say. I think that it has taken us this long to figure out what we need to be. Seven is an interesting number.

I think sufficient time has passed and now we can say, 'This is Teatro Luna.' No ghosts are coming back to haunt it.

In terms of who and what Teatro Luna is now, Meda shared thoughts about the feminist and womanist principles at play in the organization.

Our feminism was very white for a very long time and a part of what I'm trying to deconstruct is the trope of white feminism where we say something like, 'We're going to talk about a collective space,' but then we still maintain systems of privilege in that space. I am really making a class critique on classic Luna. One example is that there was an artistic director in the space that we say was a collective. My title only exists today for external reasons. I have tried every title under the sun that isn't artistic director or executive director. That's my preference. Another title would reflect how we operate, but people don't understand it and I'm tired of the hour-long investigation of why there is no artistic director or the impression that I'm not actually in power. We all just got tired and went back to the title of 'artistic director' for the outside but internally we don't work that way. And that is more womanist of us. Does that make sense? Ultimately, I was like fine, we'll perform to the world their coded language and their structures. But internally - am I a decision maker of the

company? Absolutely, but that's only because I'm the only one without a full time job outside of this company. That's what it comes down to. Not because I feel more entitled or more educated or more prepared than other people in the company. I really come from a place of horizontal learning - we - Liza Ann and I - who I say are the oldest members, we work on the day to day basis. Everyday. How do we break down more barriers? We're working with really early twenty year olds and we make sure they have just as much space as we do. Because even though I might have more experience with x, y, z, they have something I don't have too. That is what I mean when I say we moved from a feminist to a womanist philosophy and structure. And mostly that it always remains fluid. So like in 2015, we sent out a press release that we were a leadership team of four people that we were all called creative producers. So that was awesome. I want to do that again, but it had to change because things changed. Now everything is shifting again as we develop the Los Angeles arm of the company. I think that is a major thing about our structure. The only thing that remains intact is that everybody has a say and everybody has agency.

I also want to say something else about being womanist. It also emerged when we stopped identifying as just Latina. We had to really embrace our Afro-Latinidad. If we were to make that small move just try to be inclusive of Afro-Latinas, it seemed like a half step. Why would we just do that and not really start to look further than that? Because women who identified as Black and maybe not Afro-Latina - that doesn't mean they

aren't Latina in some capacity. Just bringing them into the space felt right. Another thing that led to it was that so many new members were not Spanish speakers. That was a big change. Classic Luna has changed because people are changing, the babies people are having are changing. The culture is changing. We have fewer people who are first generation, second generation. We're having third, fourth, fifth, sixth, whatever. Our framework just needed to change. The womanist thing to do was to become in name women of color. Now the majority of the ensemble is still Latina. It takes time to bring people in and it's something that we're very dedicated to. Recruitment is one of my biggest priorities.

Teatro Luna has undergone leadership changes and structural overhauls in the past fifteen years. They put into practice the ideas about fluidity and a certain kind of nimble-ness in order to survive. Meda described the company's approach:

The changing landscape external from us and the theater landscape is incredibly fluid right now. Things are changing really quickly in our field and we have to respond to that. We also have to be responsive to what our company members need. One of our company members was in school for the last four years. The expectations on her were vastly different from what they are now. She is moving to LA to help me with that arm of the company. Everything is shifting again. I think that is a major thing about our structure. The only thing that remains intact is that everybody has a say and everybody has agency. In terms of everything else, titles and responsibilities and job descriptions, I say those things change on a

seasonal basis. And that's become a structure for us. The fluidity has actually become a structure.

They, like Teatro Vista, have developed certain survival tactics that have enabled them to exist for seventeen years. They are a self-reflective company, one that remains open to challenges, and one that embraces change. There is much to be learned from a theater company that can survive the hurdles of leadership change, funding challenges, and their status as an itinerant company. Rather than fight this status they have embraced it and their company members work in Chicago and Los Angeles.

In her essay “An Irrevocable Promise: Staging the Story Xicana,” Cherríe Moraga states that her creative endeavors “announce[s] our presence to one another and the world, but in our own tongue, on our own ground, brandishing our own homegrown instruments of naming. This is where the project of revolutionary Teatro occurs—self-defined, self-determined, employing words and images before and beyond colony.”<sup>7</sup> Teatro Luna exemplifies Moraga’s ideas about claiming space on one’s own terms. Martínez-Cruz and Acosta, in their description of Teatro Luna’s work, echo Moraga’s ideas about the processual nature of Latina feminism and theater. As they continually undo gender and artistic boundaries, they express themselves on a “continuum of being” (294). Their body of work is both “conflict and resistance” an idea that Moraga uses to describe the ongoing and processual nature of Chicana feminism. It is revolt that yearns to become revolution. Their creative impulses and their political consciousness compelled them to organize, to pen their own stories and to move those stories into the

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<sup>7</sup> Moraga, Cherríe. “An Irrevocable Promise: Staging the Story Xicana” in *Radical Acts: Theatre and*

*Feminist Pedagogies of Change*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007.

public sphere in the form of theater and performance. For them, the creative impulse centers on process and not product. This idea runs against the values of our capitalist democracy one where even not-for-profit theaters prioritize ticket sales over creative expression and artists who take risks and challenge dominant societal norms.

### **Urban Theater**

Urban Theater is located in the center of Paseo Boricua in Humboldt Park on the West Side of Chicago. Two large, steel structures depicting the Puerto Rican flag mark each end of Paseo Boricua. The Puerto Rican Cultural Center (the parent organization of the theater), the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, founded in 2000, and Urban Theater Company, founded in 2005, are all located on this section of the street which is filled with murals such as The Sea of Flags, a depiction of the Puerto Rican Pride Parade, large-scale images of recently released political prisoner Oscar Rivera Lopez, and freedom fighter Lolita Lebrón. At nearby Roberto Clemente High School, the famous Pittsburgh Pirate is memorialized on the side of the building in a mosaic mural. He died tragically in a plane crash as he attempted to deliver aid to earthquake victims in Nicaragua in 1972 and holds the distinction of being the first Caribbean player to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. There are numerous Puerto Rican coffee shops, bakeries, and restaurants in this neighborhood and Ivan Vega, artistic director of Urban Theater, often partners with them to offer patrons special pricing on theater tickets and meals. When he described his approach to producing theater, he shared, “the infrastructure of Urban Theater is family oriented. That’s big for me. Anyone who comes to my mother’s home is fed and is taken care of. They are made to feel extremely welcomed, that’s just who she is. So that part has rubbed off on me; that happens at my

home, too. I want to make people feel like they are at someone's home here at the theater." Inside the theater, where we conducted this interview, there are the flags of Puerto Rico and Lares as well as vejigante costumes hanging on the walls. The lobby and the theater are intimate, culturally specific spaces.

Speaking about the founding of Urban Theater, Vega says, "At that time we were a group of Latino artists, primarily Puerto Rican, who wanted to get together to create a company where we could showcase our stories, our voices. We were all actors as well. We just wanted to show Puerto Rican people in a positive light; we weren't seeing that anywhere." Vega is a graduate of Roosevelt University in Chicago and he was the only Puerto Rican man in the theater department at that time. While in college, he started auditioning for Latino plays at Victory Gardens and Teatro Vista. Eventually, he was cast as an understudy for Eddie Torres for the premiere production of *Anna in the Tropics* by Nilo Cruz; the play would win the Pulitzer in 2003, shortly after it was produced in Chicago. Just two years later, he started organizing with Madrid St. Angelo and Marilyn Camacho who were co-founders of Urban Teatro. Their initial efforts were stalled because of a difference of opinion with their first parent organization. Vega explained, "We just had to break away from a structure that we didn't believe in at the time. We came together to form an ensemble, but they had a top-down style of leadership. They wanted to have a title and run the organization, but not do any of the work." The split meant finding a new artistic home and learning how to produce theater on the spot. Vega continued:

At that moment, I had to learn lots of things. I had to learn how to do numbers, marketing, and public relations but it was something that came

naturally to me. I just took on the leadership. Sometimes I struggled because I'm really an actor and the co-founders and the ensemble all saw me as an actor first, but I felt I had to be the producer. This is what I had to do. I always saw it as a business. And you know, sometimes even though it's a business you still can't lose sight of why you started the company in the first place. We were an ensemble; we were a group of friends who came together to start something. We struggled a lot because we had to deal with a lot of adversities that came our way early on."

In their first season, they produced Miguel Piñero's contemporary classic *Short Eyes* and then continued to do his work in 2006 when they produced *The Sun Always Shines for the Cool* and *Eulogy for a Small Time Thief* alongside *365 Plays/365 Days* by African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks. Vega told me that they are "a Latino-based multi-cultural theater company" and that they use this language "because not everyone here is Latino." He also pointed out that they are "the only theater company in Humboldt Park and the only theater company producing Puerto Rican work in Chicago." A survey of their twelve-year production history shows their commitment to Latina/o/x playwrights and more specifically Puerto Rican writers. They have produced two plays by Parks and in 2007 they produced *Runaways* by Elizabeth Swados. While not being an explicitly feminist organization, they regularly produce Puerto Rican women playwrights and consistently employ women directors.

Liza Ann Acosta, of Teatro Luna, is also the resident dramaturg at Urban Theater. She joined the company after being invited to lead a conversation on Carmen Rivera's play *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water* in 2014. She and I spoke about this play's central

character in relation to two other Urban Theater productions: *Adoration of the Old Woman* by José Rivera and *Lolita de Lares* by Migdalia Cruz, both produced in 2016. These three recent productions feature strong, Puerto Rican women as protagonists whose stories interact personally and politically with Puerto Rican history and cultural identity. Acosta found the opportunity to learn more about Chicago and Puerto Rico through her involvement in these productions. She stated, “The connections between nationalism, culture, and identity in Chicago are different from New York and different from the island where I grew up. I feel more connected to home by working on these plays.”

*Lolita de Lares* chronicles the life of Lolita Lebrón centering on the sacrifices she made fighting for Puerto Rico’s independence. With this play, Cruz takes a critical stance toward Puerto Rican nationalism and asks, “Do you know the heroes stitched into the fabric of the Puerto Rican flag?” One of her answers is Lolita Lebrón and one way that Cruz attempts to answer this question is with this sprawling and at times surrealist play. She depicts the spectrum of Lebrón’s life that includes her childhood in Lares, her work with the Independence movement, and her time as a political prisoner in the Federal Correctional Institution of Women in West Virginia as well as nightmarish sequences of a tour guide who satirically portrays the colonial relationship that dictates the nature of the relationship between the US and Puerto Rico. Acosta observed,

We can agree or disagree with the actions that Lolita and others felt compelled to take in order to pursue their ideals but we cannot deny the fact that they are a part of the revolutionary history of our country. Many people of our generation have not had the opportunity to learn about them because it was dangerous to know or discuss what they did. I better

understand why people reacted the way they did to Lolita, why they voted the way they did, and why they spoke about ideals the way they did.

People who lived during that time experienced a kind of terror and lived in fear. This helped me understand my own family. The personal is political.

The Puerto Rican who is not political is a strange creature, indeed. My mother claimed to be apolitical and I have actually learned that she is far from it. There is a silencing of our people. And with this particular play we see the effect of that silencing, the process of that silencing, and the consequences of that silencing. It's painful but it has been an incredible gift to be able to understand this. And the audience response to this play has been really moving. I have seen men and women, especially older people who were probably kids when the gag law was enacted in 1948, who saw this onstage and it was so cathartic for them. That surprised me. I didn't expect to see that from the audience.

Actor Frankie Davila, founding member of Latino Chicago who has since appeared in film and television, continues to perform on stage. He played Vejjigante Tinto and Pedro Albizu Campos in Urban Theater's production of *Lolita de Lares*, roles that he helped to craft in the Latino Chicago production twenty years earlier. When I spoke to him about his work as an actor in spaces like Urban Theater and Latino Chicago, he reflected:

Back then I was auditioning here and there. I mean, I would get this whole stereotype thing, you know the 'Where's your bandana, kind of thing. Where's your goatee? Can you sound a little more ethnic?' You know, that kind of thing. You hear that a lot, everybody's gone through that.

Which is why it was always great to go back to the firehouse and do the lead on something there like *Miriam's Flowers* or *Lucy Loves Me* because then, it would never faze me when I would go out there and I would go for a McDonald's commercial looking Latino or whatever. I always knew I had some place to go.

*Lolita de Lares* by Migdalia Cruz is key to understanding the continuity of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. It was produced by two different companies: Latino Chicago and Urban Theater, two decades apart, and it exemplifies the re-mapping of Chicago through theater that is the wider focus on my current research. From the Firehouse theater on Damien Ave in Wicker Park, where Latina/o/x artists literally transformed an abandoned space and ultimately a neighborhood to Humboldt Park where Puerto Rican cultural pride thrives in many forms of public expression, this play moved from one space to the other as a part of the claiming of space and the articulation of Latina/o/x culture and identity.

## Conclusion

These Latina/o/x artists are performing an “aesthetics of resistance,” an idea put forward by Kenyan writer and cultural critic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in his 1997 essay, “Enactments of Power.” They announce their presence through performance and public expressions of culture. They construct home for themselves on stage and off throughout the city and they work in enduring ways to transform spaces that have been traditionally reserved for the Anglo American theater canon. I would like to close with one more quote from Eddie Torres, who observed how he and other Latina/o/x artists have worked against the color line in Chicago’s larger, mainstream theaters. He stated:

We ended up doing co-productions with Victory Gardens, the Goodman, and Steppenwolf as a way to try to break the line. Even Latino Chicago at their last point ended up doing a production at Steppenwolf, which was Migdalia Cruz’s *Fur* that transferred from Latino Chicago. It was one of the last plays I remember being done there and it transferred to Steppenwolf. It is the last thing I remember that Latino Chicago did. It was great because we were breaking a lot of doors at that point. That was happening mid 1990s.

Even if their strategies vary, the Latina/o/x theater artists at these companies focus on community and attend to their sense of purpose as creators of culture. They describe a sense of responsibility to the communities they are connected to and this informs what they choose to represent on stage. In the various contexts, i.e. large predominantly white theaters, culturally specific theaters, community-based theaters, described in this chapter,

these artists operate within an oppositional framework in order to render themselves visible in a city (and a nation) that continually attempts to erase them.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**CRAFTING CULTURE THROUGH THEATER**

**Introduction**

We decided to stay closer to the neighborhood, away from the theater district and we were definitely a success. But the way I see theater now, um, people are doing good things. I, for one, will always be supportive of Urban Theater, supportive of Aguijón, too. Because they are not in that theater district. I'm not knocking it, I'm just saying: If they are Latino theaters and they want to be with the neighborhood, then they should make it easier for them to have access, to be able to come to the space. [At Latino Chicago], we wanted to get them here, especially young kids. There were so many horrible things happening and we wanted to get them off the streets. We wanted to give them something to do. Theater, to me, is an avenue for learning. They could learn how to do lights. They could learn how to do sound. They could see actors on stage. They could become actors. They could direct. They could watch. All of these things, later on, will spark their creativity. They could do beautiful works, you know, be successful and whatnot. So if you wanna help the community, you need to be with the community. That's how I see it, and I guess that's how we were at Latino Chicago.

In this passage Nilda Reillo Hernandez, company member and ultimately executive director at Latino Chicago, shares her ideas about the purpose of theater and the necessity of creative outlets like theater in neighborhoods and communities. She links the work of

Latino Chicago directly to ideas about access and location and notes their deliberate choice to make theater outside of the downtown theater district. As they built the company, members of Latino Chicago crafted Latina/o/x culture with the idea that their creative work was inextricably linked to their neighbors, friends, and family. In this chapter, I will use four theater productions to illustrate how Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago approached their work, what motivated them, and how their work in community contributes to the ongoing and affirming construction of *latinidad*. These productions are *Lolita de Lares*, written by Migdalia Cruz and produced by Latino Chicago in 1995; the revival of *Lolita de Lares* by Urban Theater (2016); *Generation Sex* by Teatro Luna, presented at Instituto Cervantes in 2014; and *La Havana Madrid*, written by Sandra Delgado, who performed the lead role, and had the play co-produced by Teatro Vista and the Goodman Theatre in 2017. My goal here is to show how Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago, in the name of creative expression, strategically organized and carved out space throughout the city in order to deploy critical ideas about race, culture, class, gender, politics, and history. My analysis and descriptions of these four productions will demonstrate how these artists contribute to the ongoing discourse of *latinidad* and how their work assists in the project that Arrizón describes as “a counteracting mediation against racism and imperialist practices.”<sup>1</sup>

Before I launch into my analysis of these four productions, it is important to acknowledge the evolving scholarship on the concept of *latinidad* that has emerged in the

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<sup>1</sup> Arrizón, Alicia. *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999.

past two decades in order to draw out nuance and a deeper understanding of the term. In 1999, scholars Alberto Sandoval Sánchez and Alicia Arrizón published two important books on Latina/o/x theater and they crafted useful definitions of latinidad. In *José, Can You See?: Latinos On and Off Broadway*, Sandoval Sánchez writes:

Latinidad results from Latino/a agency and intervention when US Latinos/as articulate and construct cultural expressions and identity formations that come from a conscious political act of self-affirmation. Hence, any Latino cultural performance and ritualistic enactment constitutes an affirmation of “Latinidad.” (15)

In his book, he moves from the early problematic representations of Latinos on Broadway examining stage and television performances by Carmen Miranda and Desi Arnaz as well as theater productions *West Side Story* and *A Chorus Line* to draw out examples of ethno-racial stereotyping, the sexualizing of the Latina/o/x body, fear-mongering and the criminalization of Puerto Ricans, and the erasure of the contributions of Latinas/os from U.S. theater history. In the first chapters he looks at mainstream images of Latinos and the distortions of culture that emerge. In chapter four titled, “An Octopus with Many Legs: U.S. Latino Theater and Its Diversity,” he provides an incredibly useful definition of Latina/o/x theater that gets at the complexity and diversity of the creative expression of Latinas/os/x in the U.S. He then dedicates the second half of the book to chronicling the themes and ideas present in Latina/o/x theater that emerge when Latina/o/x artists create representations of themselves. He focuses on AIDS and queer identity, gender stereotypes and idealized images, and notions of belonging in these three remaining chapters.

In her book *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*, Alicia Arrizón focuses on the Latina subject as represented in performance in the twentieth century. As she plots the range of representations, beginning with Chata Noloesca in the early 1900s and settling on Monica Palacios and Carmelita Tropicana in the 1990s, she draws on cultural and political history as she works towards a definition of latinidad. She explains this notion of identity is complex because of the “social, historical, political, and personal dimensions that constitute group identity.” (17) Arrizón centers her conversation of Latina identity on the Latina body and she demonstrates that it is one of “constant motion” and fluidity (165). She draws on queer politics and feminism in relation to race and ethnicity and she works to destabilize hierarchies of power/oppression. She writes:

Latinos (or Hispanics) are distinguishable not only by race and class, but also by generational processes of migration. Despite the importance of the processes of migration, the history of Latinos in the U.S. has often been viewed with little or no regard for the diverse types of émigrés, the reasons for emigration, or the timing of their arrival in the United States. (17)

She connects the concept of latinidad to the movement of bodies across borders and notes that we should be mindful of the distinctions of these bodies that contribute to the diversity and complexity of who Latinas/os/x are. At the same time, she asserts, “Theater and performance art are logical choices for Latinas as they seek to enact their selves, and in doing so to contribute to a collective act of identity making” (23). The performing arts are tools for articulating notions of the self, connecting that self to others, and building community in the face of obstacles and oppression. The last point that I find useful in Arrizón’s work is her idea about “collectivist vision” and how Latina/o/x artists use

theater specifically as a “tool for resistance” (25). She cites theater movements in Argentina, Chile, the United States, and Uruguay whose “goal was to raise public awareness and stimulate responses to political, social, and economic injustices, while at the same time striving to incorporate previously marginalized rural sectors into the national consciousness and culture of their home countries (25). In the US, she notes the efforts of El Teatro Campesino as contributing to this social justice project. Using theater as a tool for change and a weapon of resistance applies to the ideas that drove Latina/o/x artists in my research to organize themselves, create their theater companies in Chicago, and produce plays that speak back to hegemonic discourse while affirming themselves and their place in society.

Since Sandoval Sánchez’ assertion about the affirming nature of performances created by Latinas/os/x, many scholars have continued to refine and redefine *latinidad* as the culture shifts. Lorena García and Mérida Rúa address the “healthy tensions embedded in Latino identity formation” in their 2007 article, “Processing *Latinidad*: Mapping Latino Urban Landscapes Through Chicago Ethnic Festivals.”<sup>2</sup> They define *latinidad* as “an ethnoracial configuration and sociocultural practice in place-making, where a shared sense of being Latino transpires within diverse social settings and associations” (318).

They continue:

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<sup>2</sup> *Garcia, Lorena and Mérida Rúa. “Processing Latinidad: Mapping Latino Urban*

*Landscapes Through Chicago Ethnic Festivals.” Latino Studies 2007, 5, (317–339) 2007 Palgrave Macmillan.*

While cultural nationalism is regarded as counterproductive in generating a sense of *latinidad*, and whereas *latinidad* is itself considered an empty signifier that obliterates the unique circumstances that characterize and variously effect national identities; we nevertheless, argue that these two configurations do not necessarily cancel each other. In fact, we suggest, that there are moments [such as the opening vignette] where they emerge simultaneously, dynamically informing one another. Our task then is to point to how such frictions embedded within Latino social worlds create opportunities for critical dialogues concerning identity formations. (318)

In this article, García and Rúa examine *latinidad* through “outsider” perspectives that include marketing specialists, festival producers, and city officials who organize events such as Viva Chicago, a “Latin music festival” (322) and from within, specifically a Latino Studies student group that experienced tensions around the removal of a Puerto Rican flag for a Mexican Independence party at the Latino Studies house at University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. By focusing on these two events, one large-scale, state-sanctioned “cultural celebration” and one intragroup event in the shared home of Puerto Rican and Mexican American students on a college campus, they are able to move from one location to another and back again highlighting complicated factors in each scenario. They reflect, “Largely interpreted as counter-intuitive to one another, cultural nationalism and pan ethnicity have been understood as a choice between either/or. As our research reveals, such dichotomous interpretations of these two configurations have limited our ability to capture their coexistence and truly understand Latino experiences” (336).

García and Rúa’s work is important because they build on the scholarship of Frances Aparicio, a foundational Latino Studies scholar who pushes us away from reductionist thinking about Latina/o/x identity, one that critiques cultural nationalism on one hand while celebrating panethnicity on the other. Through this binary, these two positions are more often pit against each other rather than examined for the productive tensions that co-exist between and among them (319). It is also important to note that García and Rúa, like Aparicio, Lillia Fernandez, and others, have undertaken the study of Latinos in Chicago in order to resist the “geographic hegemony” that once scripted Latino populations in discreet “urban centers—that is Cubans in Miami, Chicanos, Mexicans in Los Angeles, and Puerto in New York” (319). My work with Latina/o/x theater artists is inspired by their scholarship, and I am adding theater as another aspect of cultural production to this wider conversation about latinidad in Chicago.

The ongoing attention to the study of Latinas/os/x in Chicago is evidenced by the recent collection *The Latina/o Midwest Reader* that includes an afterword by Frances Aparicio who states that, “Chicago has been historically characterized as the city of latinidad, a sort of exceptionalist paradigm in which no national Latin American group dominates, although Mexicans constitute 79 percent of Latina/o Chicago.”<sup>3</sup> In her footnote to this statement, she acknowledges that this is a relatively recent phenomenon citing Juan Flores’s 2000 *From Bomb to Hip Hop* and his observation that Chicago has “more or less equally sizable Latino groups.” Since that time, Aparicio writes, “the Mexican population increased significantly” (283). She characterizes “Latina/o Chicago

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<sup>3</sup> Aparicio, Francis. “Afterword” in *The Latina/o Midwest Reader*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2017.

as an urban space informed by what Chabram-Dernersesian calls ‘local transnational plurality,’ that is a domestic transnational community in which Latinas/os cross national borders within their everyday, local lives within the same urban space, without necessarily having to travel outside of the United States.” (273) Some examples of this can be found in the interactions and collaborations of Latina/o/x theater artists who formed theaters that cross nationalist and cultural borders and who perform their work in various neighborhoods throughout the city. As discussed in previous chapters, all of the theater companies represented in this study were/are comprised of Latina/o/x artists of various backgrounds with a range of ethno-racial, cultural, and nationalist identities. Further, Aparicio proposes that Latino Studies scholars attend to nuance and shifts in culture:

Intralatina/o lives re-situate the transnational flows throughout the hemisphere from the exclusive political and social realms into individual family rooms and kitchens, the macro to the micro, from the structural or social to the intimate realms. This concept adds a new layer to our multiple understandings of transnationalism, which has been celebrated, generalized, and diluted as any act of border crossing, and at times dangerously neutralized in terms of power differentials. Her work with intralatinas/os reaffirm these contradictions and tensions within Latina/o Chicago. (273-4)

Lastly, in “Reconstructing Latinidad,”<sup>4</sup> Aparicio shares: “These sites of Latinidad do not necessarily imply a utopian, egalitarian dynamic, nor do they suggest altogether that

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<sup>4</sup> Aparicio, Francis. “(Re) Constructing Latinidad: The Challenge of Latino Studies” in *A Companion to Latino/a Studies*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007.

power differentials are decreasing, but rather, that new power relations emerge from these encounters” (56) Latino Studies scholarship and the interrogation of Latina/o/x identity vis-à-vis cultural products such as theater must attend to the changing and complicating dynamics and resist oversimplifications in order to construct a palatable narrative about the artistic expressions of Latinas/os/x in the U.S. “Latino Studies can become the space in which these diverse experiences, identities, and can be accounted for in the construction of a new social imaginary that transcends the old paradigms and nationality based conflicts.” She states we can no longer use “national identities as the dominant criterion for exclusion and inclusion in the community” (57) However, I note national identities in this dissertation when those labels are used by the artists to describe themselves.

Scholars Ramón Rivera-Servera, Claudia Millian, and Cary Cordova add dimensions to the conversation about latinidad with their recent books. In *Performing Queer Latinidad*<sup>5</sup>, Rivera-Servera writes “Latinidad cannot be properly addressed without attending to the political economies that have shaped both the living conditions of Latinas/os living in the United States and their available strategies for making sustainable and pleasurable lives.” (22) He adds, “Through serial acts like the performances that I examine in this book [latinidad] becomes an approachable, although fluid, position. He looks at “the material and contextual specificities from which latinidad is performed.” (26) His insights as both a Latino Studies and a Performance Studies scholar are useful in

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<sup>5</sup> Rivera-Servera, Ramón. *Performing Queer Latinidad*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012.

my observations about Latina/o/x theater in Chicago in that theater provides pleasure and entertainment as much as it offers social and political commentary.

In Claudia Milian's 2013 book, *Latining America: Black-Brown Passages and the Coloring of Latina/o Studies*, she describes latinidad as "a decolonizing project" (11) but she also discusses "the limiting locations of latinidad." She calls attention to what Jose Muñoz calls "the affective overload that is latinidad" and points out that there are no analytic terms available for the theorizing of collective Latino and Latina dissonances, variances, and disagreements. (12) One of the biggest gaps for her is the way the term is "ensnared in the logic of white and brown." (13). In my research, the only artist (of twelve that I interviewed) to address the black/brown color line and concepts of Afro-Latinidad was Alex Meda, current artistic director of Teatro Luna. She noted that this as a relatively recent but now on-going dialogue within the company. In her interview, Meda complicated the conversation about race and identity for Latinas/os/x in general and shared ways Teatro Luna specifically is working through this topic. For Meda, the conversation about race is directly connected to concepts of feminism and womanism and specific shifts in the leadership and make-up of the company that she now describes as womanist in nature.

Lastly, Cary Cordova, using oral histories as a key method, highlights how Latina/o/x artists shaped the identity of the Mission District in San Francisco as both a place and mode of art-making. In her 2017 book, *The Heart of the Mission: Latino Art and Politics in San Francisco*, she writes, "There is a desire to show how the Mission emerged as an influential physical space for a profoundly creative and politically active

Latino arts community.” (6) Again, nuance and complexity motivate her as she describes her approach to this project:

Moving between regional, national, and transnational perspectives is key to dismantling reductive, dehumanizing stereotypes and essential for documenting cultural diversity and political dissension. Tracing how Latinos have sought to represent themselves is critical in this process, as well as inseparable from how they have been represented. Ultimately, acknowledging the history of local communities in the larger national landscape is imperative for understanding the inclusions and exclusions that have played out in forming a national pan-Latino identity. (8)

Citing Augustin Lao-Montes, she writes:

Latinidad is both a category deployed within a variety of dominant spaces and institutions (state, corporate, academic) to label populations as well as a form of self-identification used by individuals, movements, and organizations to articulate a sense of community. While national similarities exist, the impact of local histories and politics generated divergent expressions of Latinidad, both from within and outside the Latino community. (7)

Echoing García and Rúa, who also move from insider to outsider perspectives in their analysis, Cordova’s employment of Lao-Montes’s description of latinidad signals her approach to constructing a complex view of the contributions of Latinas/os/x to the place and the artforms of the Mission District. The clearest example of movement from inside the community to outside (and back again) can be found in Sandra Delgado’s experiences

at Teatro Vista and the Goodman Theatre throughout her career. *La Havana Madrid*, her most recent play, was supported by both companies through her research and development phases and then co-produced by both in summer 2017. While the Goodman has a decent track record of producing Latina/o/x artists, it is still an historically white institution that grapples with issues of representation. That being said, Delgado's play about the erasure of Latinos in Chicago was workshopped and then fully produced at the Goodman for a successful run. *La Havana Madrid* is an example of the breaking down of the color line at the Goodman. For Delgado, moving between Teatro Vista and the Goodman, as well as other community-based sites, was an important part of creating and sharing the work with wide and varied audiences throughout Chicago. Her play exemplifies the best aspects of fluid cultural production and her unique desire and ability to move between multiple sites.

Through the examples of these four productions, I will show how the making of place is inherently tied to the making of identity for the artists and their companies. Their sense of identity is tied to their sense of lineage as they trace their artistic and ethno-racial identities and describe the importance of their connections to one another as they create theater even as they note the challenges and limitations of the smallness of the city and the limits of opportunities available to them. I will discuss artistic and cultural lineages in Chicago and how these artists use theater to write themselves into existence in Chicago, on the American stage, and in the social and cultural fabric of the US. While these artists are undoing the color line in Chicago and remapping the city as their own, they are simultaneously constructing *latinidad* on their own terms. Chicago, as other scholars have documented in great detail, is unique in its construction of *latinidad* based on patterns of

migration and based on its location in the “heart of America.” (The Latina/o Midwest Reader)

***Lolita de Lares, Latino Chicago, 1995***

In 1995, Latino Chicago produced *Lolita de Lares*<sup>6</sup>, a play they commissioned Migdalia Cruz to write. On the title page of the script, Cruz acknowledges Juan Ramirez, Nilda Reillo Hernandez, Frankie Davila, and Joel Klaff as collaborators on the text. She credits these company members because of their research on and writing about Lolita Lebrón for *Dolores*, a devised project the company completed two years prior to the commission. The play is surreal; the characters come from different spans of time and place; they collide and co-exist in the world of the play. In fact, there are 13 different locales in six different cities and a dream space. Cruz sets the time of the play as ranging from the 1930s to the present with one scene set in the 1500s. The prologue includes Ramón Emeterio Betances as a character who interacts with schoolchildren. Betances lived from 1827-1898 and led the uprising known as El Grito de Lares in Puerto Rico in 1868. Lolita Lebron, the political figure, is written as three separate characters in the play, “Lolita Niña,” “Lolita Mujer,” and “Lolita Anciana,” who interact with each other as well as other characters throughout the piece. This play functions as a history lesson that depicts the infamous shooting in the gallery of the House of Representatives and shares the perspectives of freedom fighters like Betances, a general, and Marian Bracetti, a seamstress who also played a role in the Lares revolt. I read Cruz’s inclusion of Bracetti, alongside Betances, as a feminist re-visioning that writes women into this early narrative

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<sup>6</sup> Cruz, Migdalia. *Lolita de Lares*. Unpublished.

of revolution. Additional examples of feminism in the text can be found in the speeches by Pedro Albizu Campos that Cruz includes. She shares an excerpt of “Feminism and the Independence Movement” on page 25 and an excerpt from “The Liberated Woman” on page 40, both by Campos. These interventions serve to demonstrate the centrality of women’s roles in the Puerto Rican liberation movement.

*Lolita de Lares* largely centers on the sacrifices Lebrón made fighting for Puerto Rico’s independence. With this play, Cruz takes a critical stance toward Puerto Rican nationalism and asks, “Do you know the heroes stitched into the fabric of the Puerto Rican flag?” By asking this question, she challenges allegiances to the flag that are devoid of knowledge about those who fight for Puerto Rico’s liberation and consistently resist colonialism. One of her answers to this pointed question is Lolita Lebrón and one way that Cruz attempts to answer it is with this sprawling play. She shares the scope of Lebrón’s life that includes her childhood in Lares, her work with the Independence movement, and her time as a political prisoner in the Federal Correctional Institution of Women in West Virginia. These scenes are contrasted with nightmarish sequences of the Dream Tour Guide who satirically portrays the colonialist attitudes that dictates the nature of the relationship between the US and Puerto Rico.

This production served an act of remembering for the cast members, the company, and the playwright. Many of them shared that it was a point of entry into Puerto Rican history that they had not been taught elsewhere. In the program note for the 1995 production, director Edward Torres wrote:

When I first started working on this project, I thought I knew everything there was to know about Puerto Rico—its people, history, and music.

However, during the rehearsal process for *LOLITA de LARES*, I quickly realized that I really knew very little about my mother's country.

To begin to understand my culture, I had to examine the political issues that had a profound impact on Puerto Rico's past, present, and future.

Being involved in this production stirred my political consciousness. Lolita Lebrón has become to me a symbol of Truth, Commitment, Strength, Spirit, and Hope. Without any of these elements, it is difficult for anyone to truly understand the plight of Puerto Rico. The plight of our people.

At the same time that it serves as a reclaiming of one's past, the play also demonstrates the contradictions of hope and freedom for colonized peoples. In the prologue, Betances and Bracetti, the freedom fighters from another time, tell the young students, "Don't give up on your dreams" (12) while Lolita Anciana is held and tortured in prison in the same scene. Later in the play, Lolita Anciana encounters a young woman who shares her father's saying, "You can't eat dignity, why dream of something you can never have." Lolita finishes the line by adding, "But I say, everybody eats." (46) Additionally, Cruz weaves a decolonial point of view into this play through the four vejigante characters: Vejigante Tinto, Vejigante Blanco, Vejigante Azul, and Vejigante Estrella who each have distinct personalities but also function as a chorus. They are primarily tricksters who disrupt and discredit the Dream Tour Guide throughout the play. The Dream Tour Guide represents colonial power and the ongoing colonization of the island through tourism. By the play's end, the vejigantes are able to disempower and even transform the Dream Tour Guide. The tourists she was leading abandon her and she admits, "All I know is a lie. I'm so lost." (70). Near the play's end, Lolita Anciana and Lolita Mujer share the line,

“Every one of us is adrift like an island— searching for home.” (81) This statement echoes what director Edward Torres expressed in this statement and what Cruz has written about her own sense of identity, also in the 1995 program note, Cruz states:

The journey to this play has been paved with the power of knowledge and the pain of not knowing enough—about my culture, music, literature, and, especially politics. It was an honor to explore the life of a woman everyone should know about—not just because of her politics or nationality—but because of her spirit. The story of Lolita Lebrón is a story about the survival of dreams in a world that no longer tolerates idealism.

Lolita gave me back my dreams, forced me, to look at my own politics, and, most importantly, fed my spirit and my soul. The journey of this play was a journey home.

Prior to the commissioning of this play, members of Latino Chicago co-created a piece about the life of Dolores “Lolita” Lebron simply titled *Dolores*. It was produced in 1993. Frankie Davila recalled this process:

It’s funny to say but I started to get bored doing the leads and stuff [at Latino Chicago]. I had done quite a few of them and I think Juan started noticing that. He mentioned, ‘There’s a lot of political prisoners. They are still incarcerated.’ There were like twelve of them; I think Carter released them during the ‘70s. Back then I wasn’t doing anything, I was failing. I went to Roberto Clemente High School for one year. I think I just had too many friends, so I got out [of school]. They had the YMCA summer jobs program. Basically they got kids off the streets to work in summer jobs. It

was either play percussion or learn how to use photography, work in dark rooms, make silk screen t-shirts, that kind of thing. That doesn't exist anymore. But yeah, we were paid to do stuff like that. And I met these really cool people. Luis Rosa and Angel 'Figgy' Figueroa were master percussionists and people in the know. Luis he had his politics, but I knew nothing about it. He ended up being a political prisoner. All that stuff was kinda like 'all behind the door' stuff. He wasn't advertising any of it, you know. So when he got put away for seditious conspiracy, and the other eleven, that was like a big blow to me. I was like 'Wow.' He was a truly dear, dear friend to me when I was young.

So Juan puts this in my head about our political prisoners. I was thinking: 'What made Luis do that?' So then I started prying into the politics. I didn't know anything about it, and everything back then was on microfilm in the library. I started seeing this stuff about Lolita, the 1954 Blair House incident. And then I'm coming back to Juan with this, and this, and that. There's all this stuff. Well, it's all connected. That's why they were doing it. So there's a story there. He said, 'You should really look into it more.' So basically it took on a life on its own.

So we did this piece called *Dolores*. I was going to the library, going to get the stuff in print and we made this timeline in the theater and we put it on the walls. Anytime we did research or we got more information, or anything from the cast we added it to the wall. When the activists put the Puerto Rican flag on top of the Statue of Liberty we added it to the wall.

All these things, we just put them on the timeline. That's how we created this piece. We just started looking at the material and making scene after scene.

Davila's description reveals a collaborative, community-based process that today would be called devised theater. The company of actors each contributed content by conducting research and sharing their findings on the walls of their theater. They re-made the firehouse on Damien Ave into a dynamic space of learning and creativity. They constructed a timeline of Puerto Rican history and activism that they used as inspiration to create a piece of theater that was then shared with the wider community, their audience in Chicago.

There is another dimension to their creative process that speaks to the affirmation of identity. Later in the interview, Davila shared a point of debate between himself and playwright Cruz as worked on the second iteration of the piece, *Lolita de Lares*:

One thing I remember was the Vejigantes. When I first got introduced to them, I said, "Oh my god, that thing just lends itself to this over the top style." You see the costume and the mask, and this guy just flying onto the stage. I was hooked and I was so into making the Vejigantes appear proper, making them on point. So we were writing the piece and my concern was the Vejigantes. You know, they never speak. But in our play, Migdalia has them speaking. I was so hooked on tradition, and I had to find out what tradition is. It is just basically somebody handing something down. And as the generations go on, you know, each one adds to it and makes it their own. So she has them speaking and it was the first time she

and I were throwing little jabs at each other. I didn't want the elders who taught me about Vejigantes to be offended. And then, we brought in this guy and he was an artist, and I remember telling him my concern. I'll never forget this. He said, "Frankie, que el pueblo haga, it's never wrong." I remember thinking, "What are you talking about?" He said, "It's great. It's beautiful. You have to understand, tu era boricua from Humboldt Park, del parque. This is your vision." So I took that. I will never forget him, "Que el pueblo haga, nunca hacer mal."

The issue that Davila raises reflects questions that arise around authenticity when one represents culturally specific elements on stage, in this case the vejigantes. Davila wanted to remain true to tradition with the vejigante characters while Cruz took liberty to write them as speaking characters who have a point of view and whose actions impact the storytelling. She uses them to make cultural commentary on various issues in the play. Davila's anxiety about appearing "proper" were allayed when another artist affirmed that "what the people make is never wrong." I find Davila's reflection to be especially heartening when young artists of color, in this case Latina/o/x artists, are often told that they are not right: not right because they are too ethnic, not right because they are not ethnic enough, not right because of their skin color, their accents, their attitudes, and their experiences. At Latino Chicago in 1995, this company was all right.

### ***Lolita de Lares at Urban Theater, 2016***

Urban Theater produced Migdalia Cruz's *Lolita de Lares* in 2016. This production is key to understanding the continuity of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. That *Lolita de Lares* was produced by two different companies: Latino Chicago and Urban

Theater, two decades apart, exemplifies the re-mapping of Chicago through theater. From the Firehouse theater on Damien Ave in Wicker Park, where Latina/o/x artists literally transformed an abandoned space and ultimately a neighborhood to Division Street in Humboldt Park (just a little over a mile away) where Puerto Rican cultural pride thrives in many forms of public expression, this play moved from one place to the other as a part of the claiming of space and the public articulation of Latina/o/x culture and identity by Latina/o/x theater artists.

In Urban Theater's 2016 program note and on the company website, they cite the original production of this play note details such as the commission and production by Latino Chicago and that it was directed by Edward Torres, founding director of Teatro Vista. They deliberately name their connection to both Latino Chicago and Teatro Vista, two Latina/o/x companies with long histories producing independent work in Chicago. The play itself is a testament to community as I described the collaborative process that Latino Chicago company members participated in when they originated the work in 1995. An even more direct connection between the two productions lies in cast member Frankie Davila, who performed in both versions. As an actor, he carried the history forward and was able to share memories of the process and production choices of the earlier iteration. These details exemplify the values that founding artistic director Ivan Vega holds central to the work at Urban Theater, namely visibility and connection to community. Vega told me the Urban Theater was founded by "a group of Latino artists, primarily all Puerto Rican, who wanted to get together to create a company where we can showcase our stories, our voice. We were all actors as well. We wanted to just show the Puerto Rican people in a positive light, and we weren't seeing that anywhere." Vega is a

graduate of Roosevelt University in Chicago and he remembers being “the only Puerto Rican young man in the theater department at that time.” While in college, he started auditioning for Latina/o/x plays at Victory Gardens and Teatro Vista. He worked as an understudy for Torres in the premiere production of *Anna in the Tropics* by Nilo Cruz; the play would win the Pulitzer in 2003, shortly after it was produced in Chicago. In his career as a theater artist, he has moved from being a marginalized actor to leading a company that has claimed space in the city and consistently pushes back against the erasure of Latinas/os/x people in Chicago.

He maintains this message of community and solidarity among Puerto Ricans in Humboldt Park throughout the interview:

This is our responsibility. It is mine as a leader in the theater to make sure people know about us. And when they know about us, then they learn about Puerto Rican history as well. There’s a lot to learn. It’s our responsibility: educating and making sure people know...not just Urban Theater, but the whole community. They need to learn about the businesses that are here. The organizations that are serving the neighborhood. You know, I live three blocks from the theater, and it’s changing. There’s condos. The Americanos are everywhere, and they have no sense of identity or community, or what’s going on in the community. To them, they have their own perception of what Humboldt Park is.

I attended a performance of *Lolita de Lares* during my research trip in summer 2016. When I booked my reservation online, Vega’s ideas about community building were clear and present. He partners with neighborhood restaurants for ticket and meal

specials to encourage audience members to spend more time and money in the neighborhood. In fact, the restaurant he partners with is just a short walk from the theater making the evening pleasant and easy. This section of Division Street is home to the Puerto Rican Cultural Center, the National Museum of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, and Urban Theater. It is also the site of two large steel flags that mark the entrance to Paseo Boricua. The theater lobby is a store front with large windows where images of Lolita Lebrón hung alongside the Puerto Rican flag. These images add to the mix of murals found on most blocks in this neighborhood that signal Puerto Rican pride and a shared history.

Inside the theater, costumes, flags, and posters covered the walls of the lobby. The vejigante masks and suits were hung on display for audience members to see before the play began. Flags from Lares were also hung in the space, making a clear statement about Puerto Rican independence. Once inside, I had an intense, even dizzying, experience watching the play. *Lolita de Lares* is definitely a long and sprawling piece. It is dreamy and alternately nightmarish, political, cultural, and it demands stamina from its audience and its actors. Lolita Lebrón is a challenging political figure for many people as is the stark depiction of the colonial power that the US holds over Puerto Rico. When I spoke with Liza Ann Acosta about her work as the dramaturg on *Lolita de Lares*, she recalled:

I feel more connected to home by working on this play. It has been a gift to learn more about Pedro Albizu Campos, one of the leaders in Puerto Rico's independence movement, through my research. He was born in Ponce, where I grew up. It's been an honor just to understand more about his work and the influence he had on others. We can agree or disagree

with the actions that he and Lolita, and others, felt compelled to take in order to pursue their ideals but we cannot deny the fact that they are a part of the revolutionary history of our country. Many people of our generation have not had the opportunity to learn about them because it was dangerous to know or discuss what they did.

Today, I better understand why people reacted the way they did to Lolita, why they voted the way they did, and why they spoke about ideals the way they did. People who lived during that time experienced a kind of terror and lived in fear. This helped me understand my own family. The personal is political. The Puerto Rican who is not political is a strange creature, indeed. My mother claimed to be apolitical and I have actually learned that she is far from it. There is a silencing of our people. And with this particular play we see the effect of that silencing, the process of that silencing, and the consequences of that silencing. It's painful but it has been an incredible gift to be able to understand this. And the audience response to this play has been really moving. I have seen men and women, especially older people who were probably kids when the gag law was enacted in 1948, who saw this onstage and it was so cathartic for them.

That surprised me. I didn't expect to see that from the audience.

This play served another purpose for actor Frankie Davila. Throughout his career he has appeared in film and television and he continues to perform on stage, in parades, and in other cultural events in Chicago. As an elder and a member of the original cast, he took on a leadership role with the Urban Theater cast. He became the leader of the vejigantes

and a point of honor for him as he was able to pass on his knowledge of these characters to younger company members. He also had similar reservations about choices in the 2016 production that relate to questions he posed of Migdalia Cruz in the 1995 production. This time, he was concerned about his portrayal of Pedro Albizu Campos and director Marcella Muñoz's decision to put him in tattered clothing and in a wheelchair. Davila recalled:

I don't know about this because he's never really been seen like that. It might offend some people. I was just throwing it out there instead of somebody else throwing that out there. And then out of nowhere, on her cell phone within seconds, she comes up with a picture of Campos looking like this frail individual who did not look like Campos to me. Those pictures are out there. She showed them to me. So the scene that we do here when I'm in the wheelchair, at first I was kind of like 'I don't know about that.' Then she pulls out this picture of him in a wheelchair and he looks tattered, like a man who has been through so, so much. And we saw other pictures, you know all the things they must have done to him to get him into that state. Then it started making sense. Then I started realizing 'Yeah, well if somebody does say something,' I can say 'Look this is what we saw. This is what we came up with. And this is not something we were making up. This is what it is.' So you're seeing this Harvard Grad, this valedictorian, you know. All of that is great and those things about him really stuck out to me, but then to know what he was reduced to. That was hard to see.

The 2016 production provided new opportunities for Davila to learn more about figures such as Pedro Albizu Campos and to think even more critically about the U.S. and its treatment of political prisoners. Like Acosta, Davila gained a deeper understanding of Puerto Rican revolutionary history with this play. Taken together, the 1995 Latino Chicago production and the 2016 Urban Theater production demonstrate sustained efforts by Latinoa/o/x theater artists to engage in creative activities that serve to educate themselves and their audiences in culturally-specific places of their own making. Their autonomy as artists match the liberatory aspirations of characters like Lolita, Betances, and Campos who they portray on their stages.

My observation is that Latina/o/x theater artists are contributing to the ongoing dialogue (the making) of what constitutes latinidad through their stage productions. With *Lolita de Lares* by Migdalia Cruz, both companies share their creative explorations of the world around them filtered through their lenses as Puerto Rican and Latina/o/x subjects. They offer up critical commentary on our society as they produced this play in their respective theaters. That they each produced the same play with such similar goals and having so many shared experiences across two decades, speaks to the consistent erasure of Latina/o/x stories and experiences in our society. One can only conclude that it is deliberate when multiple generations are not taught the history of their people in schools.

### ***La Havana Madrid at the Goodman Theatre, 2017***

*La Havana Madrid* is described by Sandra Delgado, the playwright and lead performer, as an “immersive, documentary theater experience.”<sup>7</sup> She conducted

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<sup>7</sup> Delgado, Sandra. *La Havana Madrid*. Unpublished.

interviews with community members and developed the piece over three years with support from Teatro Vista and the Goodman Theatre. The play serves as a counter-narrative to the invisibility of Latinas/os/x in Chicago. I was able to attend a workshop production of the play at the Goodman in Summer 2016. The play premiered in Summer 2017 to very positive reviews. This production exemplifies the Goodman Theatre's ongoing commitment to Latina/o/x theater and highlights the benefits for artists and community members when large institutions collaborate with smaller, community-focused ones such as Teatro Vista in this instance. While my questions about accessibility remain (given that the play was produced at the Goodman), Delgado functioned as a producer and moved the piece to various spaces in the city, including Teatro Vista. What is most useful about this production and the reason to include it in this chapter, is Delgado's intervention regarding the erasure of Latinas/os/x in the city. My analysis draws on my interview with Delgado and my reading of the final draft of the script.

La Havana Madrid was a famous nightclub located in Lake View, a neighborhood on Chicago's north side. Delgado recalls:

We used to go to this nightclub on Belmont and Sheffield. I don't know if you know that corner? It was on the second floor above the Bank of America. It's a hair salon now. You'll see it. It's like a really generic, and becoming increasingly more generic, corporate block. The buildings are owned by a corporation and not a family which is something I want to tease out more in my play, how we're losing our identity when we lose our spaces.

In the 1960s, La Havana Madrid was a gathering place for primarily Cubans and Puerto Ricans to meet and dance. Today, the site of the club (no longer in existence) is not known as a Latino neighborhood even though “that area between the lakefront and Devon on Belmont Avenue had quite a significant Cuban population that arrived here before the Revolution, and they quietly helped others flee the island after it,” said Delgado. “In the early 1960s there also was a large Puerto Rican barrio in what was kind of a Skid Row area located where the high rises of Sandburg Village now stand. But the Puerto Ricans kept getting pushed further westward — first into Lincoln Park, and then to Logan Square and Humboldt Park, and the process continues.”

“As I started working on this project, I realized there was no mention of this part of Latino history in Chicago to be found anywhere,” said Delgado. Her own family’s story of migration from Colombia to Chicago launched her interest in the broader Latina/o/x story and inspired her to write this play. *La Havana Madrid* is actually the third play in a series specifically about her family. She uses various techniques to craft personal stories and often includes musical elements such as song and dance to heighten the drama of the real lives she depicts. She also extends ideas about documentary theater through a collaborative process as described in the first play of the trilogy:

The piece was called *Para Carmen* and it was a ten-minute meditation on what happens to you in your final breath. The play started off with this woman making rice. And then she sees her mother coming towards her and they hug. And then the whole world explodes, and you see all these people who have gone before her welcoming her into the afterlife. And I was in it. I played Carmen, and I got to sing. It was so beautiful because I

basically just called up my friends. My fellow Latino friends. I have this idea and who would want to do this with me? That's when I realized that I liked creating stuff that has pieces of my collaborators in it. Because there was one rehearsal where we just sat around the room and talked about death. We shared different death stories and I was able to put a little piece of everyone into Carmen's life story. I think that made the ensemble even tighter. You know, they were all really into it.

Delgado is a self-taught artist who stated several times in our interview that she considers herself an "outsider artist" because she didn't study theater in college. She credits Henry Godinez and the Goodman Theatre for the hand-on training she learned as an actor in productions such as *Zoot Suit* (1989). In fact, the Goodman sponsored her for a TCG Fellowship that allowed her to study interview theater with Ping Chong, Moises Kaufman and Tectonic Theatre, and Anne Bogart's SITI Company. She followed *Para Carmen* with a solo show titled *Para Graciela* that was based on interviews with elders in her family about their lives in Columbia.

My idea was to have a trilogy. So it was *Para Carmen*, my paternal grandmother, *Para Graciela*, which is my maternal grandmother, and *Para Maria*, which is my mom. But what ended up happening was that *Para Maria* turned into *La Havana Madrid*. And the story of the two people getting married by proxy, those are my parents. It's a strange story. My mom just said to me "Will you stop writing about the family?" She's like "No one wants to know about us. Can you start expanding?" With *La Havana Madrid*, I'm doing it. I'm doing it.

With *La Havana Madrid*, she plays the lead role, a spirit also named La Havana Madrid, who weaves three narratives together. Once again, she plays with artistic form and transforms the interviews that she conducted into three fictionalized stories that she weaves together. We follow the experiences of Maria, a Pedro Pan from Cuba; Henry and Maruja, a young couple from Colombia, and Carlos, a musician from Puerto Rico. Maria struggles with feelings of confusion and loss because she and her brothers had to leave their parents in Cuba and travel alone to Chicago in 1961. They are separated once they arrive and face feelings of isolation in a harsh new environment. Henry travels to the US for work while Maruja waits for him in Colombia. When they are ready to get married, he doesn't have enough money to travel back home nor can he take time off from work. To solve this problem, they arranged two weddings, one in Chicago and one in Colombia. They each have a stand-in for the other and participate in a wedding by proxy. In the third storyline, Carlos comes to Chicago because his father decided to leave Puerto Rico to work in the steel mills. He is a teenager who is kicked out of different schools until he ends up in a vocational school, a place for "hard-core kids" (22) and he learns photography. Through a monologue of his, we learn specifically about the Young Lords organization and their political activism in Chicago in the 1960s.

The second act of the play takes a more critical turn (even if there are funny and touching moments in it). Delgado introduces us to beauty queen Myrna Salazar who shares the events surrounding *Fiestas Puertorriqueñas* in 1966. On the same night as the festival when Myrna was crowned Miss Puerto Rico, the police shot a young man in Humboldt Park and then riots erupted. This scene is depicted with music and dance while Myrna describes the events:

Dozens and dozens of squad cars all up and down Division. Policemen spilling out of them, guns, nightsticks, and tear gas ready to go. The National Guard came with K-9 units and they sic-d their dogs on mothers running with children. I pounded on doors until someone let me in and I climbed up on the roof. People threw bricks and basura/trash on the police. Shattered glass on Division flickered like diamonds in the setting sun. West towards Humboldt Park I saw thick, raging orange flames coming from the houses set on fire by our slumlords. It looked like the end of the world. (36)

Finally, the play ends with the image of a storm and a cleansing. La Havana Madrid, now dressed in white, leads a song whose refrain commands, “No dejen que te quiten tu historia” (48). In the last moments of the play, an image of water is projected and Delgado asks, in the stage directions, “Is it the Caribbean or Lake Michigan?” She answers, “Yes and yes.” The very last image is the current site of where La Havana Madrid once stood, “Projections show the evolution or devolution of the corner of Belmont and Sheffield and we are left with the image of that corner as it is today: A Walgreens, a pizza place, a liquor store and a Bank of America” (48). This final moment illustrates Delgado’s perspective on the loss of identity that occurs when corporate culture cannibalizes neighborhoods. The people have been displaced by unfair housing practices, rising costs, and a lack of resources. As the people are pushed out, so, too, are the cultural practices and the spaces that once served as sites for community-building. Both Migdalia Cruz with *Lolita de Lares* and Sandra Delgado with this play describe a

yearning for a sense of belonging and relentless attempts to re-create home in hostile new environments. In both plays, the characters are enmeshed in unrelenting cycles.

Delgado is an interesting figure whose career offers a counterpoint to the narratives of Juan Ramirez and Miguel Lopez Lemus, two Latino artistic directors who deliberately chose to make their work outside of Chicago's theater district. Reflecting on Ramirez and Latino Chicago, Eddie Torres stated, "The thing about Latino Chicago was that they fought a lot for things. Juan did that a lot." Lopez Lemus pointed out that he never felt the need to be validated by mainstream theaters. Instead he insisted, "We have to create our own enterprise, our own theater houses, our own support for artists and the other arts. We have to recognize who we are for ourselves." Their approach differed from the path that Henry Godinez forged from the founding of Teatro Vista to his current position at the Goodman. Godinez spoke to me about "getting in the door at the Goodman and then making sure that he held that door open for more Latinas/os/x artists." His efforts have led to an ongoing, collaborative relationship between Teatro Vista and the Goodman. *La Havana Madrid* is the most recent example of their successful partnership.

Delgado moves fluidly between large mainstream institutions, in this case the Goodman, and culturally specific spaces like Teatro Vista, providing another model for producing and circulating Latina/o/x theater in Chicago. This movement between institutional spaces and neighborhoods produces tension around accessibility, and Delgado's successful movement signals her deft fluidity and artistry. Her play about the erasure of Latinas/os/x in the city's narrative also reflects the relative invisibility of Latinas/os/x on the Goodman's stages. She was able to create an oppositional narrative

on one of the most venerated stages (and one that has been rendered a white space historically) with *La Havana Madrid*.

**Generation Sex by Teatro Luna, 2014**

Latinas in contemporary theater emphatically reject the marginal spaces and narrow roles meted out to them. Instead, they insist on a new vision—one that pushes back the limits of patriarchy and creates an open site for proud bodies, strong voices.

Alicia Arrizón, *Latina Performance*, 1999

Teatro Luna is a Chicago-based Latina collective founded in 2000 by playwright/performers Coya Paz and Tanya Saracho, “with an ensemble of ten women from diverse Latina/Hispana backgrounds.” (teatroluna.org) Their vision follows:

We came together because we realized that the stories and experiences of Latina/Hispana women were undervalued and underrepresented not only on the Chicago stage, but beyond. We were also concerned that the few parts written for Latina women often went to non-Latina actresses. We felt that we had to do something. Our answer was Teatro Luna, Chicago’s first and only all-Latina theater. (www.teatroluna.org)

Las Lunáticas, as the women of Teatro Luna often call themselves, organized primarily to raise the visibility of teatristas latinas. Their sense of sisterhood and solidarity unites them across cultural, racial, ethnic, and national lines. The original company members were self-described as “pan-Latina” and included Colombianas, Mexicanas, Puertoriquenas, and Chicanas. For nearly two decades, Teatro Luna has offered

opportunities for its members to write, direct, and perform in creative work that expands rather than limits or stereotypes the experiences of Latinx artists.

I attended a workshop production of *Generation Sex* at Instituto Cervantes in June 2014. In their promotional material for the play, they describe themselves guiding the audience “through our stories of finding love and satisfaction in the digital age.” They address how “technology impacts our relationships, sex lives, and means of expression in hilarious and devastating ways.”<sup>8</sup> By performing in camisoles, hot pants, stockings, and high heels, members of Teatro Luna project sex positive images for the audience. Contending with their bodies of various shapes and sizes while we listen to stories of connection and disconnection (caused by our ever-deepening reliance on social media and technology), the performers make powerful statements about intimacy, violence, shame, and blame in our patriarchal society.

In the opening sequence, performer Abigail Vega sings a peppy rendition of the pop song “Wishin’ and Hopin’” in the style of Nancy Sinatra. While Vega croons, “All you have to do is hug him and kiss him and squeeze him and love him and if you do, you will be his,” members of the company perform as a 1960s girl group much like the Supremes or the Ronettes. Through their bodies, they display the contradictions of women as sex objects and women in command of their sexual selves. As the song ends, the performers all collapse onstage as if to signal that conforming to feminine ideals (as constructed in this song by male lyricists Burt Bachrach and Hal David) is physically exhausting and unsustainable.

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<sup>8</sup> See description: [www.worldtheatremap.org/en/shows/5877c12117334f313edb665d](http://www.worldtheatremap.org/en/shows/5877c12117334f313edb665d)

In another scene that highlights the contradictions of body autonomy for women within pervasive rape culture, one performer discloses an acquaintance rape among friends who respond by dismissing the violence enacted on her body thus highlighting current conversations about consent and the rampant lack of it in many sexual encounters. The scene is scripted as a group conversation where the main performer's friends weigh in on the play-by-play narrative that the main actor shares. They point to her choice of clothing, her excessive drinking, and her need to be "taken care of" because of said drinking all as signals that she probably did want to have sex. This disturbing scene, where women use victim-blaming and denial to minimize the main character's feelings about her experience, ends with the upbeat delivery of the last line, "What an amazing guy!" The circle of women have shifted the entire narrative about rape away from the woman who has disclosed the act to an affirmation of "the guy" who committed the violation against her body. This scene functions as a mirror to society and a critique of the ways patriarchal views have been so deeply ingrained in women.

The performers balance the more challenging content of the play with an animated short video mid-performance that depicts an online meeting between a nearly forty-year old woman and a possible suitor that moves to the real world and ends with a positive sexual encounter, replete with blossoming flowers that fill the screen to project female sexual satisfaction. I found it a poignant statement that this positive physical connection did not involve live bodies onstage but cartoon characters instead. The choice to use animation for one of the few instances of female pleasure in the play reinforced the seemingly elusive nature of this type of pleasure. The message underscores a larger critique of patriarchy, a system that denies women, especially older women, bodily

pleasure through tactics such as shaming and self-hatred. At the same time, the cartoon created a distancing effect that drove home Teatro Luna's larger statement about technology and disconnection. At this point in the play, this was the only positive, heterosexual, physical encounter depicted and it was depicted onscreen without the use of live bodies.

In striking contrast at a later moment in the play, the women bring the focus directly to their bodies as they proclaim in unison, "We love The Diva Cup!" They continue this choral piece that centers on their bodily functions:

We slide our hands inside our menstruating bodies to tweak and adjust.  
We then slide that same hand back up to pull out this little cup holding all of our motherfucking menses! Woah! To know that we are holding in our hands the lining of our uterus. We are so caught up in self-loathing that we let them tell us that one of the most integral parts of bearing our children is not okay. #sorrynotsorry That is not okay. Sorry, ladies but it is about time that we become comfortable with our bodies. Hating our bodies is just another way of hating ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

This scene celebrates the beautiful, messy functions of female bodies onstage. It is provocative and unapologetic with clear, descriptive language. Latina/o/x theater scholar Alberto Sandoval Sánchez has stated, the very job of the latina teatrística is

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<sup>9</sup> This passage and subsequent quotes from the performance were transcribed from *Generation Sex* performance video: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN0bhDsOHmk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WN0bhDsOHmk) Accessed 21 March 2018.

to “shock and scandalize the audience.” Las Lunáticas accomplish this directive in this powerful scene.

Near the end of the play, the cast performs another group poem with the refrain “Forty years from now.” This is a visionary piece in which the performers imagine a time when feminism is the norm. They state, “Forty years from now, you won’t need to be more successful than me to feel like a man. We don’t want anything from you, not your respect, or your power, or your balls. And we don’t want to feel shitty for wanting to be loved. Forty years from now you will come around.” They then move from this delivery of direct address into a more abstract story that looks back to the time when “we were round” before patriarchy. It’s an epic poem with choreography that addresses our need for companionship and our quest to find our soulmates, to become round again forever. Lastly, the play ends with a haunting rendition of “Wishin’ and Hopin’,” only this time it is a slow, drawn out, and even tragic version. The performers evoke Amy Winehouse’s style as they sing, “All you have to do is hug him and kiss him and squeeze him and love him yeah just do it and after you do you will be....” They don’t quite finish the song as the lights fade to black. It’s a chilling ending that contrasts with the opening. The women are dispersed across the stage some sitting and some standing in isolation rather than dancing together. The feeling of despair offers a critique of toxic masculinity and patriarchy as harmful elements of society that devastate women. Again, the audience is left to contend with these powerful women, their bodies, and their voices. While I appreciate much of this performance, I couldn’t help but think about the focus on heteronormativity in the scripting of various relationships, both consensual and

nonconsensual, in the performance. Despite this gap, as a Chicana audience member, I felt visible and affirmed through the stories onstage.

During our interview, Alex Meda, current artistic director of Teatro Luna, problematized the question of visibility and linked it to the evolution of Teatro Luna's work:

I think rather than approach [visibility] strictly as a challenge we're facing, we also have to look at it as related to a privilege that Latinos have in terms of assimilation, in terms of light-skinned privilege that many of us carry. And we are fluid. Unlike black people, and again there are light-skinned black people, they can still be named physically. One of America's challenges about Latinos is that we all don't look the same. It's not a race. It's an ethnicity. I don't think America—on the whole, en masse, I'm painting these broad strokes here, knows how to identify us. They easily categorize us with issues that are black and white because there are Latinos who are experiencing real mainstream privileges because they are passing or whatever. And there are the dark-skinned ones who are just automatically grouped with black people. Brown bodies that are being assaulted and murdered—they're automatically black in our society. They are being treated as black. Does that erase some of our really unique experiences in this country? Absolutely. It's part erasure, but it also shows our economic and race privilege. What we're speaking about is both privilege and oppression. This is also a population with a lot of internalized oppression, which turns into a lot of prejudice. We, as a

group, the studies are showing, are much more prejudiced against other people of color than other people of color are. Classic Teatro Luna wasn't just about celebrating these brown women with multiple body shapes on stage. Teatro Luna created plays for the white gaze to help them understand that we're not all the same. That's very different. That's feminist, not womanist. That's very different from what we're trying to do now: trying to heal our communities of the major prejudices we have of each other because of internalized oppression. And that's a really different Teatro Luna today.

There is an intersectional analysis embedded in her response to the question about visibility that is linked to Teatro Luna's organizational framework and their approach to creating work. They remain a collective in their decision-making process and in their creative processes. They have also added the term "women of color" to their current public material signaling a more expansive view of how their members identify.

Their creative impulses and their political consciousness compelled them to organize, to pen their own stories, and to move those stories into the public sphere in the form of theater and performance. For them, the creative impulse centers on process and not product. This idea runs against the values of our capitalist democracy where even not-for-profit theaters prioritize ticket sales over creative expression and artists who take risks and challenge dominant societal norms. I want to close this section with Meda, who invokes Cherríe Moraga best as she describes Teatro Luna's persistence:

There are plenty of ensembles, collectives of Latinas and women of color, and they do events. All of that is important. The ecology is important. But

there aren't any dedicated organizations doing what we do, on the level that we do it, paying as many people as we do, and sharing that work nationally and internationally, who are activists. That just doesn't exist in this country! That's a really specific niche. And so that has always been an incredible pressure for me. Whatever way we figure out to survive, we survived. It was very much 'cockroach mode' for me. And I really call it that. A lot of people may pick a more beautiful animal or creature. For me, I don't care if it's beautiful. This is a creature that will survive. That was it. We were in survival mode for five years. We accomplished incredible things, but we also made a lot of mistakes because survival mode doesn't always allow for the most complex vetting of things. It's just "go" "go" "go." And in certain ways, I'm really proud of that because I think that takes a certain level of commitment from everyone involved.

### **Conclusion**

Through the descriptions of these four Latina/o/x productions, spanning three decades, we can see identity in process and the remaking of Chicago as a Latina/o/x city. In these examples, we see characteristics of Latina/o/x identity that scholars Aparicio, García, and Ruá describe as contingent, fluid, and relational. Each production is unique in terms of the who, what, when, where, and how AND each production contributed to the ongoing construction of latinidad that leads us to this moment. For the artists of Latino Chicago and Urban Theater, cultural connection and continuity are named as key values within and across their respective organizations. Sandra Delgado's ability to move between various institutions mirrors the path the Henry Godinez chartered in the mid

1990s; she negotiates history, culture, identity, and representation across various social spaces without compromising her vision and her political commentary. Members of Teatro Luna embody Cherrie Moraga's ideals of self-definition and self-determination both onstage and off as they create their work in and around the city. There is no one way to be a Latina/o/x artist and there is no one way to make Latina/o/x work even if the agenda of the work is to connect ideas of the self to larger ideas of community and speak against societal oppression as Alicia Arrizón asserts.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago have been producing theater for more than forty years and have built significant culturally specific institutions that serve as foci for the various Latina/o/x communities throughout the city. Some of these artists have also worked with mainstream, predominantly white institutions to share resources and co-produce plays while others work at those larger entities enacting (or attempting to enact) cultural change from within. The early efforts of these artists, specifically the work of Juan Ramirez and Miguel Lopez Lemus in the late 1970s, mirror those of Chicana/o/x, Nuyorican, and Cuban/Cuban American artists who organized themselves and built foundational Latina/o/x theater companies such as Teatro Campesino in California, the Nuyorican Poets Café, Pregones Theater, and Puerto Rican Travelling Theater in New York, as well as Teatro Promoteo and Teatro Avante in Miami. Despite the fact that Latina/o/x theater in Chicago developed in and around the same time period (mid 1960s to late 1970s) as these companies, this work has gone largely unrecognized in the national landscape. Through various strategies, Latina/o/x theater artists in Chicago create work that announces their presence in both a city and a nation that renders them invisible. Through theater productions and the claiming of public spaces, they are revising the narrative about Chicago and serving to educate and empower their communities.

By performing themselves into existence these artists participate in the ongoing construction of latinidad in Chicago. The artists in this study collaborate across cultural-national boundaries that is not typically seen in other parts of the US at earlier times. For

the most part, Chicana/o/x, Mexican, and Mexican American identities were shaped in the West and Southwest US, Cuban and Cuban American identities in the Southeast (Miami) and Puerto Rican and Cuban identities in New York. The first wave of scholarship on the identity formations and cultural products of these groups reflect these regional distinctions. This study, based on the work of scholars Francis Aparicio, Ramón Rivera-Servera, Jonathan Rosa, and Mérida Rúa, reveals a version of *latinidad* across cultural and national identities. My research did not uncover tensions (neither productive or destructive) along these lines; rather the tensions appear along questions of who has access to theater, where these artists believe it should be performed, and what is the function of theater. In the case of Teatro Luna's body of work, they embrace a "pan-latina" (their word) identity from the beginning and they continue to push the boundaries of inclusion as they move forward in their womanist framework to be more inclusive of Afro-Latinidad and a broader spectrum of women of color. With Sandra Delgado, she centers Cuban, Colombian, and Puerto Rican experiences in the play *La Havana Madrid*. While Urban Theater produces predominantly Puerto Rican playwrights, the company members are not exclusively Puerto Rican. In fact, both Ivan Vega and Eddie Torres, founding member of Teatro Vista, made a point to tell me that while their companies are Latino, they are also multicultural. The construction of *latinidad* across cultural, racial, and national lines is unique to Chicago and scholars like Francis Aparicio and Lilia Fernandez trace this to labor-driven migration in the early part of the twentieth century.

### **Limitations**

This dissertation represents a small segment of the Latina/o/x theater artists who contribute to theater production in Chicago. While I am satisfied with the number of in-

depth interviews that I was able to conduct, there are some key voices missing in this dissertation. I was not able to interview Juan Ramirez, founding director of Latino Chicago because he declined my invitation to meet with me. Members of Aguijón Theater, Chicago's first and only Spanish language theater, did not return my emails or phone calls and so that important company is not represented. While I was able to conduct one short interview with Henry Godinez, I was not able to schedule a more in-depth, follow up with him nor was I able to interview current members of Teatro Vista. In the future, I will prioritize these artists as well as the many younger Latina/o/x theater artists who are not affiliated with any theater companies.

### **Future Research**

One of the primary goals for conducting this research was to raise the visibility of Latina/o/x theater in Chicago and this dissertation is a first step. In Summer 2018, I plan to continue my interview project by returning to Chicago to attend theater productions and make contact with members of Aguijón, current members of Teatro Vista, and additional members of Teatro Luna. Aguijón Theater is a significant company because it is the first and only Spanish-language theater in Chicago and is nearing its thirtieth anniversary. Rosario Vargas, one of the founding artistic directors, worked as a member of Latino Chicago, and her daughter Marcela Muñoz, theater director, now serves as the artistic director. Their mission to produce Spanish-language plays distinguishes them from the other companies in this dissertation. Ricardo Gutierrez, Teatro Vista's current artistic director, is leading that company into its thirtieth season as well. They have just produced a season of women playwrights and they continue to work with new plays through initiatives. It is important to document their ongoing efforts. I will also continue

to work with members of Teatro Luna and we will create an institutional archive of their work. From the outset I have conceived of my research as collaborative and mutually beneficial for the artists in my study. For me, raising the visibility of these companies extends beyond the dissertation and into spaces where other scholars and artists can access this research in order to write about and even produce these plays. Alex Meda and Liza Ann Acosta, of Teatro Luna, are most interested in this aspect of the research and we will continue this conversation this summer.

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