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Representation in American Theatre:

The Chicana Community's Fight to Express Social and Political Inequalities

CLAUDIA WAGENER

Theatrical performance has survived for thousands of years and is still studied today by millions of aspiring artists. People have always gathered to tell stories and perform their own works in front of an audience. Since 1948, the Tony Awards have provided recognition to exceptionally original playwrights. The script of a play is often the foundation for a Broadway show, making it highly prestigious to be a recipient of the Tony Award for Best Play. The televised award ceremony brings together the most brilliant minds of Broadway for recognition. Four to five playwrights are nominated per year,

but only one wins. Theater enthusiasts have noticed that the Best Play award is mainly bestowed upon white playwrights, causing concern about the types of plays being celebrated—and the types of plays that are not. To date, no Mexican-American has ever been nominated for a Tony Award and all eight of the female recipients have been white. It is not as if *Anglo* playwrights are naturally more engaging writers or Mexican-Americans struggle to write anything innovative. It is a matter of whose plays are being produced on and off Broadway, and therefore are receiving more mainstream representa-

ANGLO:

a white inhabitant of the U.S. of non-Hispanic descent (Merriam Webster Dictionary)

CHICANX:

Chicanx is a shorter way to express Chicana (female pronoun) or Chicano (male pronoun) while being gender inclusive. Chicanx refers to an American with Mexican heritage. This term is more specific than Latinx, which refers to any person with heritage from South America, Mexico, or Spain.

tion. Without Chicanx playwrights being honored at the Tony Awards, the threat of inequality and misrepresentation remains.

The fact that Mexicans have been on American soil longer than Caucasians makes it appropriate for Chicanx literature to be incorporated into American understanding (Pesquera, 298). For centuries, Mexicans lived in what is now the Southwestern United States. A peace treaty from 1848 converted the land of Northern Mexico into the land of Southern United States; the Mexicans who inhabited that land could either become full citizens of the United States or move further south to Mexico (Pesquera, 298). The majority chose to become citizens to avoid having to relocate their farms and families. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 was designed to include Mexican citizens in American government so they would have the same rights as the white Southwesterners. Unfortunately, the opposite was achieved.

Mexican-Americans were treated like outsiders on the new American soil and were denied equal treatment as Americans. Beatriz M. Pesquera of the University of California, Berkeley writes, "Cultural differences between Anglos and Mexicans became the ideological basis that legitimated the unequal treatment and status of Mexicans in the United States" (Pesquera, 298). While the name of the land may have been Americanized, it should be recognized as a land that many indigenous people built their families upon. Elizabeth Martínez writes, "The Chicana was raped by the invading gringo both in the literal, physical sense as well as in the sense of those forms of oppression opposed on all our people, both men and women" (Martínez, 32). Yet today there is a population of Americans who believe Anglos were in the United States first, and that Mexicans who are trying to live in America are invading the land. When considering how seldom Chicanx plays are produced, one can see how the remnants of such a mindset are still present in the United

States. These Chicanx authors and the people they represent are regarded as the people that don't belong here, as if they are tainting the land that they held before colonists staked their claim.

The white man had no problem with taking the cultural identity of the Mexicans and denying it the opportunity to flourish. Gerard Navarro is a Chicano playwright who has written "Gitano Fronterizo" and other plays. His works present his perspective as a Mexican man living in the United States. Navarro's writing expresses the impact of having white Americans assume their race is the superior one that deserves land ownership more than Chicanxs. Kirsten Nigro, a professor of world literature at the University of Texas, El Paso, writes about Navarro's objectives in his plays; "His politics were more about the degradation that first-world political and economic hegemony have inflicted on third-world spaces" (Nigro, 10). The overlap of white Americans and Chicanxs living in one land has caused a collision of cultural identities that has led to a top dog, underdog dynamic. An interview by Adelaida Del Castillo, the 1974 associate editor of *Encuentro Femenil*, the first Chicana feminist journal, wondered if the Chicanx movement and the Civil Rights Movement could ever collaborate. Given that these movements both occurred in the 1960s, a partnership would make sense. However, the person who answered this

question, an unnamed Chicana, describes Chicana and Black women as third-world women living in an oppressive state that owes them their own movements due to their different racisms. Partially from racism and partially from ignorance about this history, Anglos do not see the value in representing Chicana plays. As these writings fail to be produced, they become stories that will be forgotten. If such plays are not taken note of, the trend of Anglos being celebrated and hailed for writing Best Play of the year will continue. Until American theaters produce Chicana plays, audiences will fail to recognize Mexican-Americans as valid residents of the United States. Their experiences in America are vastly different from what Anglo-Americans have experienced and it is necessary to highlight these different histories.

Luis Valdez began the movement that introduced the working-class Chicana community to the advantages of theater in expressing political dissatisfaction. Following his lead was the introduction of Chicana playwrights to the Mexican-American theater community. Josefina López and Estela Portillo are Chicana playwrights who paved the road for other Mexican-American women to write their plays. Ultimately, these women's writings represented feminist concepts such as making money as a woman, supporting another woman's business, and being comfortable with one's sexuality and body type. Plays written by Mexican-Americans are scarcely produced by major theaters and are rarely recognized at award ceremonies like the Tony Awards. Chicana playwrights tell underrepresented stories that, should those plays be brought to mainstream theater, would educate non-Chicana Americans about the lives and struggles of these people.

The Chicana movement of the 1960s and 1970s started from the community of Mexican-Americans who felt their lives were at a disadvantage due to the racism they endured. Female Mexican-Americans dealt with greater discrimination as they were treated with sexism from the government, from their male counterparts, and even the church. The desire to bring the Chicana man to the same level as the white man was born along with the spark that created a political movement. Chicana women supported their men, not only to create better job opportunities for Chicanos, but to later bring Chicanas to the same status as white women. They requested that modern feminism include the needs of mothers, including their right to free bilingual childcare and the right for professional, educated women to have salaries that measured their success more accurately (Nieto Gomez, 56). They wanted freedom from the Catholic Church placing judgment upon the women who chose family planning methods such as birth control pills or who chose to divorce their husbands. They did not see these rights being fought for by mainstream white feminists such as Gloria Steinem (Nieto Gomez, 56). Women like her did not recognize that a

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Chicano man is more oppressed than a white woman. Since Chicano feminism did not directly relate to white feminism, no attention was brought to the Mexican-American movement. The Chicano community had to take matters into their own hands.

Subsequently, Chicano could not rely on writing literature alone—they needed a way to perform their frustrations and express the inequalities. In the modern day, Chicano theaters exist in nearly every major city. However, these theaters are built because there is seldom an opportunity for a Chicano show to be produced otherwise. If a larger theater does produce a play written by an American of Mexican descent, they are praised for being diverse and representing the so-called minority. Chicano plays deserve to be a commonplace practice, recognized just as much as non-Chicano works—not every so often.

The godfather of Chicano theater is Luis Valdez, a farm worker that wanted to inspire other workers to participate in socio-political protests (Huerta, 25). Valdez and other workers performed *actos* in a theater company called the *Teatro Campesino*, which is still active today and has been since the 1970s. The company's purpose was to demonstrate their frustration with the poor working conditions they faced and to provide a public platform for their life stories to be heard (Huerta, 26). Their

TEATRO CAMPESINO:

Peasant Theater

ACTOS:

Acts

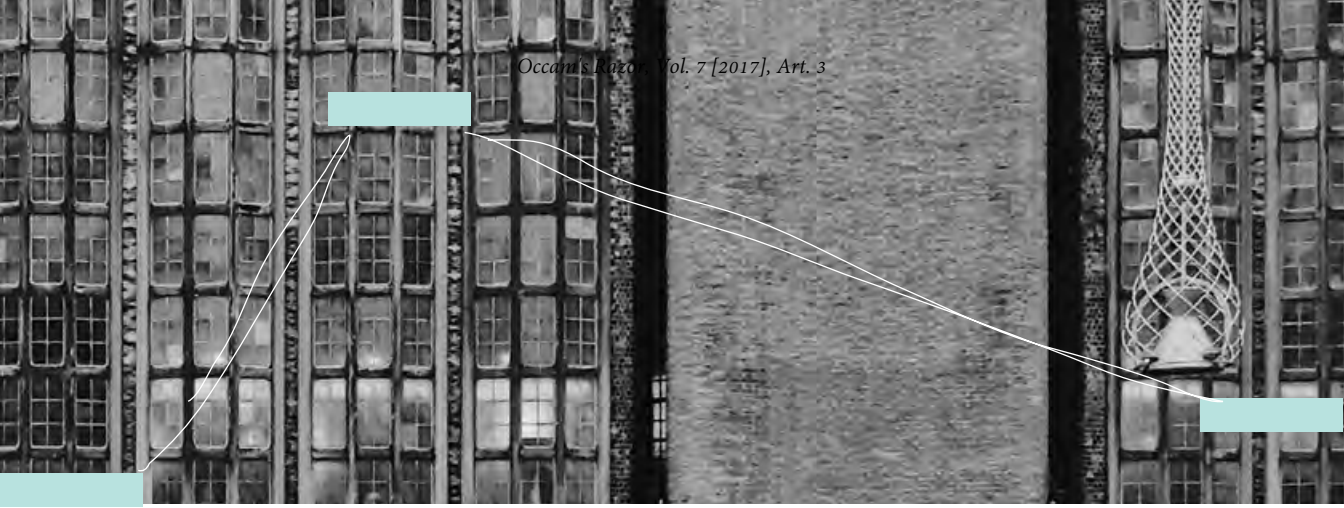
intended audiences were other Chicano farm workers and the white people who needed to see these performances to learn of the hardships Chicano face. Teatro Campesino toured the country and “dramatized issues of police brutality, the need for bilingual education, and the importance of voter-registration drives” (Huerta, 32). Their performances also highlighted themes regarding national identity and the need for social equality amongst white people and Mexican-Americans. These workers had basically no knowledge of traditional English theater techniques and instead relied on their passion to create a memorable performance (Huerta, 32). With the help of Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, other Chicano farm workers, they provided a strong reputation to Chicano theater. Decades later, Valdez recounts these memories in an interview and describes his need to write as “Realizing early on that there was no context [in America] for me within which to exist” and recognizing that he had to carve out his own way of being in the U.S. (Valdez). There was a lack of opportunity for Chicano playwrights to be produced, and he created that opportunity for himself and others through the Teatro Campesino.

Though there were many positive outcomes from this theater movement, Jorge Huerta, a professor at University of California, San Diego, writes about the importance of recognizing the downsides

to the Chicana movement and its inclusion of the theater community. He writes that, "...it would be negligent to romanticize the Chicano theater of the 1960s. As current Chicana and Latina scholars have made clear, the *teatros* were male-dominated, mirroring the Chicano Movement, and few Chicanas, if any, were in leadership positions in the 1960s" (Huerta, 32). Such leadership positions involved choosing the themes to be presented in their performances and choosing which gender of actors should be featured. Huerta reveals the source of the machismo stereotype amongst male Chicanos. It did not originate out of a desire to oppress females, but because Chicanos were being oppressed by white men. Machismo is a valid concept that Chicanas fought against during the 60s and 70s, as the Chicana movement primarily validated the needs of the Chicano man. However, female playwrights' voices did not become prominent until the late 1970s and early 1980s.

To illustrate a strong Chicana's voice, Josefina López's play, "Real Women Have Curves," represents a remarkable accomplishment as she was only 21 years old when it was first performed (López). The play demonstrates that Mexican-Americans are just as capable of writing engaging literature as Anglo-Americans. The play is written in English, with a bit of Spanish woven into each character's dialogue. This was not so that Anglo audience members could attend a performance and understand the plot. López created her characters to be fluent in English to illustrate her reality. The characters reflect the author's attempt to dispel the stereotype that all Mexican immigrants speak broken English around Americans but then converse in Spanish in their own space. Considering López did work in her own sister's factory just like the play's protagonist Ana, she was very familiar with that work environment and its difficulties. Factory life is not glamorous, nor does it lead to a livable wage. She had no need to embellish or exaggerate any characteristics; she stated the reality about being a factory worker and did not romanticize any aspects of it.

In addition to dispelling stereotypes and depicting everyday life, López's play is a partial-autobiographical work that discusses struggling body confidence in a skinny-obsessed world, factory workers' low wages, fears of deportation, and the desire for higher education. Jorge Huerta writes, "The formerly male-dominated Latino theater scene now includes Latina playwrights, directors and producers, women whose voices were basically ignored before the 1980s" (Huerta, 19). Josefina López is not only a Latina, but specifically, a Chicana. Her writing demonstrates the necessity for Americans to not assume that Latinos all come from the same exact background. López intentionally identifies issues that a general Latino audience may not relate to. For example, a person from South America may immigrate to the United States, but they don't feel an attachment to the land as a Chicana person would. The history with the land use laws causes Chicana to grapple with the idea that this land was taken away from them where a Latina



would not necessarily identify with that conflict. López moved to the United States when she was young, as did the character Ana, and López had a constant fear as a child that Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) would catch her as an undocumented person and deport her. It's ironic that a child of Mexican heritage should fear being deported—her people had been on this land much longer than the government officials who could deport her. The battles a Chicana wages are different from that of any other Latina because she deals with racism in a land that belonged to ancestors but now is not hers. López writes in the preface of her script, “Undocumented people have been used as scapegoats for so many of the problems in the U.S., from drugs and violence, to the economy” (López). Other than all these negative connotations, the Chicana rarely are recognized for their happier accomplishments as Americans. Increased representation like winning Best Play or being cast in a show that traditionally is for Anglo people would help shift the focus from perceived faults to deserved praises.

López's play is also revolutionary because Ana is a feminist, even if that word is never specifically used in the script. One of the scenes in the play depicts the factory workers taking off their clothes due to the intense heat. This scene was inspired by Ana's confident body image, despite her mother's consistent remarks of Ana's excess fat. Body image was a major theme in this production. Elizabeth Ramírez, a writer, describes the objective of the play as promoting the idea that, “Women can determine for themselves what they will do with their lives and actively take on the charge of resistance to the inequality and oppressive circumstances surrounding them” (Ramírez). As such, López manages to tackle feminism and racism concurrently by addressing gender equality and the pursuit of independence.

Another aspect the play tackles is spousal abuse. When Ana's mother claims she is lucky that her husband doesn't hit her, Ana responds with, “Lucky? Why lucky? It should be expected that he doesn't. Women have the right to say no.” The other factory workers are shocked to hear this and regard her as a young person that knows nothing about the real world. Mainstream feminism in the 1990s belonged to Anglo women. It was uncommon for a Chicana woman to hold such views, so where did Ana learn that saying “no” is okay? Later on in the play, Ana's mother describes her reluctance to deny having sex at her husband's command, resulting in her eight pregnancies. When Ana asks why she just never said no, her mom says, “Because, *M'ija*, I was never taught how to say no.”

Though the source of Ana's feelings of value and empowerment aren't discussed in the play, it seems that her refusal to work in a factory forever is an excellent symbol of female strength that provides a great example to the play's audience.

M'IA:

My Daughter

López has created a feminist character based off her experiences and the beliefs that mirror the ideologies of progressive people today. Having a strong-minded Chicana star in a production provides the much-needed representation of Mexican-Americans. It further encourages other Chicana playwrights to feature their women and to create more opportunities for Chicana women to have roles.

Other plays by Chicana writers deal with issues of forbidden love, social class and suicide. The play “The Day of the Swallows” by Estela Portillo, one of the first widely produced Chicana playwrights even before López, deals with challenges of unrequited love, inner struggles with connecting to religion, and the guilt associated with closeted sexuality (Ortego). A young woman, Josefa, kills the person who walked in on her and her female lover; she then must come to terms with the aftermath. She feels guilt that she murdered someone, but also feels upset that the shame of her sexuality has caused her to hide from being herself. The play is a suspenseful drama that could easily fit in at a standard American theater, as it has a balance between entertainment and truth of what shame does to someone. It does not project untrue, negative stereotypes about Mexicans, nor does it handle a murder story in a way that might make an audience look down upon Chicanas. It exemplifies that Chicanas can be of high social class, but still experience undeniable sadness. A person could have everything going for them and still feel awful, regardless of class, which is a theme all can relate to. From a feminist lens, “The Day of the Swallows” is similar to “Real Women Have Curves,” in that both provide starring roles for Chicanas. They both offer an engaging read at the very least. An opportunity for other memorable performances would arise should a large theater give other Chicana plays a chance.

Despite the excellent aspects of “The Day of the Swallows,” the play did receive criticism for the heterosexual playwright’s choice to have the lesbian protagonist commit suicide as an answer to her wrongdoing. Some viewed it as romanticizing murder and seeing suicide as a healthy, viable option for a closeted individual. It was not an encouraging play for the gay community. Another critique of the play was that a straight woman should not be writing about the struggles of a gay woman since she does not have the proper perspective to make her an authority. Cherríe Moraga, a noted Chicana writer who has written

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and still writes extensively about feminism, said, “It is a ‘classic’ lesbian work in the worst sense of the 1950s view” (Ramírez). Sue Ellen Case, a theater professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, said that the work was homophobic for its time. In modern theater, it at least acknowledges the existence of gay Chicana women, which few plays do now, even if it does so in a negative light. However, Portillo was still the first Chicana playwright known to the theater community for writing a successful play. The play contained the proper elements of a rising and falling action with an ultimate cliffhanging ending. Her presence created a path for other Chicana playwrights to follow.

In sum, themes of sexuality, immigration, social class and a quest for political change are common themes in Chicana plays. Promoting the work of these playwrights would create a more realistic understanding of Mexicans living in the United States, which would encourage more opportunities for Chicanas to excel with their educational and employment opportunities. The farm workers from the 1960s were untrained actors who performed their *actos* with heart rather than technique, and today, Chicanas continue to participate in all aspects of theater arts. Jorge Huerta writes, “While professional

conditions have changed over the past generation, as more actors, designers, directors, and playwrights are trained by and graduate from formal theater programs, the socioeconomic condition of the Mechicanos has not improved as much as the pioneers of *teatro* [theater] would have liked” (Huerta, 32). The Chicax Movement of the 20th century provided a good starting point for Mexican-Americans. An increase in Chicax representation on stage would remind people of their valuable existence and allow them to share their cultural expressions. Until a Chicax is nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play, Mexican-American playwrights and the ideas they are striving to share will remain undervalued and overlooked.

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