Mieko Gavia: The Dog Project

An overview of the motivations, processes, and reflections surrounding the November 2010 production of an original theatrical work

This thesis chronicles my journey with my original theatrical piece, Dog, from inception to the end of its Oberlin College run, and includes a reflection of my experience and ideas for the future of the piece. I will provide both sociological and literary context for several important aspects of the show, as well as personal reflections on the process and discoveries made therein.

Mieko Gavia
4/13/2011
Why Dog?: An Introduction

Seek Help Immediately. This was the warning from a mental health quiz I took in seventh grade. My little sister and I found the quiz in the back of my health textbook, and when we both scored in the 99th percentile danger range we burst out laughing. The examples of major stressors marked in the book were simply part of the realities of most people we knew. Even at that age we took it for granted that being poor, female, and a minority meant high stress and low access to aid. What was the point of seeking help, when you couldn’t afford what was offered?

As far back as the first grade I lived a life swinging back and forth between “normal” adolescent angst and cacophonous, suffocating depression and anxiety. I vividly recall distressed fourth-grade me weeping in the back of my classroom, fiercely debating the merits of an increasingly complicated life, strangulation in the coat closet, or a leap through the second story window. Incidents like this were almost routine for me- twice a year my world would tilt and I would collapse in a fit of tears, then play sick and take a day off from school, recover just enough to catch up, and keep going. I didn’t know the pressure could and would accumulate in college, and that my maladaptive ways would have to change.

On a rainy night in October 2009 I came very close to killing myself. My depression was becoming unbearable- I was oversleeping, under-eating, and those closest to me were beginning to notice. I was desperately, achingly lonely, but I was terrified of anyone finding out. More than that, I was exhausted from fighting against myself. I stopped in the middle of an intersection, hesitating between life and the undercarriage of an oncoming semi-truck. I
remember the headlights burning through the dark as I stood there transfixed, hovering between temptation and fear. I wanted to leave everything behind, lie down in the road, and rest.

_Dog_ came from moments like this.

I set out to write this play in part to piece these moments together, to explain these moments to others, and to better understand them myself. However, during its creation I felt, and still feel, a duty to give voice to more than just myself. I wanted to promote women of color in the theater, most specifically mixed women of color, who rarely see themselves onstage.

This memory-play revolves around a young man named Charlie and a young drifter who refers to herself as “Dog.” After almost running over her in his truck, the two spend three days in Charlie’s motel room while his car is being repaired.

Though the story is told through the mind of Charlie—a heterosexual, monoracial, cis-male character—this serves to point out privilege and the imbalance of power in Dog and Charlie’s interactions, as well as how lack of communication on issues of racism, sexual abuse, and mental illness exacerbates these issues and allows them to feed off of each other.

This play is a construct of Charlie’s memory. I wanted to try and describe memory and its seductive qualities: to use the unreliable narrator framework to meditate on the difficulties seeking “truth” in something that can never be objective and is constantly re-writing itself. In order to support this I wanted a contrast of the surreal (certain monologues, the general set design, highly expressionist lighting, etc.) and the hyper real (certain dialogues, props, etc.) combined with non-linear storytelling.
The characters’ races were left partially open in order to allow for flexibility of casting while still promoting women (and men) of color in acting roles. Early versions of the script conceived Dog as a mixed-race woman with Mexican-American and African-American roots and Charlie as a White man, but after further thought on the importance of race to the story I wanted to tell I realized that allowing for more flexible casting choices would also allow different yet still interesting and valid stories to be told long after I finished writing. The play would take on new subtext if Dog’s background was Mexican and Korean, for example, and Charlie’s was Japanese.

I write for myself, and for people like me. Women of color often don’t see positive roles for ourselves in theater. We don’t see much of ourselves in theater period. As an actor and a writer, I want to change that. I want to write intelligent, challenging, engaging, and entertaining stories that not only challenge existing ideals of race, sexuality, class, and gender, but provide inspiration for actresses and actors of color to tell their own stories.

As it was brand new, this production relied heavily on collaboration. I had never undertaken such a large task before and so relied heavily upon my production and acting team to balance out my perspective and better the work.

This thesis chronicles my journey with Dog from inception to the end of its Oberlin College run, and includes a reflection of my experience and ideas for the future of the piece. I will provide both sociological and literary context for several important aspects of the show, as well as personal reflections on the process and discoveries made therein. I have broken down the categories thus:
A. Research and application: sociological
B. Research and application: literary
C. Writing, collaboration, rehearsal, and performance
D. Conclusion and the future of Dog

“How Long Were You Out There?”: Sociological influences behind Dog

“Oppression insidiously affects mental health.” – Maria P.P. Root

Research concerning Women of Color and mental illness is far and few between, but research concerning multiracial women of color is nearly nonexistent. The numbers are even smaller for non-white multiracial or non bi-racial mixed women of color. Most of my sociological research relied upon the anecdotes, observations, and conversations between me and my multiracial friends. Part of this is due to the relatively small population size of self-identified multiracial peoples, contributed to largely because of anti-miscegenation laws\(^1\) and the “one-drop rule”\(^2\). In the year 2000, the U.S. Census bureau finally allowed people to check than more than one box pertaining to race, thereby officially recognizing multiracial individuals.\(^3\) Seven million people (2.4% of U.S. population) identified as mixed race that year, and today the population of self-identified multiracial Americans is growing rapidly. This author hopes the levels of research and scholarship will attempt to keep up.

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1 Anti-miscegenation laws have existed in the U.S. as early as 1641, and were declared unconstitutional in 1967. My father, the child of a Black and Native American maid and a Spanish-Mexican immigrant, was seventeen. My mother, the child of a Japanese (Okinawa) immigrant and a Black and Native American Army serviceman, was thirteen.

2 Officially, the policy demanding mixed race children claim the race of the non-white parent was abolished in 1989—incidentally, the year I was born. In practice, as well as in the minds of some people however, the one-drop rule still exists, as do rules of blood quantum (in which members to a specific group must have above a certain amount of racial heritage to qualify as a member of said group).

3 I was eleven years old at the time, and remember how excited my parents were to legally check multiple boxes for both themselves and their children. My parents are proud of their mixed heritage, and would either rotate which race they checked each year or check all their boxes whether it was legal or not.
Because multiethnic/multiracial Americans were historically stereotyped as unbalanced genetic oddities, I felt it was my duty to guide this project with substantial fact and research. Showing a character who is both multiracial, a female, and mentally unstable could easily fall into the dangerous crazy-person, hysterical woman, and/or the tragic mulatto stereotype, which I detest and wished to avoid. The following research is, unfortunately, several years old. As in most media on mixed-race issues I was able to find, those studied were usually of biracial parentage, with one white parent. Usually, the other parent was Black or Asian. Very rarely were case-studies included of a non white/other mix, and none of the people researched identified as more than triracial/ethnic. The following is a summation of my findings on the specific issue of multiracial women and mental illness. I used these findings to supplement my writing- I would refer to the research whenever I felt I was going to write something potentially problematic, to check my facts. On occasion, the research sparked my curiosity in writing specific scenes and storylines. In essence, my findings acted as a type of “WWDD” (what would Dog do?) bracelet for my writing.

The research I found emphasized that research itself must be taken with a grain of salt. The authors of the various essays were adamant in explaining not only the history of mental health care as it relates to women and people of color, but in explaining the current limits of their field as well as offering possible solutions for those limits. Psychology and psychiatry have historically disenfranchised women and people of color through neglect, misdiagnosis, and mistreatment of minority populations.

In her essay on mixed-race women for the book Women of Color: Integrating Ethnic and Gender Identities in Psychotherapy, Maria P.P. Root writes that “Oppression insidiously affects mental health,” (Comas-Diaz and Greene, 475). My research supports that oppressive systems
can also define mental health. *Racism, Sexism, and Mental Health* points out that “in the past, stereotypes of mental illness have not only functioned like ethnic stereotypes, at times they actually were ethnic stereotypes.” (Willie, Reiker, Kramer, and Brown; 137) The past tends to recycle itself. For example, stereotypes used against Irish and eastern European immigrants such as “degenerate” and “mentally ill” have been recycled and are used against urban poor today: “It should be noted that these same traits characterize today’s urban poor, particularly poor blacks, and may help to explain the reported correlations among living in poverty, being black, and having chronic mental illness.” (137) According to a surkeongeneral.gov report, though minorities in the general population⁴ have similar levels mental illness to that of whites they “have less access to, and availability of, mental health services; are less likely to receive needed mental health services; minorities in treatment often receive a poorer quality of mental health care; are underrepresented in mental health research.” Taken with the fact that minorities are overrepresented in high-risk communities such as homeless, incarcerated, and institutionalized and the fact that levels of mental disorders are higher in such high-risk communities, as well as the fact that “racial and ethnic minorities in the United States face a social and economic environment of inequality that includes greater exposure to racism and discrimination, violence, and poverty, all of which take a toll on mental health,” (Surgeongeneral.gov)⁵ the report concludes that minorities collectively face a greater burden from mental illness than do whites. In response to this research, as well as my personal difficulties affording medication, I included Dog’s rapidly decreasing medicine supply into the script.

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⁴ The report acknowledges that there is a dearth of adequate research concerning populations of Asian Americans, Alaska Natives, mainland Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders, preventing firm conclusions on these groups. Multiracial populations were not mentioned.

⁵ This is commonly referred to as “minority stress”
On the front of sexism, a 1970’s study found that “women are both overrepresented and underserved in treatment populations,”(Willie, Reiker, Kramer, and Brown; 376). Clinicians were more likely to associate mental health and maturity with stereotypically masculine traits, and mental health and immaturity with the feminine. Even among treatment populations, stereotypes persist. Illnesses such as depression and anxiety are coded feminine, and therefore more likely to be diagnosed among females, while substance abuse and aggressive-personality disorders are coded masculine and more likely diagnosed among males. (29) Of course, proper treatment is hard to come by when someone is improperly diagnosed.

Classism, too has its effects on psychological research and care: “The rate of psychopathology in the lowest social class averaged two and a half times that of the highest social class.” (382)

Historically, when multiracial women were viewed through a mental health lens, they were disenfranchised by a triplet of racism, sexism, and anti-miscegenation. This triplet has both over-pathologised and under-treated the communities it is supposed to service. Women of Color’s Maria P.P. Root sums the problem thus:

“Both anti-miscegenist and supremacist thinking have guided research questions and clinical interpretation of symptomatology in multiracial people. These, combined with gender biases such as the unequal distribution of power to women, women being viewed as sex objects, and a woman’s worth assessed through her physical appearance, have put the multiracial women at a particular disadvantage. Until recently the base of data on mixed-race persons interpreted by persons unfamiliar with their experience and in a historical context that has been anti-misceginist. Mixed race women (this is usually based on women with black and white mixed parentage) have been described as lacking impulse control, particularly within their sexual desire and other consummatory behaviors. Alternative hypothesis to account for individuals’ maladjustment have not been demonstrated because of limited research methodology and biased theories...However , the ‘average’ multiracial individual is well-functioning in society, and is no more disturbed or lonely than their monoracial identifying peers.” (457, 460)
For further analysis of the tragic mulatto trope and how this figured in my writing, please refer to the literature section.

As evidenced by the quote above, stereotypes have negatively impacted diagnoses of mental illness among multiracial women.

The implications for therapy are significant. The multiracial woman may manifest social anxiety, general anxiety, detachment, or depression when she does not feel connected. These are reactions of powerlessness and alienation that may be based in a reality that at times is very subtle. Feelings of being an “imposter” might arise as a signal that she feels pseudo- or conditional acceptance within a group. The experiences that give rise to this feeling may also give rise to a lack of confidence in herself or lack of trust in how she perceives her environment. (466)

Sexual stereotypes of multiracial women being promiscuous and exotic also feature highly in Dog. Growing up I had often felt exotified, but during research I found this was not an individual phenomenon: “Multiracial women are especially vulnerable to internalizing the oppressive expectations of the exotic woman because of society’s socialization of the importance of physical appearance, mixed messages about woman’s sexuality, and the oppressive beliefs about the sexuality of multiracial women.” (470)

Though the play is based off my experiences, I decided to simplify and clarify Beatrice/Dog’s racial admixture somewhat. I figured it would be difficult to find actresses to embody a Japanese-Black-Native American-Chicana woman, so the only requirement I placed on her heritage was that she be part Mexican-American. This also allowed me to meditate on the connections between language and cultural identification, as well as the current anti-Latino/Latina climate. I decided to do additional research on Chicana-specific psychology. 

Familismo, the strong connection and sense of responsibility to one’s family, factors largely in —

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6 The play took on more weighty issues regarding immigration stereotypes thanks in part to Arizona’s SB 1070 crisis.
mental health issues relating to Chicanas. Being a good family member often means subscribing to rigid gender norms that can stifle individual growth and health.

“The ‘good’ Chicana is family and home oriented, nurturing, self-sacrificing, soft, passive, and submissive to her husband. The ‘bad’ Chicana is self-centered, promiscuous, and, in general, the opposite of the “good” woman...What is unique to the Chicana(o) community is the reference to the Malinche⁷ and the Virgin⁸ and the exaggerated extremes created by those images.” (Velasques, Arellano, and McNiell; 62-63)

I also found startling facts about sexual assault that influenced my writing. One in three latina women reports incidents of sexual abuse, regardless of acculturation or citizen status, and across educational level, employment status, marital status, number of children, and neighborhood. Almost half of sexually abused Latinas were abused by persons within their family (qtd. in Velasques, Arellano, and McNiell; 76). This number is comparable to the incidence of sexual assault among Native American and Alaskan women (one in three), and higher than the numbers of black (one-in-five), Asian and Pacific Islander women (one in fourteen), and white women (one-in-six), as well as women-at-large (also one-in-six).

Within their lifetime, one out of every four multiracial women will have experienced rape or attempted rape (RAINN).

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⁷ La Malinche (or Dona Maria, as she was called by the Spanish) was an Aztec courtesan of the Spanish conquistador Cortes. Her lingual-interpreter skills and intimate relationship with Cortes have earned her infamy as a traitor and whore, who sold out her people to the Spanish. She is also the mother of the first documented “Mexican” - the first child of Spanish and Native blood. Modern historians have pointed out that La Malinche was a child at the time and a sex slave who was made a scapegoat for the subjugation of the Native people, yet the pejoratives Malinche and La Chingada (the fucking one) persist.

⁸ The Virgin refers to the dark-skinned Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, whose vision appeared to the indigenous St. Juan Diego several times in 1531, nine years after the fall of the Aztec Capital to Cortes. This apparition, as well as the miracle of her likeness appearing on Diego’s cloak, is credited with spurring Catholic conversion efforts in what is now Mexico. She is celebrated as “La Reina (queen) de Mexico,” with a feast day of December 12.
“For individuals with psychiatric disabilities\(^9\), the rate of violent criminal victimization *including sexual assault* was 2 times greater than in the general population (8.2% vs. 3.1%)\(^{10}\) (Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault)

97% of homeless women with severe mental illness will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. (WCSA)

Victims of sexual assault are three times more likely to suffer from depression, six times more likely to suffer from Post Traumatic-Stress Disorder, thirteen times more likely to abuse alcohol, 26 times more likely to abuse drugs, and four times more likely to contemplate suicide (RAINN).

With all of these statistics staring me in the face, I realized that it would have been a near-miracle for Beatrice to have gone through her life without encountering sexual assault and/or rape, and as a survivor of sexual assault I know how that can exacerbate an existing mental illness. This is why I decided to include a storyline about sexual abuse.

*“Dye that colors my thoughts”: Literary Influences*

Though Dog was mainly inspired by the plays and literature of multiracial and/or minority writers, there is no specific plot my story is taken from. My general writing style consciously tries to balance Walt Whitman verbosity and exuberance with Japanese literary aesthetics of word-choice economy, turn-of-phrase and analogy, circular endings, and noticing beauty in sadness and decay. For this project I drew largely from the emotional and linguistic

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\(^9\) Psychiatric disability is a term used when mental disability significantly affects major aspects of one’s life such as working, learning, or communicating.

\(^{10}\) Emphasis mine.
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atmosphere of latino/latina writers like Cherrie Moraga, Lorna Dee Cervantes and Jose Rivera, while taking structure tips from Tennessee Williams and Paula Vogel.

My first and heaviest inspiration is Tennessee Williams’ *Glass Menagerie*. I have performed both the roles of Laura and Amanda, and am very fond of his emotional, romantic writing style and ground breaking use of the memory play concept. In his opening descriptions of the set for *Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams describes how he wants his memory play to work:

“The scene is memory and therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic.” (Williams, 3)

His poetic treatment of histrionic women greatly affected my style of depicting extreme longing onstage. During early drafts of *Dog* I referred heavily to *Glass Menagerie* to help me imagine my set as well as how to work in narration. Unfortunately, Charlie’s monologue, which is very Williams inspired, was cut from later versions of the script.

As an homage to Williams, I set the play during a time of severe weather-conditions. The snow in my script served a similar role as the heat in Williams’s plays- it was an irritant and catalyst to the characters, who were forced to deal with the cold by getting closer, as well as romantic descriptor of an emotional landscape.

The structure of Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* was also influential to *Dog*. Like *Glass Menagerie*, *How I Learned to Drive* is a memory play, but this script takes the concept one step further and applies a non-linear narrative. This made much more sense to my interpretation of memory as stream-of-consciousness, and so I studied Vogel’s play to discover how she broke her scenes into sensible chunks that could be told out of order. Unfortunately, I have not yet figured out how to apply this concept.
Jose Rivera’s play *Cloud Tectonics* was the first play, and one of the few pieces of literature I read that featured strong Latina/ Latino characters. The play also deals with a man who develops a relationship with an enigmatic female drifter, but in this case the man learns something about connecting with his heritage. This play, like several of Rivera’s works, deals with the nature of time and memory, however *Cloud Tectonics* has more of a literal take on the idea: Celestina, the woman, exists out of time. Time slows down to a crawl in whatever space she is in.

It was inspiring to see characters who dealt with important issues like culture-clash, racism, *familismo*, love, fear, and individuality yet still remained relatable human-beings and not some abstract concepts. I enjoyed the magical realism, how dialogue could be surreal yet remain relatable, and how rich and poetic the language was.

The poet Lorna Dee Cervantes was a particularly important resource. I discovered her poetry while researching the importance of Spanish language comprehension in cultural identification, and the response was immediate and profound. I wrote this email to Heather regarding her poetry:

> “I was looking up pochas\(^\text{11}\) and depression and self-esteem and language and all that, and I came across this thesis paper. The paper is interesting and covers a LOT of what I’m hoping touch on in the script, but the poems and authors and quotes are what gave me an athsma attack when I read it. Like literally, my throat closed up and I started to cry because, I mean, how many times in your life do you read poetry that just *gets* you, you know? oh, and since Lorna Dee is of Oaxacan descent and talks about it in her poetry, I took it as a sign to go ahead and do it\(^\text{12}\). I mean, hell this is already T. Williams level of self-absorbton, might as well go whole-hog.”

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\(^{11}\) A pocha (masculine: pocho) is pejorative slang used to describe a Chicana(o) who has forgotten or rejected their Mexican heritage, especially the Spanish language. The original word “pocho” is used to describe rotted fruit. In my play Dog becomes mistakenly offended when Charlie announces the name of the beans they are eating - pocha beans.

\(^{12}\) Heather was asking what part of Mexico Dog’s family was from, and which side of the family the heritage is on. My grandfather was from Oaxaca, and since Cervantes was too, I took this as a sign to make Dog’s background Oaxacan.
The poems in particular that “got” me were Oaxaca, 1974, Refugee Ship, and Freeway 280. Oaxaca, 1974 chronicles the details of her trip to Mexico and how she feels an outcast in a land her family belonged to. I identified greatly with the shame of being looked down upon as “not Mexican enough,” and read and reread this poem before writing sections that had to do with Latina identity. Cervantes writes in a combination of English and Spanish slang, creating her own home for language and those who practice it.

**Oaxaca, 1974**

Mexico,  
I look for  
you all day in the streets of Oaxaca.  
The children run to me laughing,  
spinning me blind and silly.  
They call me in words of another language.  
My brown body searches the streets  
for the dye that will color my thought.  
But Mexico gags,  
!Esputa!¹³  
on this bland pochaseed.  
I didn’t ask to be brought up tonta!¹⁴  
My name hangs about me like a loose tooth.  
Old women they know my secret,  
“Es la culpa de los antepasados.”¹⁵  
Blame it on the old ones.  
They gave me a name  
that fights me.

The second poem that influenced me was Refugee ship, also by Cervantes. In this, she talks of her difficulties with language and how she feels alienated and closed off from her culture.

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¹³ Esputar means “to spit.”  
¹⁴ Translates as “idiot.”  
¹⁵ Translates to “blame it on the ancestors.”
Refugee ship

Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother’s eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.
Mama raised me without language.
I’m orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
my reflection; bronzed skin, black hair.
I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.
El barco que nunca atraca

Freeway 280 was more of an aesthetic reference for this piece, as to the feel of life outside the motel room for Beatrice. Perhaps this is what Beatrice was thinking before she wandered into Charlie’s path.

Freeway 280

Las casitas near the gray cannery,
nestled amid wild abrazos of climbing roses
and man-high red geraniums
are gone now. The freeway conceals it
all beneath a raised scar.

But under the fake windsounds of the open lanes,
in the abandoned lots below, new grasses sprout,
wild mustard remembers, old gardens
come back stronger than they were,
trees have been left standing in their yards.
Albaricoqueros, cerezos, nogales . . .
Viejitas come here with paper bags to gather greens.
Espinaca, verdolagas, yerbabuena . . .

I scramble over the wire fence
that would have kept me out.
Once, I wanted out, wanted the rigid lanes
to take me to a place without sun,
without the smell of tomatoes burning
on swing shift in the greasy summer air.

Maybe it's here
en los campos extraños de esta ciudad
where I'll find it, that part of me
mown under
like a corpse
or a loose seed.

The fourth poem, by Cherrie Moraga, a multiracial Mexican American’s voice kept me strong. I would play this song when I needed inspiration or information on co-op issues. My thinking was that changing one aspect of my life than other things was part of the key to building self-confidence needed for this project.

**From It’s the Poverty**

* I lack imagination, you say.

* No. I lack language.
The language to clarify
my resistance to the literate.
Words are a war to me.
They threaten my family.

To gain the word to describe the loss,
I risk losing everything.
I may create a monster,
the word's length and body
swelling up colorful and thrilling
looming over my *mother*, characterized.
Her voice in the distance
*unintelligible illiterate*.

These are the monster's words.

Sam the poinsetta came from a specific source: the Japanese novella *Twinkle-Twinkle* (or *Kira Kira Hikaru*) by Kaori Ekuni, translated by Emi Shimokawa. One of the main characters, Shoko, is described as mentally ill and has an unorthodox way of relating to the world
around her. Among other habits, she develops a love-hate relationship with her husband’s potted plant. She feeds it tomato juice and alcohol, speaks to it, and is occasionally jealous of its relationship with her husband. Similar to my play, the novel relies upon unreliable narrators to tell the story of an unorthodox and at times volatile relationship.

I remember one particular scene in sharp detail: Shoko’s gay husband, Mitsuki comes home from work and the two sit on their porch and drink, when Shoko grabs the plant and sets it between them. The chapter ends in silence, with the three entities engaging with their environment and each other. That scene stuck in my brain- I had to have something like that in my play:

*She sits down and watches the snow, grooming and cradling the plant. He puts on his coat and grabs hers, goes outside and drapes the coat over her shoulders. He sits down. She sets the plant beside her and they watch the snow. She blows into her hands.* (Dog, Scene 5).

Sam, the poinsettia version of Shoko’s plant (I wanted to throw in a humorous nod to Dog’s ancestry) is a silent child, pet, and confidant to first Beatrice and then Charlie. I often experience a special connection with nature, and I wanted to make sure that connection carried over into the play as well. Sam always listens and only wants sun, soil, and water. With all of the yelling and arguing and miscommunication, I wanted something or someone to bear witness to the truth. Sam is really the only constant. He is the evidence and witness to Charlie’s relationship with Dog.

While I do not set out to write “issue” plays, I will purposefully avoid to reinforce stereotypes, to subvert them in one or two ways throughout my piece. Two major concerns with this play were that I was enforcing Manic Pixie Dream Girl and Tragic Mulatto stereotypes.
My first concern was whether or not Dog/Beatrice was going to become a Manic Pixie Dream Girl. Anita Sarkeesian, video blogger for the Feminist Frequency, explains this trope:

The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a term coined by Nathan Rabin to describe the female character who’s written to help the usually white and definitely straight male hero loosen up and enjoy life. Rabin writes, “That bubbly, shallow cinematic creature that exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures.” The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is a supporting character used to further the storyline of the male hero. She really has no life of her own, she has no family or interests or much of a job that we ever see. She is as the AVclub describes, “On hand to lift a gloomy male protagonist out of the doldrums, not to pursue her own happiness.” (Feminist Frequency)

Somewhere between the first and second half of the script I became worried that Dog was becoming a Manic Pixie Dream Girl for Charlie. This issue began to take on new forms when I decided to turn the script from a regular show into a memoir play. As soon as I realized this I decided I wanted Dog to embody certain aspects of the trope while subverting other aspects. I wanted the play to be about her, but at the same time I wanted the audience to know as much as Charlie did. I wanted them to come away with a definite sense that they met this woman and only saw a certain side of her- that her situation was not all of what she was. I also thought this would be a statement about the nature of depression. Someone in the depths of depression becomes a ghost of your former self and everyone involved only sees pain and how that manifests. The pain is all there is.

In order to undermine this stereotype I made sure that Charlie and Dog’s relationship was much more complex than a boy-meets-girl, girl-educates-boy, boy-and-girl-fall-in-love storyline. To start, Beatrice is not interested in educating or nurturing Charlie in the slightest. Though she calls herself a dog she is repulsed by the idea of having no purpose in life except to please a master: “You know what’s ugly? That painting. It’s really really…stupid. I mean, the
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quintessential American hero with his faithful, stupid spaniel by his side.” (Scene 5) She is easily frustrated by his insensitive comments and behavior:

*Creaking bedsprings from next door, peppered with moans.*
*She grabs her radio, winds it up, turns up the dial. “Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head” begins.*
They’ve been at it all day.
Charlie: It’s so dark in here.
*He turns on a light.*
Dog: You’re not forgiven, you know.
(Scene 5)

She only admits her inner feelings out of a desire for her own catharsis and her inability to say no to requests, no matter how much they compromise her position: “I can’t say no. Even if I want to, even if they hurt me I can’t say no” (Scene 5)

Furthermore I did not want the ending to be as simple and predictable as Beatrice either living and staying or dying and somehow teaching him about life. Beatrice leaves at the end of the play, and Charlie is left picking up the pieces. He learns a few lessons about tolerance, but he is left confused, heartbroken, and lonely:

*He pounds on the door, eventually manages to open it—she is not there. None of her things are. He heads out, then notices her backpack is missing as well. He flings open the outer door and looks outside. No Beatrice. Only Sam, the Poinsetta, is left. Charlie carries Sam inside, sets him down. The weight of the situation falls upon him. He puts his head in his hands. He looks at the plant.*
Charlie: Well, Sam—what do I do now?
(Scene 6)

Though both Charlie and Beatrice reveal their histories and eventually move to physical intimacy in scene five, this intimacy is purposefully rushed as a way to avoid more communication and revelation. Beatrice kisses Charlie on two separate occasions, and both of them occur immediately after he begins to ask questions about her family. In both instances it distracts him.
The trope of the tragic mulatto can be traced back to white Abolitionist Maria Child’s short stories “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843). In these tales a well-bred, beautiful young “white” woman is revealed as biracial upon the death of her white father. She is then abandoned by her white lover, enslaved, and dies in sickness and despair. Over time the trope became a black/white biracial character—usually female, usually eloquent, attractive, and prone to misfortune, depression, over ambitiousness, promiscuity, and cunning.

Winona L. Fletcher puts it best in her article *Who put the Tragic in the Tragic Mulatto?*:

Somewhere along the way there sprang upon the stage a convention that declared the treatment of the mulatto must be sentimental, given to evocation of pity (and sometimes real fear); that the character must possess virtue and nobility; that figure must be resigned to alienation from society and the acceptance of a fate that results in shame for the possession of one drop of black blood. Melodrama, the favorite of nineteenth-century playgoers, dictated the creation of this virtuous, noble sentimental agent. The perfect real-life model for this dramatic character was the female mulatto slave. Already a victim of the white master, whose whims dictated her existence, her presence as his concubine aroused jealousy in the white woman, envy and hate in her darker sister, and despair in her own soul when she was prohibited by society from passing for white. She offered limitless dramatic possibilities. It was, therefore, generally agreed that the thus created ‘tragic mulatto’ should be female although there are notable exceptions to the last mandate (Fletcher, 250).

Though the tragic mulatto character started as a tool for abolitionist sympathy and ended as a tool to warn against miscegenation, she remained a tool of the white establishment. Along with many other African-American stereotypes, this was popularized due to the success of the 1852 stage adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin by George L. Aiken, which was often performed in blackface. From that time on, the tragic mulatto stereotype has persisted in numerous film, stage, and literary incarnations, notably the 1927 musical *Showboat*, D.W. Griffith’s infamous Birth of a Nation in 1915, as well as the films *Imitation of Life* in 1934 (remade in 1959), and *Pinky* in 1949.
Resisting this stereotype in my writing proved difficult. The story I wanted to tell was one of minority stress exacerbating mental illness, yet existing tropes made it very easy for my story to be misinterpreted. I felt internal pressure to sanitize Beatrice’s character and story-to make her such a lovable and perfect character who was so secure in her identity that the audience had no chance but to see how minority stress and an untreated disorder were ruining her life. However, early attempts to reflect this in my editing made the script flat and unbelievable, and took the narrative away from the aspects of multiracial minority stress I wanted to explore. The best solution, I reasoned, was to portray Beatrice as a human complete with flaws and strengths. I was also careful to include instances where Beatrice is put down by outside forces such as her ex-boyfriend, Charlie, and her stepfather to show how her self-esteem issues are built:

My ex-boyfriend called it “hybrid vigor.” (sarcastically) Apparently mutts have more fun (Scene 4).

We lived in this little apartment downtown- tiny tiny little closet of a place. It had cockroaches and bad neighbors who called us halfbreeds, so Marcie and me kept to ourselves more than other kids (Scene 5).

And Poinsettia Makes Nine: On Writing, Collaborating, Rehearsal, and Performance

Writing this play helped pull me out of severe depression. It was difficult, but at the same time this was therapy. This was not only a way for me to address my demons but to literally take back control of my life. The blue polka-dot skirt and cowboy boots I wore the day of my near-suicide attempt became Beatrice’s basic costume. My experiences with male Oberlin students became the basis for Beatrice’s interactions with Charlie, and my struggles to accept help or kindness from friends and family wrote themselves through Beatrice’s reluctant lips.¹⁶

¹⁶ Please see pages 16, 19, 20, 22, and 29 for specific dialogues where Beatrice denies her problem or refuses help.
The play was what I used to bargain my depression for freedom. *Listen*, I said, *you can tell your story for three hours if I get three hours of my life back. This is how I will cry. This is where my anger and sadness can go. This is why I cannot die yet*, I told myself. *I haven’t finished explaining myself.*

I would allow myself to write in exchange for the most menial tasks: waking up in the morning, going to class, eating, talking to friends- things that had become almost too difficult to bear were bargained for so that I could expel my demons on the page. During my writing sessions I would almost crouch over the computer in the dark, typing frantically. One of the symptoms of severe depression for me is crippling writers block, but at the beginning of the *Dog* process words seemed to burst forth like from a broken dam. Within a few weeks I had written what would become the first two scenes of the play, and I was desperate to show someone my progress.

I also believe in multiple editors. Once the second draft is complete- not before- I send my scripts to people I trust. I listen to their views, but retain my own sense of artistic self. I am learning how to be a brutal editor- to *kill my darlings*, as Faulkner said. Even during first rehearsals or readings, I try to remain receptive to critique from cast, director, crew, and audience.

But in order to make sure I completed the script I forced myself not to show anyone anything until the first draft was finished or unless absolutely necessary. I showed Heather Harvey, my (at the time) prospective director the first fifteen pages during our ride home to Indianapolis for Thanksgiving break 2010. I was extremely nervous, but she dove into the script within the first minutes of the ride during a sunset that made it almost too dark to see. She
agreed to the project almost immediately afterward, and following her suggestions, I assembled
the rest of my production team.

I am very interested in the roles light and scenery play in telling a story, and I was
fortunate enough to have Ebony Burton as lighting designer and Erin Joenk as set designer and
technical director. The four of us held our first production meeting via Skype while I was
studying in Japan for the spring semester, and it was as if they read my mind from half a world
away. Their ideas for the show came out of such a similar place of understanding memory and
mental illness. Heather focused on the bipolar aspects of Dog’s personality, the differences in
the characters’ energies and movement, and the contrast of unclear memories to bold flashes of
memory and color. Ebony spoke of lighting that reflected the warm and cool aspects of Beatrice,
as well as impressionist lighting. Erin Joenk’s design for the motel room was based around the
geography of a memory—clear in the center, yet fading around the edges. I left our first
production meeting confident that this story would blossom beyond what even I had imagined.

Later in the process, Ben Ferber went the extra mile, arranging a real recording of the
loud neighbors in the script when no appropriate sound clip could be found.

Working as an actor and a writer on your own play means a lot of compromise— not only
with your creative team but with yourself. During the writing process my acting brain would try
to interject with opinions on how I wanted to perform the show. *This is too hard,* my acting
brain thought. *I don’t want to be naked on stage. I don’t want to be seen in this light. Put this
in; make my part juicier.* To which my writing brain replied with a firm *Shut up, you diva. This
show will last long after you or I, so it must stand on its own merit.* Towards the end of the
writing process, especially when it was time to write the climax, there was a strong conflict
between my desire to tell the truth as I saw it and the fear of making myself or my family look dysfunctional. I was also terrified of writing this most important scene poorly. I was afraid of how it would reflect not simply on me but on my family and the ideas I was trying to put forth. The reaction section will deal with further analysis, however I was able to push past my fear during the initial writing section by writing the end of the play as quickly as I could, then revisiting that scene several times for edits. Editing is something I struggle with, so to allow myself to mess up and then going over these mistakes with ease was definitely a change for me. It made writing much less stressful.

This conflict between the acting and writing self is not necessarily a bad thing. Tennessee Williams, for example, is infamous for driving director Elia Kazan crazy with his impractical transitions and settings, so having experience in both the practical side and the literary side of plays was important, and helped keep me from going too far in either direction.

Another thing this play did for me was give me a better understanding of collaboration in theater. I came from a theater background where the director ruled, and everyone else did what they were told. The idea of collaboration was eye-opening for me. I wasn’t sure how to do it. Managing projects makes me very nervous- I tend to be a disorganized person, and am often not confrontational enough to make difficult decisions or announcements-lucky for me I had the organizational expertise of my director Heather Harvey, Read Tuddenbaum, our stage manager, and Michael Everdell, our assistant stage manager. The rehearsal process was a very flexible schedule. Because of the small size of the group and the length of the play, we were able to meet and rehearse without much scheduling conflict.
One example of the beauty of the collaborative process was the emergence of the color red. Even though the monologue containing that idea was cut from the show\textsuperscript{17}, Heather and I were both very adamant about having bold punches of color in such a dingy, bland motel room. The “steady, confident red of the coke can” was a strong image for both of us. Having that can, Sam the Poinsettia, and Ebony’s beautiful sunrise lighting contrasted with the dingy pinkish color of Erin’s set made the hyperreal, identifiable aspects of the play even more evident.

The audition and rehearsal processes for the play were relatively short and painless, especially given that only one additional person needed to be cast. Daniel Kessler, our Charlie, had auditioned for the show while I was abroad (spring semester of 2010). However, because few people showed up to audition Heather and I decided to postpone our decision until that Fall, when we then decided that Danny was the best man for the job.

The first read-through was the most difficult part of rehearsal, and demonstrated the difficulties of being both a writer and actress at the same time. Reading each word of the script aloud was torture. I squirmed in my seat the entire time, especially during the sex scene. I burned with embarrassment. My immediate thoughts ran somewhere along the lines of what in the world did I get myself into? I can’t write, and especially not a play. After the first rehearsal the four of us (Heather Harvey, Read Tuddenbaum, Danny Kessler, and myself) went around asking what we thought of the play. Surprisingly, the responses from all were favorable.

Acting in this play was a challenge. Originally I did not intend to act- I’d recently had a bad experience with someone who wrote, directed, and starred in his/her own show, and that made me weary of amassing too much power. I did not want to override the creative, collaborative process. I was worried that I would undermine the story and turn the project into a

\textsuperscript{17} See Charlie’s monologue on page 29 of this paper.
masturbatory display instead of a legitimate piece of art that existed beyond myself. I wanted to write something that could live on without me.

However, the closer it came to casting time, the more confident I was that I should play Beatrice myself. This was, admittedly, helicopter parenting on my part. I was not sure who else could play the role, many of my advisors and collaborators assumed I was going to play the role, so I decided to go along.

I initially thought that being the writer would make my acting job much easier. This was only partially true- memorizing my lines proved incredibly difficult. It was embarrassing, but oftentimes Danny would receive fewer line notes than me. However, all of my line notes were only a few words off from perfect. Because I had written them, I remembered the meaning and general word-style, but having written them gave me a false confidence that whatever I spoke was correct, because all the words were in my writing style following my logic.

Rehearsals focused largely on distinguishing ourselves from our characters. Danny is a kind, sweet person by nature, as am I- so it was a challenge to be aggressive, abrasive, and confrontational with each other. Most of our individual work at home as well as in rehearsal involved lowering Dog and Charlie’s vocal registers, as well as changing our physicality to be much less apologetic. Dog moved often and erratically, similar to a puppy, while Charlie moved and spoke very directly. Heather kept repeating “Balls to the walls. All the walls!” This statement was helpful, as I would sometimes play Dog as more myself than I wanted, or hold back on emotionally raw parts because I was afraid of committing to such a scary topic.

Beatrice desires to be free, yet she does not know how and is afraid to trust. Like an abused dog, she vacillates between opening up and becoming hostile to Charlie. In contrast,
Charlie has led a stable life- he came from a military family, where he followed the expected path. His monoracial identity adds to the sense of security that Dog lacks.

It was difficult for me to separate myself from Dog/Beatrice since she was based off my past views of myself. Heather and I would often have differences of opinion on how brash my character was. I would sometimes have problems with laughing too much or not being abrasive enough. However, due to the nurturing atmosphere of the rehearsal space sponsored by check-in exercises every rehearsal followed by brief stretching, Heather and I were able to sit down and come together on such matters of opinion.

On days when it was very difficult to deal with the issues brought up in rehearsal I would call my mother for a mental health check-in, which helped me cope with the stress of being part of a production team.

Performing Dog was one of the most draining experiences of my life. It involved pulling much of my own experience, yet requiring that experience remain separate from the character. Each night striking the balance between the two was exhausting.

Our official opening night, a small calamity occurred. There is a moment during scene five where I am supposed to reach out and turn off a radio- however someone in the light booth pressed the wrong button, and the ringtone sound cue came on several minutes before it was supposed to. I remember shooting Danny a look begging him not to answer his phone, but he answered his phone anyway and proceeded to do his monologue. This meant that I was in the room for a conversation I was not supposed to hear, and one of my important monologues that begins “Have you ever felt like exploding?” was skipped. I pretended to head to the bathroom and close the door during his conversation. When I came out of the room I recited my
monologue then made an excuse as to why I needed to go outside. This put the two of us back on track plot-wise, but during that entire period light and sound operators didn’t know what to do. During two of my monologues sound and lighting effects cut off, leaving a general wash of light on the stage. This was unnerving to me, yet acting to an unexpected silence was beautiful in its own way.

“Well, Sam-What Do I Do Now?”: Conclusion and the Future of Dog

Later in the process—perhaps too late— I realized I wanted this project to be more than just a play. I wanted to spark conversation, encourage people to have open, honest, and caring discussions about race, gender, and mental illness. At that time I was also heavily into procrastinating on Obietalk.com, Oberlin’s anonymous forum. Many Obietalk posts around that time were from people either in or very near a mental health crisis. Some revealed suicidal thoughts and feelings of hopelessness. I replied to those posts in the most supportive way I could, offering encouragement and advice, but I wanted to reach out to more people. I figured that the show would be one way to get conversations started, so I partnered with Oberlin’s chapter of Active Minds\(^\text{18}\) as well as students I met at the Multiracial Symposium panel\(^\text{19}\) to do talkbacks after certain performances. These talkbacks helped me tease out new ideas for improvement.

One critique that came up among several people was that multiracial issues weren’t highlighted enough in the show. Perhaps, some suggested, if the actress had looked more Latina the issues would have been more evident. Another critique was on the nature of memory in the

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\(^{18}\) **Active Minds** is a nationwide college group that seeks to dispel stigma around mental illness, and give people resources to go for mental health help.

\(^{19}\) I sat on a panel of multiracial students presenting their work for Oberlin’s Mixed Dreams Multiracial Student Symposium. This took place Fall 2010
play. I wanted to be subtle but it wasn’t brought out as clearly as I had hoped, and some audience members were confused.

In response to this I am working on changes to further explore both memory and Dog’s multiracial-Chicana identity. However, I refuse to promote casting discrimination in this respect. Many of my personal identity issues revolve around how a mixed person is supposed to “look,” and I refuse to perpetuate those issues with others. My goal is to empower multiracial actresses and those with mental illness, not box them into narrow categories.

Memory could be best represented through the use of déjà vu-like moments. I could repeat certain key phrases, tableaus, or stage direction, for example. I could also give Charlie’s vision of Dog a greater progression: while at the beginning, Charlie sees her as filthy and endeavors to get her out of his room, through subtle changes in light and sound she becomes more idealized, while the script could support Charlie’s memory becoming increasingly divorced from a realistic sense of who Beatrice is.

In future versions light, sound, and scenery will play a much larger role than before in telling the story. In terms of lighting I would like to include more moments of light that rapidly changes in intensity, such as flickering light or light in a power surge. I would like to include more music, such as Oberlin Alumn B Steady’s song Red Sky. I was introduced to this song during a performance of Heather Harvey’s show Broken and Contrite Heart, and I think it fits the aesthetic and meaning of the piece very well. Perhaps this could help frame the story within the context of memory and the surreal.

I am still unsure what to do with Charlie’s opening monologue. The original monologue was cut because I could not figure out how to further incorporate him as narrator- I felt it chained
down the story- however I am very fond of this monologue and feel it reveals so much about who Charlie is--

When I left this room for the last time, I promised myself I would remember everything the way it was. I knew so little truth then, I wanted to hold on to what little I noticed while I was here. Stupid, I know. I forget more everyday. It’s natural- time passes and slowly you forget what things were like. The color of the walls, the smell of the motel soap, what you were wearing when she kissed you. So you invent new things, fill in the gaps. But some of it remains, clear as water. I remember the bathroom smelled like piss, the walls were dirty and the desk had one wobbly leg. I remember sitting side-by-side on the bed, touching her shoulder. I remember that stupid wind-up radio, the first snow, the fight, the other fight, the sound of the door slamming, the steady, confident red of the coke-can, how she shone when I looked at her. And my memory strings it all together, the false and the true, and I worry them like a rosary.

He places the mirror in its place on the wall.20 A woman’s laughter is heard, faintly.

I remember the laugh.

(Author’s note post scene 6)

I would like to keep this monologue either in whole or by breaking it into scraps and including it in the play some other way.

Dog began as a way to release my fears and anxieties, and explain my behavior to my loved ones, yet took on wider sociological and literary weight the more I researched. When I decided to perform the piece it was crucial to me to have a collaborative creative team, as well as a strong personal vision. I believe this first incarnation of my play was executed well, and look forward to editing and rewrites. Dog can only improve from here, and eventually, I hope to have this performed in a professional theater.

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20 There was originally an overturned mirror on stage.


<http://ecommons.txstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=honorprog&sei-redir=1#search="thesis+lorna+dee+cervantes+cherrie+moraga+pocha+poetry+language">.

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