PERFORMING LATINIDAD: HEGEMONIC PROCESSES, LATINA/O TENSIONS, AND THE THEATRE OF CARIDAD SVICH

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis begins a complicated and detailed introduction to the term *latinidad* as a way to illuminate, analyze, and address issues that involve people of Latin American and Caribbean descent who now live in the United States—that is, Latinos/as. It then shows how theatre, and one play in particular, demonstrate this term, and why it is useful.

Speaking of Latinos/as as one group is an uneasy enterprise, as they are of many races and classes, come from a multitude of countries, and have a multitude of languages, cultures, and religions. Attempting to articulate what this group is, who they are, whether historically, presently, or potentially, is an articulation of latinidad. These articulations can exist in all forms of human behavior, whether everyday action and conversation, or formal, public performance. The specific racism that Latinos/as face in the United States can be described as one type of latinidad. Conflicts between Latinos/as and non-Latinos/as, and conflicts between Latinos/as are all instances of latinidad. Actions of resistance, division, affirmation, support, solidarity, and compromise by Latino/as are also instances of latinidad.

Theatre is an excellent venue in which to demonstrate and discuss latinidad. Theatre is representational, providing embodied possibility for audiences to watch and experience, and presentational, providing ideas and opinions with which audiences may
consider, agree, and disagree. Theatre also requires conflict and multiple perspectives in order to portray dramatic action. Thus, latinidad, in all its complexity and different forms, can be well served by theatre.

One play that deals with latinidad, as a complex set of ideas and events, is *Prodigal Kiss* by Caridad Svich. The play portrays the process of ceasing to be Latin American and becoming Latino/a in the United States. Through character dilemmas, conflicts, and actions, audiences see many different aspects of and arguments on latinidad that they may identify, agree and sympathize with, or disagree with and reject. Through the representation and presentation of latinidad, audience members and theatre practitioners, both Latino/a and non-Latino/a can leave theatrical productions with new questions, ideas, and possibilities for their own lives.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Literally translated from Spanish, *latinidad* means latin-ness, or latino/a-ness. It names the qualities or circumstances that make a person Latino/a or Latin American. This word has become a term for an important theoretical concept and phenomenon specific to peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent in the United States. It captures a significant complicated dilemma: how is it that so many millions of people, from so many different countries, with so many different language and cultures, are all grouped under one racial signifier—*latin*, or *Latino/a*? Latinidad describes harmful hegemonic ideas, processes, and events that Latinos/as face. It also describes resentment, division, or simply difference, between Latinos/as. However, latinidad is also used to talk about ways to combat and address those problems, a banner under which to unite, and an assertion of an aesthetic, history, loyalty, and culture that belongs to Latinos/as. It is a part of both public and private life. An instance of latinidad can be defined in relation to one person, or it can be applied or agreed upon by many people. It can be involved with or invoked by issues of identity, race, memory, family, loyalty, nation, tradition, assimilation, mobility, agency, oppression, and countless other issues and situations.
This term has gained importance in Chicana/o and Latina/o studies and is appearing with increasing frequency all over academia. Post-colonial theorists, cultural historians, performance theorists, theatre scholars, social scientists, anthropologists, art historians, and activists have all called upon the term to advance their arguments. It has no single definition, and one scholar's use of the term may not resemble another's.

This thesis is a documentation of my study, understanding, and my own scholarly applications of, latinidad, as it pertains to Latina theatre. As a theatre and performance scholar in the United States, I am interested in latinidad because I believe that American theatre and performance cannot be understood without including the contributions (both old and new) of Latina/o artists. Theatre is a particularly generative medium through which to engage the multi-layered concept of Latinidad. Latina/o theatre can and does make many statements about the Latino/a experience, Latino/a identity, Latino/a communities, and interactions between Latinos/as and hegemonic forces. Through new scholarship that addresses latinidad (from both theatre and non-theatre scholars), our understanding of latinidad can be greatly enriched. If latinidad is used as a lens through which to analyze Latino/a theatre, scholars increase their potential discussions and insights.

Theatre is a useful medium for representing and analyzing latinidad for several reasons. Latinidad is enacted through cultural production; it exists in real time and happens in real spaces. It is created by heritage, memory, and living action. While scholars (and others) can discuss latinidad in abstract ways, performance provides a medium of discussion that is more tangible and immediately translatable to real life.
Theatre also takes place in real time and in real spaces and requires living people; it is closer to unplanned, everyday experiences of latinidad than more abstract discussions, such as in literary and academic texts. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Sternbach write that “both protagonists and audiences leave the play or performance with a sense of being, becoming, and belonging” (6). Actors are able to perform possibilities in a safe setting, and their bodies help relate or refer the ideas of the performance quickly to living bodies outside of the performance. The physical enactment and given (imagined) circumstances of theatre provide a vehicle for possibility in the lives of audience members. Witnessing a performance provides an experience, bringing concrete and abstract ideas together. Audiences are able to exit theatres with an experience and new vocabularies with which to discuss that experience and how it relates to their lives.

Unlike reading or listening to a lecture, the moment of theatre requires immediate participation of audiences. It is experiential; several types of sensory intake are stimulated. Although audience members may not always be able to immediately respond to characters on stage and influence the performance directly, their presence as witnesses is still heavily participatory. This aspect of theatre is especially helpful for bringing non-Latinos/as and non-Latino/a influences into a discussion. Theatre allows non-Latinos/as a chance to participate intimately with Latinos/as without dominating; barring someone disturbing a performance, it is an excellent opportunity for non-Latinos/as to practice listening.

Because theatre is formal performance, because it exists in its own space and time, and involves some amount of preparation, it is an excellent tool for bringing
experience and discussion together. In “Latino Performance and Identity”, David Román writes that Latino performance has often been a medium of preserving heritage and inculcating younger generations in customs, mores, and values. It can provide spiritual leadership and social support for Latino/a communities. Furthermore, he argues, Latino/a performance and has provided “a space within the public sphere to negotiate and rehearse shifting social mores and internal conflicts” (153). Issues of identity, changing identity, unity, division, and difference can all be brought to the table and discussed in a public setting. Thus, latinidad can be focused upon in an intimate setting that still allows for large groups to participate.

Theatre is also extremely useful to the exploration of latinidad because theatrical performance typically requires difference, conflict, and negotiation. Latinidad encompasses multiple different beliefs, opinions, and ideas, many of which contradict each other. Latinidad also can refer to the very differences between groups and individuals. Theatre works well for the presentation of latinidad because drama requires conflict; there must always be another perspective than that from a protagonist. Multiple perspectives are necessary for dramatic conflict to exist, and thus, if latinidad is invoked in a theatrical setting, it has less chance of being essentialized. Even if a theatrical text seeks polemically to represent one idea or approach to latinidad as preferable, correct, or better compared to another, that other still must be in some way present. Usually, the more equal the opposing forces in theatre, the more interesting the dramatic action. There is thus the potential for layered discussions of latinidad, incorporating many forms
of difference, and proposing many different possibilities for resistance, support, affinity, reconciliation, and representation.

Finally, theatre is a medium of interpretation and reinterpretation. Because theatre is a collaborative art, many perspectives and energies must be added and focused on a work before it is realized on the stage. Producers, directors, designers, dramaturgs, and actors can all lend their different ideas and expertise to the creation of a performance. Also, theatrical texts can be interpreted again and again; a subject, a character, or theme can be revisited with new twists and arguments, whether from day to day, or year to year. The possibilities for reinterpretation in theatre are useful for the ever-changing conventions, arguments, and developments in relation to latinidad.

Although my training is primarily within theatre, performance studies, as an academic discipline and mode of inquiry, will also be important to my discussion. Latinidad exists and is enacted within informal as much as formal performance; performance studies has broadened the definition of performance so that everyday action and non-dramatic forms may be included for study and analysis. Secondly, much of the best scholarship on latinidad is possible thanks to performance studies and its acknowledgment of the value of non-archival documentation and presentation. Thirdly, through performance studies, theatre can transcend many of its old barriers and take on new meanings, functions, and relationships between its practitioners and audiences.

The first part of my thesis will take stock of latinidad in its multiple meanings and applications, acknowledging my subject position outside of my subject matter. Because I am not Latina and am a newcomer to Latina/o studies, it is important to begin with an
introduction to the term and a review of the ways it is used by a range of scholars and artists. It is always important to consider who is making claims about Latinos/as, and who the intended audience or witness for such claims is. Juan Flores writes that

*distinguishing between interior and exterior perspectives is [. . .] a necessary step, and given that in the case of Latinos the outside representation is the dominant one, any instance of cultural expression by Latinos themselves may serve as a healthy corrective to the ceaseless barrage of stereotypes that go to define what is “Latino” in the public mind (185).*

One way to think of representations of Latinos/as from the dominant perspective is *latinidad from above.* This phrase carries a reminder that Latinos/as are a marginalized group and considered “others” compared to a “norm,” namely, white, Anglo-Saxon, male, heterosexual, middle class subjects. *Latinidad from above* is usually a hegemonic discourse, a strata of representation and practice that strategically keeps the interests of the dominant class in a position of unmarked privilege. The complementary term, describing, as Flores says, “cultural expression by Latinos themselves” is *latinidad from below.* *Latinidad from below* can be an event for Latinos/a audiences only, providing affirmation and pedagogy for communities, and/or a counter-hegemonic move, attempting to address and work against racism, sexism, and other social injustice in a wider public sphere. However, this is not to say that any event related to latinidad on the part of non-Latinos/as is bad or incorrect, nor that every cultural act by Latinos/as is good or correct; furthermore, these two categories are not mutually exclusive. The ideas and participants in both perspectives on latinidad can overlap, crossover, and change. Also, for those who are do not wish to assume that every non-Latino/a perspective on or expression of latinidad is oppressive, those who are interested in thinking of Latinos/as as
not essentially marginalized and thus not always on the bottom, or those who wish to include perspective from those who are non-Latino/a but who are not served by hegemony, and thus not from above, the terms latinidad from within and latinidad from without might also be used.

It is my hope that this thesis will be an example of latinidad from without. That is, this introduction to and discussion of latinidad, and then my analysis of latinidad in a dramatic text, will not reinforce hegemony but have a place with other scholarly works on latinidad and Latina theatre. I have a subject position of white, heterosexual privilege and make no identity claim to latinidad; however, I am interested and inspired by the discussions that take place through latinidad, especially as they pertain to issues of gender. Many Latina performance texts have become important to me because of their sophisticated, layered, and exciting work in disturbing and transforming gender stereotypes, formulations, and binaries. These works resonate with me greatly and provide excellent examples and models for radical feminist and queer feminist critiques and ideas. I share an affinity with these works and believe that they have the most to offer when understood as Latina works through the lens of latinidad.

I will now outline the chapters of the thesis. Chapter One will focus on the ways in which latinidad names problems and negative experiences of peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent living in the United States. My first concern will be the important discussion of what to name this group, a discussion which has been shaped by the interests of both latinidad from above and latinidad from below. The history of the terms used to describe those now often named Latino/a, and the arguments for and
against them, provide an instructive introduction to latinidad; the term itself contains processes and moments, and includes similarity, difference, contestation, and unification.

I will continue with an exploration of \textit{latinidad from above}, and reflect upon the consequences of assumptions that Latinos/as are one group despite the many vast differences between peoples and individuals. I will look at the specific racism and stereotypes that Latinos/as face, which is helpfully termed \textit{tropicalization}, by Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silberman. After exploring the ideas behind tropicalization and noting some examples of everyday racism that Latinas/os might experience, I will then turn to two forms of racism, which may or may not be more subtle and/or difficult to identify and address: \textit{intellectual multiculturalism} and \textit{corporate multiculturalism}.

I will then turn to negative experiences of \textit{latinidad from below}, or experiences of latinidad that stem from members within the Latino/a imaginary. How is a proclamation of understanding or similarities between different Latinos/as coming \textit{from} Latinos/as different from those that come from the outside? It is not only American hegemony that makes assertions on what Latino/a is and ought to be. Desire to be included in the Latino/a imaginary, or not associated from the group troped as different and less-than-American, can be passionate and lead to decisive action. I will discuss issues of assimilation, nationalism, and race, as well as hierarchy among the different ethnicities. I will give examples of how Latinos/as struggle with each other over the definition of Latino/a, and how different communities include/exclude each other. I will also address burden of authenticity, especially how it functions within the arts and popular culture.
Chapter Two will begin to explore latinidad in positive terms; I will generally focus on *latinidad from within*. Drawing on two important texts, *Tropicalizations*, edited by Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, and *Latino Cultural Citizenship*, edited by William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor, I will ask what might this Latino/a imaginary be, and why might it exist? On what grounds can positive things come out of it? How does a Latino/a imaginary physically come to be a Latino/a community? How do people come together despite vast differences? Can those differences be addressed or must they be ignored or erased for the sake of unity? I will give examples and interpretations of each. I will explore different ideas on how latinidad, as a term, is used to speak to these issues. I will give examples of groups and individuals finding a sense of self and the impetus to act based on their experiences and conclusions of latinidad.

I will then address how latinidad relates to the idea of “borderlands,” a name for the geographical locations in which cultures intertwine and clash, and a name for an interpretive approach to hybridity in communities and individuals. I will generally focus on the latter, engaging such terms as hybridity, liminality, transculturation, and *mestizaje*. Within borderlands theory, latinidad becomes many things simultaneously: a site for negotiations, a description of multiple identities, an explanation of being both and neither, and a love (or at least an acceptance) of being in-between or in the third space. How might a Latino/a find not only an affirmation of self and impetus to act despite the tropicalization from the outside, but also create affirmation and inspiration by using that tropicalization? How can stereotypes be turned around and claimed? How might latinidad enable a Latino/a not only to function *despite* American hegemony but to
change it directly; or, in other words, how can latinidad transform what is considered American? In considering these questions I will explore the term self-tropicalization, or re-tropicalization, and give some theatrical examples that use it.

The second part of this thesis will deal with how latinidad is invoked, used, and discussed in theatre, specifically in a play entitled Prodigal Kiss. In this play, Caridad Svich confronts and portrays latinidad on multiple levels. After a brief introduction to the playwright and a summary of the play, I will foreground my analysis with the conceptual framework offered by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Sternbach’s book Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance and Identity in U.S. Latina Theatre (2001). In this work they lay out four types of politics: the politics of representation, identity, location, and affinity. These will help organize the different ways that I see latinidad at work in the play. Through these four types of politics, I will show how all the characters of this play go through the process of becoming Latino/a. This involves events that happen to the characters, and the actions and reactions they choose during the course of the play. How they choose to perform their identities and negotiate with each other in their given circumstances contrast greatly, which provides a multiplicity of differences and a complicated discussion on what it means to be Latino/a, what Latino/a communities can look like, how Latinos/as can support and damage each other, and several options for how to continue performing Latino/a identities. The play incorporates many different aspects of latinidad, both positive and negative, both from above and below.

In my analysis of Prodigal Kiss, I hope to show how latinidad can be a helpful and insightful window when attempting to understand Latina contributions to theatre. It
is a concept and lens through which non-Latino/a scholars can begin to understand Latina theatre. This is because latínidad is not an essential definition of what it means to be Latina/o, what Latinas/os value, or how they express themselves; nor is it without problems and complications. However, if taken as a name for a multi-dimensional scheme of problematics and experiences, if taken as a conceptual, liminal framework that deals with both the hegemony’s historical dealings with a people, the people’s own diverse articulations of themselves, and then the third spaces where the former two are mixed and spun into new formations, then latínidad can be an excellent tool for understanding Latina theatre and performance, and a tool for increasing diversity and exchange among Latina/o and non Latina/o scholars and artists.
CHAPTER 2

DESCRIPTING DIFFICULTIES:
CONTRADICTIONS AND TENSIONS IN THE TERM LATINIDAD

In this chapter, I will examine latinidad as a description of damaging processes and experiences that Latino/as face. The sources and causes of this kind of latinidad are complicated and can be found both in Latinos/as and non-Latinos/as. The first problem that latinidad addresses is the experiences of specific racism that people of Latin American and Caribbean descent endure. However, latinidad also carries with it a reminder that those experiencing this racism are vastly different people, and peoples, in terms of race, culture, nationality, and values. Many times, they bear little or no resemblance to one another. In fact, this very experience of racism can often be the first thing such peoples or individuals have in common. How they are a group, why they are a group, what characteristics the group has, and what kind of actions the group takes, are all deeply contested and debated.

It seems useful to begin this exploration of latinidad with one important illustration: the large, ongoing, and changing debate over naming the people with heritages in Latin American and Caribbean nations. It is almost an epitomal example of latinidad; naming is an essential part of identity. A group cannot exist without a name,
yet the names used are constantly inaccurate in actually describing the group. Names speak to and of real people; they also speak of ideas about those people. A specific term applied to a group will often imply a reason why the group exists, or a characteristic they all share. Also, the arguments for and against each proposed term imply definitions of what it means to be Latino/a, from both inside and from outside Latino/a communities. Names may often be indexical in that the ideas invoked by them actually say more about the one who is using the term than the people he or she is trying to name. Official and unofficial names have come into use outside and inside Latino/a communities; no term has yet satisfied all parties. The term latinidad includes the processes of proposal and contestation, the stakes involved, and many historical moments of importance. By using the term latinidad, the impossibility of a fixed definition is acknowledged.

The term “latin,” (or “Latín”) was prominently in use since the 1920s and signified anyone and everything that had Latin American, Caribbean or Spanish roots. It often referred to music, especially Brazilian and Caribbean music, which were widely popular among the mainstream American public. “Latin” also referred to characters in movies that were considered “south of the border,” with special attention paid to latin beauties and latin lovers. That term in now generally defunct.

In the 1960s, the terms “Chicano” and “Nuyorican” began to circulate in Mexican-American and New York Puerto Rican communities respectively. These self-imposed names were part of each group’s political activism and were often very empowering. Because the Chicano movement was so large, sometimes Latinos/as without an actual Mexican heritage embraced the term. While each of these terms has
survived, neither is embraced by the United States government or commonly used among non-Latino/a people.

More prominent in common usage now is “Hispanic.” This term generalizes and erases Latinos/a difference just as much as “latin”. “Hispanic” also refers to Spain, implying a Spanish origin, rather than Latin American one. It became popularized by the Reagan administration (1981-1989), prominently endorsed in census taking. Activist groups and scholars have fought ferociously against this term, as it lumps so many different peoples together and assumes that they have a Spanish affinity or heritage. This is well explained by Teresa Córdova in “Power and Knowledge: Colonialism in the Academy”:

The term Hispanic lumps groups together without articulating their histories. Their histories and cultures are no longer relevant as they are submerged into something called “Hispanic culture.” Government agencies, marketing firms, and Hispanic Magazine are the definers of Hispanic culture. All of a sudden, everyone is Hispanic: Europeans, Sephardic Jews, white South Americans, and Filipinos (27).

The term Hispanic also neglects Latino/a individuals’ current national affiliation—the United States. Often, Latinos/as who have been in the United States for many generations (perhaps going back far enough before the country existed) do not wish to be grouped with people they consider foreigners. However, “Hispanic-American,” which does acknowledge where a person currently resides, is still problematic, as Hispanic, a term that is often considered racial, stands in place for a country designation.¹

¹ Of course, the terms Asian-American and African-American contain similar dilemmas.
The term Hispanic American

uses racial categories as ethnic ones when it comes to people of color. In other words, Italian-American and Hispanic-American are treated as equivalent categories, although the latter includes Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban American, and a dozen other national groups” (Noriega, 46).

So, when a person is called Italian-American, a listener knows that that person’s ethnic heritage lies in Italy. When a person is called Hispanic-American, this can mean any number of country affiliations and is thus unsatisfactory to those who seek an ethnic distinction. However, while that problem may be solved by designating all Latinos/as by their national heritages, i.e. Chilean-American, Uruguayan-American, etc., all those terms are still problematic in that they imply that one is not quite American but *American-except-for-this, or American-plus-this.* This type of designation is also less useful for Puerto Ricans, who may define their “American” status quite differently than other Latinos/as, whether they reside in the United States or on the island. This was the very problem that the terms Chicano and Nuyorican attempted to solve; many people still feel that these terms are successful. However, appropriate parallel terms have not been put forth for less prominent Latino/a national communities, such as Peruvians, Salvadorans, Uruguays, etc. Whether because of verbal clumsiness or their peoples’ lesser numbers and representation, terms such as Venezuelan-American, Brazilian-American, Haitian-American, and Dominican-American, etc., are rarely used in everyday common verbiage, regardless of whether these groups wish to be specifically identified thus or not.

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2 The term Mexican-American has been especially lambasted by important Chicanos/as such as Luiz Valdez and Gloria Anzaldúa.
There are non-Latinos/as, both on the inside and the outside of the hegemonic class, that look upon this naming debate with confusion, not understanding why Latinos/as want (or have the right) to hang onto their separate affiliations. They might have thoughts like *My parents (or grandparents, etc.) gave up their country of origin; why the new option?* Blanca Silvestrini writes that while American cultural citizenship begins with the premise of welcoming outsiders, the newcomers are expected to “become part of the national community by joining the mainstream through a process of assimilation” (47). Non-Latino/a Americans may assume that since everyone has an ethnicity, all issues regarding ethnicity can be understood by everyone, creating an “ethnic paradigm” which reduces “the histories of racialized peoples (such as African-Americans and Puerto Ricans) to an immigrant analogy based on the experience of so-called European white ethnics (Irish, Italians, Jews, etc.)” (Laó-Montes, 11). The problem is, while most everyone the United States is, by heritage, an immigrant, their respective immigrant histories are not all similar. This ethnic paradigm refuses to acknowledge that “unlike earlier waves of European immigrants, Latinos move to this country as a direct result of the economic and political relationship of their homelands, and home region, to the United States” (Flores, 188) as well as the histories and cultural memories of slavery, conquest, and exploitation that these immigrant groups carry. When Indians, Blacks, Latinos and Asians fail to meet the expectations set up by the European immigrant ethnic paradigm, the white core proclaims a failure within the racial group itself, justifying and furthering racism (Noriega, 46).
“Latino” or “Latino/a” has become the preferred term for scholarship. It was proposed by Latino activist groups of the 1960s, however, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Stenbach write that the term did not truly gain currency until the late 1980s (92). While this term obviously does not explain or designate ethnicity or nationality any more than Hispanic, “Latino/a” is less damaging and more useful than “Hispanic” because of who coined the term and what reasons were behind its creation. Although non-Latinos/as may rarely understand the difference, “Latino” is not a more politically correct replacement for “Hispanic.” It is not simply a name for all people of Latin American and Caribbean descent; it is also not a self-imposed name for lumping all nationalities together. It does name a group of peoples, but the characteristics that qualify membership in the group are not essential but circumstantial and active. They are a group because of their current situations, and because they choose to be a group. It is a term created by Latinos/as specifically to assist unification—because they are different people, they are not yet united. The term begins that unification. Teresa Córdova writes that it was created to bring together people with similar histories which contributed to people’s socio-economic positions today: “By identifying their similar histories, they establish a term for mutual coalescence,” (27).

However, although racism can be experienced by Latinos/as of any class or race, not all Latinos/as share similar socio-economic circumstances, which can create as many barriers and divisions as different nationalities and ethnicities. Furthermore, Latinos/as do not all share similar histories with each other; the difference between the histories of Cuban exiles and other Caribbean nations should be sufficient demonstration. Racial
divides, class boundaries, and differing norms and beliefs about gender and gender roles also prevent unification. And, of course, neither unification nor the term “Latino/a” is settled, as is shown by Juan Flores:

Where I come from, in New Mexico, nobody used Latino, most people never even heard the term. We’re Mexicanos, Chicanos, Mexican-American, Raza, even Hispanic, but never Latino. Anyone who comes around talking about Latino this and Latino that is obviously an outsider, and is most likely trying to push something (183).

Debate within various communities and individuals continues on which term is the most appropriate and how terms should be used. Like the creation of the name Latino, the term latínidad was created to take into account the diversity of people and ideas associated with peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent. It was meant to include the good and the bad, the unification and division, and the influences, people, and actions from outside and inside the actual group(s).

It is, of course, useful to remember that this debate exists because these people need a name; “American” is not sufficient. They are different; they are something other than “the norm.” The fact that they need a name, and the naming action, mark their difference. It is hardly disputed that any individual or group that does not bear the characteristics of the American hegemonic class, namely, white, male, English speaking, European, and heterosexual, will experience some form of “othering” while living in the United States. While this gives all people not privileged by the processes of hegemony some things in common, such as feelings of invisibility or lack of security, the ways in which different people(s) experience this “othering” vary dramatically. The stereotypes

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3 Literally, “La Raza” means “the race”. Chicano groups of the 1960s used this term as a call for unity and action.
about various races and nationalities, and the socio-economic circumstances that various peoples and individuals face, are vastly different. Latinos/as are certainly not the only group that holds more diversity than common hegemonic views expect. For one example, Native Americans are often considered one group despite their many nations. However, the phenomenon specific to thinking of Latinos/as as one group, and the racism, stereotypes, and problems that they face, together create processes and events of latinidad as formed by hegemonic forces. This can be understood as *latinidad from above*, as it indicates a process that keeps a certain class of people in a dominant and advantaged position. Racist acts, damaging events, and the performance of stereotypes and harmful ideas can be understood as *tropicalization*. The word tropical is helpful in identifying the specific set of fictions pushed upon Latinos/as; as it describes a common American way of thinking about Latin America. The racism that Latinas/os face often has roots in a conscious or unconscious assumption that they come from, or are genetically and culturally linked to, tropical paradises. Tropical paradises, from the perspective of American non-Latinos, have been pictured as hot places of plenty, where normal standards of restraint, law, and order, do not apply. Tropical paradises are thought of as holiday playgrounds for eating, drinking, sleeping, dancing, romance and sex. Latinas/os, conflated with these ideas about the tropics, are troped as over-emotional, simple, available for consumption, and inherently sexual. Simultaneously, the tropics have also been considered slow, backward, poverty-stricken, corrupt, and full of disease. They are thought to be lacking in civilization. Thus, Latinas/os are thought of as stupid, uneducated, poor, lacking principles, sinister, and dirty.
Like all forms of racism, tropicalization grows out of “Anglo (or dominant) projections of fear” (Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, 8). For example, Frances Negrón-Muntaner writes that large bottoms on Latina bodies make white people very uncomfortable; in Latina bottoms, white people see and fear excesses of food, (violating their values of restraint and the cult of the thin) excrement (violating standards of modern-day hygiene), and sex (192). Because of these fears, Latinos/as are more often judged by their bodies, and assumed to be lazy, greedy, dirty, and sexual. Caridad Souza writes of instances of her personal experiences of racism: when visiting friends as a child, she had to prove to the parents of the household that she was not “that kind of Puerto Rican”; the parents feared her and the influence she might have on their children, assuming that she was dirty, naughty, and sexual simply because she was Puerto Rican (118).

It is important to note the heavy gendering involved in latinidad from above, and the kind of consequences it can bring. Both Latinas and Latinos are often assumed to be inherently sexual creatures, playing specific gender roles. In “Domestic Violence against Latinas by Latino Males,” Jenny Rivera reports that one reason that this kind of abuse is rarely stopped by non-Latino/a Americans can be found in the common assumptions of Latinos as over-emotional and violent. They believe that Latinos/as are inherently so and that nothing can be done to stop the problem. Also, neighbors and police dismiss the abuse as acceptable and expected to Latino culture and refuse to interfere (260, 262). Also contributing to the problem is the pushing of Latinas into either side of the virgin/whore dichotomy, which stems from the widespread assumptions of Machismo,
American patriarchal hegemony, and dehumanization of the colored female body (260-263). Young, virginal girls still "belong" to their fathers and wives belong to their husbands; neither have legal rights. They are seen as submissive and without desires of their own, other than to please their men. Independent women, whether unmarried, divorced, or in some 'other' category, are seen as "whores" and thus not worth protecting. If a female demonstrates desire (sexual or not) she is considered deviant and not entitled to community respect. Machismo and its many sexist facets were not invented in the United States; they exist prominently in countries that were part of the Spanish conquest. However, the gendering of both Latinas and Latinos is rampant within American mainstream art, popular culture, and in the minds of individuals.

These stereotypes and values do not simply appear; they are created and heavily promoted through official and unofficial means. The history of and current relationships between the United States government to the governments of Latin American countries play a key role in contributing to the formation of latinidad from above. Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman write that these works of discourse and culture are distributed among official texts, history, literature, and the media, thus circulating these ideological constructs throughout various levels of the receptor society [. . . ] (Tropicalization) is intricately connected to the history of political, economic, and ideological agendas of governments and of social institutions (8).

From the early treatment of indigenous people, to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, to selective economic and military interventions in Latin America, heavily influencing the success and failure of certain business, diplomatic, and revolutionary endeavors, the United States government has not respected the sovereignty of Latin American and Caribbean nations. Latin America has been viewed as incapable of government and
“development” in economic, industrial, and cultural senses. Paternalism, sexism, and racism can all be seen at work in the events and documents of culture surrounding them. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez provides an excellent demonstration of some of these documents in the first chapter of José, Can You See? A cartoon from the Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger in 1923 depicts the entirety of Latin America (obviously not acknowledging the separate nations within) as a young beautiful woman, complete with Spanish mantilla and fan. Uncle Sam leers at her from above with the caption, “My How You Have Grown!” (24-25, see Figure 2.1). Thus the United States is seen as male sexual aggressor and Latin America as young, welcoming female. Another cartoon from the Columbus Dispatch in 1902 shows Uncle Sam spoon-feeding a black baby meant to represent Cuba (26-27, see Figure 2.2). Here, a Caribbean nation is not only seen as young but infantile, helpless and needing to be taken care of. Sandoval-Sánchez also writes that the 1940s advertising campaign featuring Chiquita Banana (using a parody of Carmen Miranda) brought the idea of “Latin America as a female, as a banana, as a commodity,” to every American household (29). Equating the female body with ripe fruit, and giving the fruit/woman a voice that only spoke, with a highly stylized dialect, of how good it was for both parties involved when she was consumed, perpetuated many layers of assumptions about Latina availability and sexuality. Also, FDR’s Good Neighbor policy, with its need to “safeguard foreign markets and sources, and to guarantee profitable investments ‘south of the border,’” led to a huge conglomerate of cultural relations and exchange programs, including intense encouragement of tourism in Latin America, boosting the popularity of “Latin” music (including tango, samba, rumba,
and conga), and the making of several “Latin-themed” musicals and movies, including Disney’s *The Three Caballeros* (30-31).

It is with such large corporate schemes and highly visible cultural events that I now turn to more recent examples of *latinidad from above*. As the fastest growing minority in the United States, Latinos/as are becoming more visible within mainstream culture. For example, while in the 1950s the only well-known Latino television actor was Desi Arnaz, in 2003, George Lopez has his own sitcom on ABC, Miguel Ferrera has a leading role on *Crossing Jordan* on NBC, and Frankie Muniz stars in *Malcolm in the Middle* on Fox. Latinos/as of all classes are part of the American consumer culture and are often catered to as a specific market. As many Latinos/as are a part of corporate America, they are often involved in deciding how to approach this market. Although overt racism is alive and well in the United States today, these examples of *latinidad from above* that I will now discuss are often unwitting in how they perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce tropicalism. The very event of representation within a consumer market is often equated with respect, a “nod”, or “making it” in an American Dream sense. Occasionally these examples, whether in advertising, pop culture, or high art, are considered (by the dominant classes and occasionally by Latinos/as) non-racist, or even as overt attempts to celebrate Latinos/as, award them sentience, accept them as full Americans. This is a common occurrence under the banner of *multiculturalism*, wherein it is believed that Latinos/as can and should be incorporated into the American mainstream. People believe that increasing diversity in the United States is a positive factor of change. Well-intentioned proponents of multiculturalism have been known to argue against the
“melting pot” theory, which encourages different peoples to assimilate, thus “melting
down” their immediate differences in order for their valuable core to be donated to
society, vouching instead for a “salad bowl.” This metaphorical theory holds a hope that
the increasing numbers of different races and cultures will automatically change what is
accepted and expected as “American.” Multiculturalism, when put it into practice, rarely
resembles this latter description; it is a highly complicated and problematic enterprise. I
want to mention two major ways in which it leads to negative experiences of \textit{latinidad
from above: intellectual and corporate multiculturalism.}

Intellectual multiculturalism describes a process that can take place inside
individual’s minds, or in the policies of large institutions. It resembles the ethnic
paradigm, in that a member of the hegemonic class, or any non-Latino, assumes that he or
she can understand and speak to the Latino/a experience.

It must be acknowledged that intellectual multiculturalism is a problem that can
present itself only after minority subjects and perspectives are acknowledged. This
dilemma has been neither addressed nor solved in many places and institutions all over
the United States. Only after a minority presence is felt and deemed worth talking about,
will members of the hegemonic class have the impetus to assume that they might
understand or speak for minorities. For the sake of charity, credit may be given for at
least the desire to understand, for the acknowledgment that there is something to
understand. However, once this place has been reached, intellectual multiculturalism can
replace a desire for actual inclusion.
Far too often non-Latinos/as speak for and about Latinos/as (and other minorities) without the proper amount of listening, knowledge, and, then, understanding. Intellectual multiculturalism is premised in an academic function: learning by the time-honored tradition of analogy. Often, people who have some or many of the privileges of the hegemonic class assume that a similar experience or marginalization that they have had (as female, as a person of color, as homosexual, as a foreigner) can be translated into immediate, first-hand understanding of latinidad. Another problem is the idea that Latino/a academic discourse can be mastered as quickly as a political movement, cultural/philosophical ideology, or mode of criticism, might be mastered and criticized. By using multiculturalism as a reason to “get” a few terms or authors under one’s belt, individuals degrade Latino/a discourse, and Latino/a studies as its own discipline, as just one more lens through which to view the world, no more or less useful than anyone else’s. Because multiculturalism insists on a plurality, and assumes that all are equal, it can be used to dismiss the very cultures it originally hopes to help, by giving a minority explanation, or an entire discipline such as Latino/a (or Jewish, African-American, etc.) studies, only so much room at the table. Minorities are considered legitimate speakers, but only as they speak to their own experiences. The critical race, gender, class (etc.) theories that minority disciplines bring to intellectual dialogue can be dismissed as “only for you” or “only for them.” Through intellectual multiculturalism, a person might believe that a blatantly hegemonic article or idea is logically, ethically, or morally sound because it speaks to the author’s experience, which is “just as legitimate” as those of

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4 This problem is illustrated by Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman in “Obscuring the Importance of Race: The Making of Comparisons between Racism and Sexism (and other Isms).”
minorities. That a certain group of people's experiences, actions, and opinions, have a strategically kept position of privilege remains unexamined. Intellectual multiculturalism can be used to prevent ideas from being subjected to racial, gender, or class criticism; it allows all to speak, but does not require anyone to listen. Latino/a studies may be dismissed as a passing movement or historical ism, not as a tool with which to rethink one's own scholarship (or scholarship in general), actions, or views of the world, oneself, and others.

Intellectual multiculturalism often manifests itself in tokenism. It is like a pie on the Trivial Pursuit gameboard: there is one slot for each color; everything must be represented within that one slot. While some classes and anthologies exist for the sole purpose of immersing a student in different Latino/a texts, more often than not, Latino/a discourse is "represented" through one "canonical" text. For example, in the Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama, Luis Valdez and El Teatro Campesino's Los Vendidos, a specifically Chicano text, will speak for all Latino/a theatre. The burden of representation can also happen to individuals. Minority students or office workers may be expected to speak for their race or ethnicity in classroom or in team-decisions at work. In hiring procedures, only one minority faculty or staff member may represent or prove the diversity of the faculty, and the concern for having diversity will be considered solved.

Intellectual multiculturalism is, expectedly, prominent in academia. Teresa Córdova writes how it often creates the problem of paternalism. Non-Latino/a academics silence Latinos/as by trying to speak for them. "Trust us. You can't participate, but don't
worry; you are our protectorate; we will take care of you; we will make sure things are done in your interest, though you don’t have the right to sit at the table and be involved in defining that interest." (31). If they believe they have “mastered” latinidad—if mastering it means understanding all Latino/a experience and interests—non-Latino academics may attempt to officially define what “minority” or “Latino/a” is, and structure their “multicultural” moves in ways that are unproductive and unfair. Ruth Behar writes of how the university where she teaches refused to hire her “as a Latina,” firstly because her Jewish heritage counted her as European, and secondly because her Cuban heritage caused her to be counted as economically privileged (234). In her situation, “Latina” was defined as non-white and underprivileged; because of her Jewish and Cuban roots, she was deemed non-Latina. Also, when non-Latino/a academics assume that they have latinidad quickly “under their belts,” they often believe that certain discussions can be concluded too quickly; they believe that facts are established, all individuals in the room are on the same page, and they motion to “move on,” inevitably to topics that put hegemonic issues as the focus (Grillo and Wildman, 45-48). Under the banner of multiculturalism, minority opinions and issues are assumed to be “dealt with” in a fair and timely manner, and, as a result, dominant interests remain on top.

Intellectual multiculturalism is not limited to academia; it can take place in any individual’s mind and understanding, and often in the most well meaning minds. Corporate multiculturalism is even louder and more visible. It is difficult not to see latinidad from above exercised by corporations through popular culture. Corporate

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1 I have put this passage in italics because it is in italics in the published essay.
multiculturalism is less deep in its thoughts and views on diversity than its intellectual sibling. Its goal is not to be fair, or to grant certain individuals a place or a voice. It is not a matter of a political correctness, or an important new idea or historical development that all well-informed and educated people should know. Corporate multiculturalism has little need to justify or explain itself; all the motives are perfectly clear—a profit can be made here. Corporate latinidad (that is, corporate multiculturalism as it applies to Latinos/as and ideas of Latino/as and Latin America) exists and grows simply because there are people who will consume products that are marketed as having Latin American/Caribbean—tropical—qualities. It is especially prominent in the food, clothing, and entertainment industries. Corporate latinidad caters to both Latino/a and non-Latino/a audiences. Companies hope to give Latinos/as “what they want,” marketing the types of products that this “community” will automatically identify with or embrace. Meanwhile, they hope to give non-Latinos a taste of the “exotic,” offering “diversity” in readily available products.

U.S. corporate attempts to appeal to Latina/o audiences can be seen most prominently in Spanish-speaking cable channels such as Univision and Telemundo, and Latin-formatted radio stations. Both have sets of celebrities and programming that are entirely their own, though the products advertised on the networks are generally identical to those in English-speaking media. One genre of show that is very important for Spanish-speaking television is the telenovela, which resemble soap-operas less than melodrama. Whereas soap-operas focus equally on many characters through multiple and ever-changing plot lines, telenovelas generally follow one honorable protagonist
through one, finite story. Programming on these television stations tends to be transnational rather than U.S. Latino ethno-specific, because importing shows and actors from other countries, such as Mexico and Venezuela, is cheaper, and because other Latin American countries’ audiences make greater potential numbers than those at home (Dávila, 28). Latino/a communities and individuals differ greatly on whether these venues make them feel comfortable, interested, or well represented. At the very least, the stations’ existence and success indicates that, firstly, that there are enough Latinos/as in the United States to support such stations, and secondly, that there must be enough willingness and/or satisfaction on the part of various Latino/a, Latin American, and Caribbean groups and individuals to keep on consuming the products.

In “Talking Back: Spanish Media and U.S. Latinidad” Arlene Dávila argues that Spanish-speaking, Latino/a-oriented media undoubtedly contribute to a consolidation of a “common Latino identity among different Latino subgroups” (25). However, she also believes that because of the insistent assumptions of these media of what Latinos/as are like, and who and what they want to see and hear, discord (perhaps preexisting) between the groups rises and is voiced in their different perceptions and opinions about these media. The discord includes both hierarchies and stereotypes that Latinos/as push upon each other. Dávila noticed in her study of interviews among New York Latinos/as that her subjects “alternately praised or criticized” various pieces of culture based on how they, from their specific ethnicity and culture, saw the piece commenting on the growing power and visibility of specific Latino/a groups: “Most of them felt that the stations were geared only to audiences in the West, not to them, inasmuch as they featured ranchero
music, Mexican artists, and soccer” (27). She also noticed that those Latinos/as who had been longer in the United States and Hispanic Caribbeans were far more aware and concerned about issues of race than others were. Those who had been in the United States for many years expressed dissatisfaction with the overwhelming whiteness of the actors on the networks; those who had spent a few years here were concerned that the only black characters on screen were generally domestic servants and usually from the Caribbean. Those that were new to the United States, however, did not speak nearly as much about issues of race (28-29). When exploring the different identifications between ethnic groups, the participants troped each other with stereotypes, such as several individuals claiming that Dominican and other Caribbean cultures were the hot, sexy, vulgar ones, while their South and Central American countries were more reserved (31). Dávila also observed that no matter how much Latinos/as differed in their opinions and identifications of Spanish-speaking media, there was still an unspoken consensus that this media was claiming to speak to all of them. They understood that the media claimed to represent them all of them; they knew that they were all grouped together, at least as potential consumers of this culture, which was not the consumer audience of the mainstream. Dávila writes,

After all, all comments were made in terms of a generalizable Latino culture, bringing to the forefront the fact that despite all their critical assessments of the U.S. Hispanic media and their representations of Latinidad, participants ultimately identified themselves with the same category that merged them into that “Other” Latino that everyone had been trying so hard not to be (35).

These opinions and exchanges of Latinos/as are examples of *latinidad from below*, or *latinidad from within*, which will be explored further later. However, in this instance, the
conversations were begun by cultural events of corporate latinidad; the values expressed coincide perfectly with tropicalization. *Latinidad from above*, especially corporate latinidad, will always carry the power to speak to and influence large groups of people.

An excellent example of popular latinidad that caters to both Latino/a and non-Latino/a communities is the case of Selena Quintanilla Perez, a small-town girl from Texas who became a celebrity, gaining fame and success as a singer and sex symbol. She began singing Tejano\(^6\) music, but eventually became successful across diverse genres, including “Mexican *rancheras* and *cumbias*…German polkas, Afro-Caribbean rhythms, and mainstream U.S. pop, hip-hop, and country western,” (Paredez, 64). Furthermore, while Selena never hid her Tejana heritage, she became popular with many different communities, spanning across different Latino/a heritages and nationalities, and crossing over into the white-dominated mainstream: her records and image consumed by many white people as well (Paredez, 64). One reason of her seemingly infinite marketability was Selena’s unabashed selling of her “exotic” qualities: her dark skin, voluptuous body, and hypersexual costumes and performances. This played perfectly into hegemonic assumptions about sexy Latinas. Some critics mourn her public image, seeing her as prostituted to a *tropicalization from above* and ultimately damaged as a sentient speaker, as well as damaging to Latinas in general. However, one might also argue that Selena was simply celebrating and using what was naturally hers and her profit from this use calls into question the idea of her as a victim.

\(^6\) Tejano/a means Mexican-American, or Chicano, from Texas.
Just as various Latino/a communities had Selena’s music in common, they also found a reason to unite after Selena was shot to death at the age of 23 in 1995, by the head of her fan club. Vastly different communities of Latinos/as made public performances of grief. This unification was taken advantage of by corporate industries, seeing the mourning fans as an obvious market demographic. Deborah Paredez writes,

Mainstream, representational and corporate forces capitalized on Selena’s posthumous iconization, invoking her as a means for increasing profits by tapping into the Latina/o market and for reinforcing the borders of America...numerous corporate forces acknowledged Selena’s tragedy as a way to inform Latina/os that they could become American only by becoming consumers (65).

From the albums to the plethora of merchandise bearing Selena’s name and image, to the feature film and musical about her life, corporate latinidad was enacted with a vengeance as great numbers of people, for a multitude of reasons, consumed this Latina. Corporate latinidad was shown to be extremely successful as the consuming of products associated with Selena was considered a performance of identity—in this case, Latino/a identity.

One term that has been used to describe the proliferation of “latin” elements in popular culture is latinization. In her book Megapolis, Celeste Olalquiaga uses this term to explain the increasing permeation of elements of Latin American culture into the United States as a direct result of “imports” of Spanish-speaking immigrants, adding that latinization is stronger in areas where the concentration of said immigrants is higher (76). Her examples of latinization are the increasing use of Spanish words, such as “nada”, in colloquial American slang; restaurants such as Bayamo and Benny’s Burritos, the Caribbean and Brazilian influenced phase of the music of David Byrne, and the films La Bamba and Crossover Dreams. For her, latinization explains only corporate latinidad
from above, and is always fragmented and occasional; it rarely occurs in a concentrated, organized movements.

While Megapolis was written in 1992, the term latinization and Olalquiaga’s explanations are useful when thinking of the “Latin Explosion” of 2000. Stemming mostly from the popular music industry, a handful of new celebrities emerged who all had a heritage in Latin America. Despite their many differences, the phrase “Latin Explosion” immediately grouped all of them into a “Latin Other” category. Puerto Rican sex symbol Ricky Martin, who threw Spanish phrases into his English songs and included Salsa dancing in his videos, was thought of as similar to the Spanish and emotive Enrique Iglesias. Jennifer Lopez, Puerto Rican and raised in the Bronx, rocketed to a solo career of films and albums after portraying the much-mourned Tejana Selena on screen. Olive skinned and voluptuous, Lopez has often played on her “exotic” qualities in order to sell more records and movies. However, petite, slim, pale, and blond singer Christina Aguilera, who spoke no Spanish when her career began, was also included in the “Latin Explosion,” although she has not maintained many “Latin” elements in her public image.

The case of Lopez is interesting in demonstrating corporate latinidad, as a marketing strategy to reach all people of Central and South American and Caribbean descent, and also as a useful identity strategy initiated by Lopez. Both instances claim Latinas of different nationalities as similar. Frances Negrón-Muntaner writes that Lopez was an ideal choice to represent Latinas in general because of her “medium” status. “Embodying idea “Latin” beauty…that is, neither too dark nor too light—the Puerto
Rican label doesn’t seem to stick to her even in the white media” (183). She writes that Lopez’s previous successes in Hollywood were far more important than the specificities of her Latina heritage; if she had already gotten work, if she had already pleased multiple audiences, then she could do it again. “The bottom line was that, as the hottest Latina actress in Hollywood at the time, Lopez was picked so she could deliver in the language every backer understood best: dinero, mucho dinero” (183). Some members of the media (many of them Mexican-American), however, objected to Lopez being chosen, claiming her unfit for the role based on her New York, Puerto Rican upbringing, which was so different from Selena’s. Here a chasm between Latino communities and their representation opened up. While this objection ironically ignored the fact that Selena herself performed many styles that she was not born and raised into, Lopez herself made an even more interesting defense. She “argued that she was well-suited to play Selena because they shared an ethnic identity as Latinas beyond their ‘national’ identities...Lopez said, ‘Selena and I are both Latinas and both had the common experience of growing up Latina in this country. This was good enough.’” (Negrón-Muntaner, 183). This statement is an excellent articulation of latinidad; Lopez insists that she and Selena are similar based partly on both being of Latin-American and Caribbean descent, but moreso because of the experiences that they inevitably shared from the American hegemony’s reaction to them, regardless of their different heritages. It is also important to note the professional survival strategy included in Lopez’ defense:

“Latina,” in this case, does not refer to a cultural identity but to a specifically American national currency for economic and political deal making; a technology to demand and deliver emotions, votes, markets, and resources on the same level as other racialized minorities,” (Negrón-Muntaner, 184).
It is in Lopez's best interest to claim that the differences between Latinas are less important; her film was being marketed to all Latinos/as; she (and all those promoting her) needed more than just Puerto Rican or Mexican numbers to boost ticket sales. In order to get work, she needs to be trusted to represent more than Puerto Ricans alone. And indeed, with the Tejana role far in the past, Lopez has since played a gypsy for her "Ain't It Funny" music video and an Italian-American in the film *The Wedding Planner*. She has recorded duets with African-American rappers Ja-Rule and LL Cool J, adopting an African-American pop style of singing, and has also clung tightly to her own ethnicity and upbringing with her single "Jenny from the Block" in which she claims, "No matter where I go, I know where I came from." During an interlude in the song, a back vocal uses a slang term that means Puerto Rican: "Boricua...boricua's in the house" (Lopez, 2003).

I will now leave *latinidad from above* and focus on some negative experiences of *latinidad created within* Latino/a communities. I have already mentioned several instances of this, such as the in-fighting and stereotyping between individuals and groups. Another example is the conflict over the naming of Latinos/as; it is worth returning to. Naming oneself is difficult; naming one's group even more so. Naming a group that is immensely large, constantly changing, and that holds virtually no essential characteristics, is certainly impetus for a charged discussion. No matter how narrow the boundaries of a claim of *latinidad*—I am Latina and these *are the characteristics that make me Latina; this is my latinidad, or latin-ness*—or wide—All Latinos share these things; this is who we all are, and thus our *latinidad*—there will inevitably be other
Latinos/as (more likely many of them) who will disagree. This might be articulated as my latinidad differs from yours so greatly. I question your right to call it latinidad or what you have articulated as our latinidad does not apply to or include me (or so-and-so) and you have excluded me. While “Latino/a” and “latinidad” were coined with the specific purpose of including difference, people express latinidad in concrete ways (i.e. language, music, cooking, theatre, etc.) that cannot encompass every difference. These expressions are performances; they are specific behaviors, symbols, and messages that refer to life experiences. Latinidad cannot remain abstract. When Latinos/as perform their own latinidad, as individuals and as groups, it can be thought of as a clamming cultural citizenship. In doing so, Latinos/as are engaged in belonging to a group, position, and perhaps place. They are engaged in stating their rights, of claiming what is their own, of defending it, and of drawing sustenance and strength in that defense… a key element of cultural citizenship is the process of ‘affirmation’ and the community itself defines its interests, its binding solidarities, its boundaries, its own space, and its membership—who is and who is not a part of its ‘citizenry’ (Flores and Benmayor, 13).

Even if it is only one person’s performance, claiming cultural citizenship means drawing on and connecting to others, no matter how subtle or fragmented the messages and invocations may be.

As the quote from Flores and Benmayor articulates, because expressions of latinidad cannot remain entirely abstract, they also make specific claims on what makes a citizen, which creates boundaries and limits. No matter what motivates a performance of latinidad, no matter how inclusive or empowering its goal, the possibility for exclusion is always present, which can be damaging to other Latinos/as.
One famous example of this is in Luis Valdez' widely successful theatre and media work in furthering the Chicano movement. Beginning with the National (later United) Farm Worker's strike in 1965 and the formation of El Teatro Campesino (ETC), Valdez went on a creative mission to inform, empower, and entertain Chicano audiences using subject matter that was essentially theirs. Chicano identity and heritage were central to their shows and messages. By utilizing theatre, workshop, education, and rally formats, latinidad was given a formal space to be enacted and observed. El Teatro Campesino consciously performed what it meant to be Chicano; they dealt with work-oriented circumstances of the community, stories and folklore of their heritages, hegemonic symbolism that caused problems for them, and strategies for survival, resistance, and affirmation. By placing their Latin-ness as the lens through which to evaluate their situations and actions, El Teatro Campesino performed and allowed audiences to perform their latinidad.

Valdez made one of the biggest splashes ever seen from a minority in the theatre world and his work also extended into film and television. In addition to getting lots of attention from mainstream press for his own groups and their messages, Latino theatre groups multiplied all over the country thanks to Valdez's example. However, as important as Valdez and El Teatro Campesino are for Chicano and Latino history, and although their performances of latinidad were useful in many ways, they also performed exclusion and harm for others: namely, Chicanas. Several scholars have attacked Valdez and the ETC's claims of Chicano latinidad as they excluded women as equals in their enterprises. Yolanda Broyles-González writes, "the effort to address raza and the reality of
of *raza* as a whole somehow precluded a special consideration of women’s roles and
problems” (1986, 165). In other words, the groups to address issues for an entire race or
people erased issues that pertained to one half of the people, privileging the males’ issues
as “universal”. Although she acknowledges positive aspects of the ETC’s work to
empower Chicanos, Broyles-González emphatically states that women’s roles in ETC
productions were constantly boring, two-dimensional, and written along the lines of the
virgin-whore *dichotomy* and archetypes. “The deplorable representation of Mexican and
Chicana women is a chronic weakness and signature of Luis Valdez’s mainstream
productions” (1994, 160). Heavily informed by Broyles-González, Aída Hurtado also
writes of Valdez’s inability to see women as three-dimensional, which caused him to
refuse actresses various roles based on how their physical appearance corresponded to
traditional stereotypes of women (405-406). Elizabeth Salas has also criticized Valdez’s
assumptions that his understanding of identity and empowerment of Chicanos allows him
to speak for Chicanas, citing his “old-fashioned” analysis of *soldaderas*\(^7\) and defense of
his choice of how to represent them in a television special in 1983. Valdez said that “the
idea of a woman who went out and cooked for her man on the battlefields reminds me of
the campesina woman who goes out and works with her man and still cooks. I think that
it is a tribute to the power and strength of the Mexican woman, not to her oppression”
(quoted in Salas, 118). Valdez, in charge of creating a television special featuring and
celebrating the Mexican musical tradition of *corridos*\(^8\), had no qualms about his ability to
represent women based on his view of latinidad. He assumed that his Chicano

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\(^7\) A *soldadera* is a female soldier who served during the Mexican Revolution. They were wives, mothers, cooks, carriers of gear and ammo, as well as skilled warriors.

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experiences, knowledge, and identity were the essential definition of Chicano latinidad; he did not take into account that latinidad could have a very different side that he had not experienced. And, because the medium of Valdez’s work was formal performance, the actresses/actors and the audiences involved may have experienced exclusion and silencing because of his claims on latinidad.

Some of the most painful problems with \textit{latinidad from below} exist in the hierarchies and prejudices that exist between different Latino/a ethnic, national, and political groups. I have already mentioned several examples of these, such as sexual profiling of Caribbeans in Arlene Dávila’s interviews, and the sexual and moral profiling of Puerto Ricans in the \textit{testimonio}\footnote{A Chicano genre of ballad singing.} of Caridad Souza. In another \textit{testimonio}, Inés Hernández Avila writes that she feels silenced and exiled because the two groups represented in her mixed blood, Mexican and Indian, resent and look down on each other. When each heritage degrades the other, she feels she cannot belong to either or both communities (239-241). In “Art in América con Acento,” Cherríe Moraga reveals a resentment towards certain Latinos “who firmly believe that they can integrate into the mainstream of North American life” (214). One can almost see her curled lip as she describes these Latinos/as who are more European and higher class, who “stand under the U.S. flag and applaud George Bush for bringing ‘peace’ to Nicaragua”(214). She then reveals that she is speaking not of characteristics belonging to just some Latinos, but specifically Cuban-Americans: “They hope one day he’ll do the same for Cuba, so they

\footnote{\textit{Testimonio} is an autobiographical narrative, usually given orally, recorded, transcribed and edited. Although it has an uneasy history of unreliable transcribers, \textit{testimonio} has become an important genre of resistance literature.}
can return to their patria and live a ‘North American style’ consumer life” (214). Moraga is describing actions of Latinos/as that violate her ideas of latinidad. These Latinos/as contradict what it means to Moraga to be Latina/o; they work against the ways Moraga believes that Latinos/as should claim agency, build community, and negotiate with hegemonic classes and processes. According to Moraga, due to their beliefs, actions, and their ethnic heritage, these Latinos/as do not belong.

Another great problem in latinidad from below is the question of authenticity. Can one be Latino/a more or less than another, and how much cultural, racial, or ethnic capital does one require before qualifying as Latina/o? In “Temporary Latina,” Ruth Behar acknowledges the problems involved in only allowing Puerto Ricans and Mexicans to qualify for affirmative action at her university, but feels that she cannot campaign for change on this front; she fears that her Cuban heritage, and the historic preferential treatment of Cubans, will erase the historical identity of other Latinos/as (234). This illustrates the view that a Latino/a identity requires certain characteristics: anyone without those particular characteristics who makes a claim to being Latino/a is being unfair, or in some way oppressive. Later in the testimonio, Behar tells a complicated story of her own experience and denial of authenticity, even in an innocent, mistaken setting.

The student, assuming from my name or looks that I was a non-Latina codirecting a Latina/Latino Studies program, had, curiously, expected to share a common bond with me. And I, in turn, had made assumptions about the student’s identity based on her looks and the fact of her participation in Latina/Latino Studies. Sadly, I had played into the racial and racist stereotyping game, and, worse, I had internalized the university administration’s view of our program as a counseling service rather than a serious academic discipline. It hadn’t occurred to me that the student might not have been Latina because I expected that only “a real Latina”
would have intellectual interests in Latina/Latino Studies. Not only did I take it for granted that the student, being brown-skinned, was a Latina, I took it for granted that her color made her more authentically Latina than me (236).

This example illustrates that not only can Latinas/os feel a crises of their own authenticity after clashes with hegemonic ideas of Latino/a identity, but also after dealings with other Latinos/as. Even well-meaning and educated Latinos/as perpetuate definitions of authenticity that do harm to individuals; thus, this is a problem of latinidad from below.

From the world of Chicanismo, Cherríe Moraga gives immediate and specific rules for what qualifies as authentic with statements such as “universality in the Chicana writer requires the most Mexican and the most female images we are capable of producing.” (“Art In América Con Acento” 217) and “An art that subscribes to integration into mainstream America is not Chicano art” (ibid, 218). To be an artist within Moraga’s latinidad, one must deal specifically with personal experiences of being Chicana/o. At the same time, Moraga has also dealt with others considering her work as not Chicano enough. Lesbian and feminist issues are often at the forefront of Moraga’s work and thus less accepted by the Chicano community. Chicano communities expect plays to deal with the family unit, they consider it essential to Chicanismo. Because many conservative Chicanos assume that lesbians are anti-family, or that a lesbian lifestyle is incompatible with the survival of family values, Moraga has occasionally been shunned. When asked about her play Heroes and Saints, which was embraced by the Chicano community, Moraga joked, “Just when Chicanos think I got my politics right, about pesticide poisoning, I go and write another play about dykes” (“Gaze of the Other” 200).
Diana Taylor writes of listening to various audience members’ responses to a performance piece by Denise Stoklos at La Mama’s Annex theatre space in New York in 2000. One audience member liked how Stoklos challenged white femininity; another said the performance was “very Latin American” (11). Another felt Stoklos was too European, drawing on too many European performance traditions and ignoring Latin American issues and references (11). Each response is premised in a belief that Stoklos, a Brazilian, should have had certain characteristics that define her as Latin American, and that she should make that definition clear to the audience. The expectation is that she will perform being Brazilian, or being Latin American. Whether or not Stoklos lived up to those expectations of Latin American-ness was a basis for judging the performance a success or not; whether Stoklos authentically performed, or authentically represented, how the audience members defined her influenced their opinion.

Taylor does not specify each audience member’s positionality of Latino/a or not, feminist or not, homosexual or not, etc. What is important to remember is that these expectations and assumptions of what makes a person Latina/o or not exist in both latinidad from above and latinidad from below. Whether one has a position as a Latino/a or not, claims are often made on one’s own or another’s authenticity as Latino/a or Latin American.

It is now evident that latinidad is an extremely complex term with multiple uses and meanings, which often contradict each other. Furthermore, the very differences between people’s uses and meanings of latinidad are yet another aspect of (or performance of) latinidad. In this chapter, I have explored various types of experiences
and enactments of latinidad that are in some way negative and damaging, though varying in their effects. Often, in many of these instances, Latino/a and non-Latino/a individuals may argue that there is no damage at all. I have also illustrated many of the arguments about and through the terminology of latinidad; it is highly contested and emotionally charged, from the naming of Latinos/as to the vocabulary of racism. However, latinidad is also not confined to negative experiences and problems. As several examples have begun to illustrate, latinidad can be a point of empowerment, of comfort, of change, of transcendence, and of unification. In my next chapter, I will explore the many ways in which latinidad is invoked in order to combat problems, provide support, give the impetus for change, reconcile differences without erasure, and balance a multiplicity of identities. Although the positive effects of these experiences will also have a range, and retain multiple complex layers in their meanings and actions, it is very important to examine how the action that is possible through or helped by an understanding of latinidad can be energetic, excited, healing, and transcendent.
CHAPTER 3

DISTURBING BORDERS: LATINIDAD AS A SITE FOR CHANGE

I have now established latinidad as a term that is used to describe a range of tensions and ongoing developments of issues that people of Latin American and Caribbean descent in the United States face. This term can focus on issues between Latinos/a individuals or groups, and issues between Latino/as and non-Latinos/as. In the last chapter, I explored some of the problems and negative aspects (though widely ranging in their effects) of latinidad. One of the major problems, or issues of importance, is the assumption that all peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent living in the United States are essentially similar and have certain characteristics. Latinidad simultaneously acknowledges and contests the idea of Latinos/as as one united group. I also gave uses for several other terms connected to latinidad, such as latinidad-from-above and below, tropicalization,latinization, and corporate and intellectual multiculturalism. I also gave examples of latinidad from below and latinidad from above that were harmful and problematic. Latinos/as are a huge group of people that are increasingly diverse, from nationality, ethnicity, race, and religion, to culture, language, class, and sexual orientation. They are explosively diverse, in that their differences from
each other are multiplying and changing; and they are implosively diverse, in that the many facets, differences and contradictions within individuals are also increasing.

What positive processes, events, and ideas, then, are also included in the term latinidad? When can it be useful, helpful, and empowering to peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent to be a single group? When is it possible to speak of this group of people and not commit a violent and damaging act? Is there anything that they have in common besides experiences of American hegemony? I have already touched on some of the answers to these questions in Chapter One. One example is the word Latino itself: it was coined in order to gather people together, in a supportive and empowering manner; and respond to and present an alternative to other terms. In this chapter, I will describe more ways in which we can speak of a Latino/a imaginary, an idea of what Latinos/are, share, or believe; or a Latino/a community, in which actual people exist. However, the project of theorizing a pan-Latino/a imaginary, or creating a pan-Latino/a community, does not just involve commonalities, but also actions and articulations that work towards unification and, often, embrace difference.

Juan Flores' explanation of comunidad is helpful here; he describes two categories implied in the make-up of this word. For Flores, comunidad = común + unidad. Común refers to what various people do have in common, whether that is culture, lived experience, or anything else. Unidad is what binds the group together; it provides the impetus for the decision to be a group and the self-creation of a group, which is a conscious and empowering act (184-185). By allowing común and unidad to mean and thus entail different things, a Latino/a imaginary or community can find ways to unite
while including many diverse characteristics and choices. Not only can the group be
active in its decision on how and when to unite, it can also respond to other forms of
latinidad, resisting oppression and asserting sentience and creativity. Through new
expressions and invocations of latinidad, Latinas/os can take into account the diversity of
their peoples and individuals from the inside and the troping from the outside, in order to
blend and balance the boundaries and characteristics of their identity(ies) to their own
satisfaction.

Flores writes, “Regardless of what anyone chooses to name it, the Latino or
Hispanic community exists because for this whole stretch of history, and multiplying
geometrically the closer we approach the present, people have moved from Latin
America to the United States” (184). Latino/a communities are real groups of people;
their physical presence in the United States cannot be denied. Flores refers to all
generations and all ethnicities of Latinos/as as the Latino community; for my purposes,
because the idea that all these smaller communities are all parts of a larger community is
an uneasy proposal, fiercely fought for and against, I will generally refer to a pan-
Latino/a group as an imaginary.

What shared characteristics might be proposed for a Latino/a imaginary? One
might start by defining them by what they are not: Latin American and Caribbean
immigrants are not the same as immigrants from Western or Eastern Europe, Africa, the
Middle East, Far East and Southeast Asia. The next step might be to acknowledge that
they are now here, not there: “the legal and “illegal,” the elite and the impoverished, the
bourgeois and the peasant, the educated and the uneducated; they all, in the words of a
pop star, ‘come to America’” (Sandoval-Sánchez and Stembach, 27). American residency, whether long-lived or newly begun, and American citizenship (and/or rights, freedoms, and privileges), whether born into or still sought, are important parts of their identity and lives. Part of this life in the United States involves the lived experience of *latinidad from above*. Although I have already spoken of this at length, it is necessary to note again, here, as something that all Latinos/as share in some aspect. While possible, it is unlikely that a Latino/a will never experience tropicalization in any way. It is even more unlikely, although again it is possible, for a person of Latin American or Caribbean descent who has never experienced *latinidad from above* or tropicalization to identify with a Latino/a community or the Latino/a imaginary. “For the Latino imaginary, even when the relatively ‘privileged’ Cubanos are reckoned in, rests on the recognition of ongoing oppression and discrimination, racism and exploitation, closed doors and patrolled borders” (Flores, 189). Latinos/as have an everyday reality and shared history of oppression and marginalization, which stems partially from the similar histories of their countries’ relationships to the United States, and partially ongoing experiences.

But, again, there are also commonalities between Latinos/as that are not put upon them by others; their similarities are not just reactive. There can be an affinity between Latinos/as, a closeness and identification, that they simply do not have with others. There are some things, possibly inherent but not essential, that simply are there. Juan Flores describes these characteristics thus:

It is important to recognize that the Latino imaginary, like that of other oppressed groups, harbors the elements of an alternative ethos, an ensemble of cultural values and practices created in its own right and to its own ends. Latinos listen to their own kind of music, eat their kind of food, dream their dreams, and snap their
photos not just to express their difference from, or opposition to, the way the “gringos” do it (189).

One way to describe this “alternative ethos” or set of practices, is the term cultural citizenship, which William Flores and Rita Benmayor define as “a range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for Latinos in this country” (i, my emphasis). Cultural citizenship is more helpful than simply “culture,” because, as we have already seen, Latinas/os do not share one culture. There are multiple ways that they make music, eat food, dream dreams, etc. But there is cultural glue enough to believe that the imaginary exists, tightly woven and indivisible; it also could be called an imagined community, borrowing from Benedict Anderson (1983). The term “citizenship” allows for some variety of opinions, functions, beliefs, ways of life, and even (and especially) dissent. Cultural citizenship is helpful for talking about latinidad because it affirms both the commonalties and possible differences within the community.

Because specific examples of cultural citizenship (or cultural capital within the cultural citizenship) from the Latino/a imaginary are so numerous and available, from community functions, family practices, and industries, to artistic and linguistic expressions; and because the debates on authenticity, aesthetics, and how many different Latinos/as may speak for/to, etc., are also just as numerous, I will not dwell on specific examples here. However, a quote from Blanca Silvestrini’s “The World We Enter When Claiming Rights: Latinos and Their Quest for Culture” is helpful to illustrate how the vague yet important common cultural citizenship can lead to action.
“Culture gives us a sense of unity, of connectedness, a vision of our identity,” explains a Latino woman who has played an active role in organizing a political group. “The difficulty is trying to pinpoint what we mean by culture. It isn’t simply language, community, the arts, religion, history... It is a little of each, and all at the same time. We all know what it is but can’t explain it. It makes us closer to our brothers and sisters; it makes us disregard the differences when it comes to the tough things of life; like a unity within the difference” (43).

While there are some inherent and subtle qualities that Latinos/as just “have” in common, these qualities are hard to define. However, these commonalities, no matter how strongly or faintly felt, are enough to encourage the choice to be, or to create, a community, which is a far more powerful and tangible thing. The Latino/a imaginary becomes more like a community when actual people solidify their bond through their wills and choices.

As stated earlier, there is obviously not only one Latino community; also, there have also been many different proposals and ideas of Latino/a imaginaries. From barrios to theatre groups to businesses and activist groups, there are plenty instances where different Latinos/as have come together and formed alliances, families, support systems, and task forces, etc. One reason for this has been urgent need caused by a minority position within a large hegemonic system; David Román writes that “it has been politically efficacious for people from quite different cultural backgrounds and ideological positions to meet and organize under the label of Latina/o and Chicana/o in order to register an oppositional stance to majoritarian institutions (152, my emphasis).

In order to be heard, counted, represented, and active in society, certain differences may be put aside in order to prioritize action to work for the common good. Differences are not focused on; common concerns are. Agustín Laó-Montes describes Latino/a political movements in five categories, four of which are useful here as they
require a downplaying, or a prioritizing, of differences, which inevitably places certain needs and concerns lower on the agenda. *Hispanic Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism* only approve of unification as Latinos/as on a cultural level, citing ethnicity as private, not public. These groups are against affirmative action and see assimilation as Latinos/as best option in gaining political strength (Niuyol, 135-137). Differences between Latinos/as are relegated to different types of cultural expression; incorporating Latino/a differences from each other into public policy is not on the agenda, as incorporating Latino/a difference from the white core is also not on the agenda. In contrast is *Latino Grassroots Populism*, which focuses on local physical projects (housing, education, health care) and immediate problem solving from within Latino/a communities (134-135). Immediate individual needs are met, and then moved on from in order to serve more individuals. *Latinamericanist Vangaurdist Radicalism* rejects the current system of United States politics as useful in bringing about change, and seeks revolutions that can be begun here and brought back to Latin America (137-138). This tends to enforce difference along ethnic and national lines, depending on where they hope revolutions to take place. In *Ethnic Keyensianism*, the most widespread form of Latino activism, focus is placed on potential voters, booming markets, and receiving all the benefits of citizenship in American society. Here, Latinos/as are not seen as very diverse; they are seen as powerful numbers. Acknowledging that much power in society is economic, both *Hispanic Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism* and *Ethnic Keyensianism* can use, influence, and work with corporate latinidad in order to further their respective agendas.

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10 Laó-Montes includes the Neoliberals and Neoconservatives in one category.
For *Hispanic Neoliberalism and Neoconservatism*, corporate latinidad is useful in that, by introducing more “Latin” products and culture, Latinos/as have the freedom to easily embrace their community (or ethnicities, heritages, etc.) through consumerism, in the privacy of their homes, thus feeling personally fulfilled and able to leave their latin-ness at home and out of politics or the workplace. For *Ethnic Keyensianism*, returning to Deborah Paredez’s analyses on Selena is illustrative. One of Selena’s websites used rhetoric highly reminiscent of the 2000 census, urging fans to “Show everyone you were counted.” Given the widely publicized problems faced by official Census 2000 takers to count Latina/os, the site’s conflation of Selena commemoration with the machinations of the census carries significant symbolic value for many Latina/os…the website suggests that Latina/os can “get counted” and thereby proclaim their growing numbers through (an affiliation with) Selena. Ultimately, the site’s pairing of Selena with the Census not only configures the space of Selena’s memory as a safe and affirming place to register Latina/o presence within America but also demands that America take notice of the most often ignored and disenfranchised segments of Latino/a communities (72).

Here, a website is thought to have a power similar to corporately driven pieces of popular culture: Selena’s music, image, movie, and other merchandise. While fans may have performed their cultural citizenship or their mourning of Selena by purchasing products that invoked her, here they were encouraged to do the same through participation on a website. In addition to simply being a market big enough to make companies take notice, this site articulates an idea of political visibility through it and its use of Selena.

While political organization can cause erasure of differences and devaluing of individual needs and agendas for the sake of furthering the group’s, there is also the hope that when groups of people work together for change, they will find that they have more and more in common. Working and spending time together allow ideas and beliefs to
mesh, blend, and improve each other. Individual needs and agendas can become more similar and inclusive, and thus there will be increasingly more reasons to keep going; there will be more common goals to work towards. Examples of this can be seen in the civil rights movements and Third World Feminism, as described by Chela Sandoval:

Activists of color involved in the civil rights, antiwar, Black, Chicano, Asian, Native American, student, women’s and gay liberation movements saw themselves as bonded, despite distinct and sometimes contradictory aims and goals, in a coalitional form of consciousness opposed to dominating powers and oppressive racial and social hierarchies. By 1971, grassroots organizations of “U.S. third world feminists” began to form across the United States, bringing together women of color who, in spite of severe differences in historical relations to power, color, culture, language, gender, and sexual orientation, were surprised to recognize in one another profound similarities (356).

Certainly, if diverse people can unite in order to make improvements in their lives, there are certain benefits that can be gleaned from allowing differences to be overlooked or temporarily forgotten, in order for commonalties to surface and grow.

However, there are also groups of Latinos/who make connections and alliances while simultaneously, consciously attempting not to erase, forget, or devalue differences. They can unite for the sake for political activism and fighting hegemony, like the other groups already mentioned, but also keep differences on the front burner as a constant point of reference. One example is Laó-Montes’ fifth type of ideology for Latino/a activists, Latino Radical Democratism, which is less of an organized movement than a tendency towards collective action to achieve freedom and justice at all levels of social life. This ideology attempts to remain autonomous from the state or hegemonic systems, and consciously accepts and embraces a plurality of political identities (Niuyol, 139-140).
Sometimes groups can come together for the sole purpose of coming together. There are many reasons for Latinos/as to examine the intricate and complex details of why they might come together. This can lend itself to a discussion of how they can come together, or come together more closely or more often. They also might come together for the very sake of examining their differences. Even without a political or physical goal to achieve within American society, or a specific form of oppression or hegemony to resist, it can be joyful, healing, and empowering for Latinos/as to join forces as different people. Most importantly, coming together to look at difference lends itself to addressing problems, hierarchies, and oppressive actions within the Latino/a imaginary. Basically, groups can create themselves by embracing and articulating latinidad, in all its complex processes and instances, as their organizing principle.

An excellent example of this kind of group formation through a conscious articulation of latinidad is the Latina Feminist Group and their book *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist “Testimonios”*, published in 2001. The members of the Latina Feminist Group are scholars in higher academia that came together first as small study groups. Those groups then evolved into larger regional and national meetings, with the purpose of collaborating and building a kind of coalition. Concerns about academia, scholarship, racism, sexism, feminism, and many other issues were the focus of the book. However, quickly they found themselves “limited by traditional academic approaches, which, in the move toward comparison, tend to simplify, aggregate, and reduce experience to variables” (Introduction, 2). It was difficult to create definitions or establish premises, partially because of the great diversity in the ethnicities, classes, races, and political
ideologies among them. They had mistakenly assumed that they understood each other simply because each was Latina and a writer (10). They realized that “new hierarchies could develop even within Latina feminist projects” (5). Nevertheless, they strove forward to articulate, confront, and embrace their differences in order to create a truly safe and equal space of dialogue: “We struggled against privileging certain aspects of Latina identity so as not to limit full participation by everyone” (10). Taking their cue from other feminists of color, the group decided that an emphasis on personal experience (as opposed to, say, canonical literature, research interests, or related fields of study) would be useful in troubling traditional boundaries and legitimizing different subject matter, genres of writing, and ways of knowing (4). *Telling to Live* evolved out of many sessions of storytelling and oral history collecting, as well as theorizing, disagreement, and debate. The book was ultimately formed through the articulation of *testimonios*, which offered “an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community” (Introduction, 3). When differences were worked with, rather than ignored or set aside, then those aspects which were shared among the group became all the more apparent and the groups’ bond was solidified: “*testimonianto*...generated renewed energy and deeper trust” (Introduction, 12). The results were not only firmly cemented friendships and an exciting and well-written book, but the creation of latinidad as a useful, helpful, empowering process and state of being—and not only for individuals but for a group: “In a parallel manner to the way that Rigoberta or Domitila’s narratives speak not for the individual but for the experience of a community, we see our stories as expressing the lives of many Latinas in and out of the academy” (Introduction, 20). Even
as they took great care to allow differences to be seen in plain light, there was a sense of
transcendence: emphasis on personal experience did not prevent empathy or agreement.
This was a step toward the accomplishment of a pan-Latina project, which can be one of
the most noble uses for latinidad.

The Latina feminist group embraced the diversity of the group and the diversity
within individuals. Their methods, with coalition building as their goal, were discussion
and testimonio. Another way to incorporate difference, without the goal of coalition but
simply to free the individual to move about in whatever physical and emotional spaces
they reside in, is called borderlands theory, or La Frontera. Borderlands are both physical
spaces (geographical locations) and a mind-set and method of choice. In them, all sorts
of cultures (including non-Latino/a ones) are embraced, but on new terms; they become
combined and balanced with each other in whatever ways that the speaker chooses.

An important text for this theory is Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,
by Gloria Anzaldúa, published in 1987. This work is incredibly helpful in articulating
how a borderlands ideology can be useful in negotiating a complicated Latino/a identity.
Although Anzaldúa was not the first to work with such ideas and terms, her book has had
tremendous influence on Chicana/o and Latina/o theory and practice. In it she
simultaneously claimed each of her heritages and refused to allow any of them to rule her
or dictate her identity. She rejected the pull to assimilate into white culture and betray
her Mexican and Indian heritages, yet at the same time she also rejected anything from
those heritages that she saw as damaging or limiting.

I abhor some of my culture’s ways, how it cripples women, como burras, our
strengths used against us...I can understand why the more tinged with Anglo
blood, the more adamantly my colored and colorless sisters glorify their colored culture’s values—to offset the extreme devaluation of it by the white culture. It’s a legitimate reaction. But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me (43-44).

For Anzaldúa, supporting her people, embracing and proclaiming herself as Mexican and Indian, was not and could not be antithetical to her white identity and American citizenship. Resistance never meant rejection. Anzaldúa insisted that she was, and would continue to be, all three at the same time, even when the cultures contradicted each other. This was her reality, to juggle multiple identities, choosing to be, not be, and address any aspect of her cultures that she pleased.

The subtitle of Anzaldúa’s book, “The New Mestiza” is a reminder that, of course, she did not coin the idea of or term mestizaje. This term has been long used in Latino/a and Latin American history, first used an explanation of a “new race” created after the Spanish Conquest and the mixing of indigenous peoples, various waves of European immigration, and African slaves. The “new race” was thought of as not white, not indigenous, not black, but a sort of brown mix. Mestizaje was “an imposed term, a currency coined for Spanish and criollo convenience and privilege” (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 18). While the term was appropriated for empowerment, self-definition, and nationalistic purposes long before Anzaldúa, she gave it a further use and explored the possibilities of active rather than passive hybridity. Rather than simply assuming oneself to be mestizo/a because one is Latino/a, Creole, nor not-black-not-white, etc., the individual can choose both (or more) cultures, nationalities, races, and perform them in whatever way he or she finds to be the most true.
What I want is an accounting of all three cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own brick and mortar, and my own feminist architecture (Anzaldúa, 44).

While hybridity may once have been thought of as a given, something one is born into, it now becomes constructed (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 6). Constructing and/or performing mestizaje insures that it is not a name or a category, but an ideology and a practice. Chela Sandoval explains how the ideology, which can be called “la consciencia de la mestiza” moves into action:

La consciencia de la mestiza is born of life lived in the “cross-roads” between races, nations, languages, genders, sexualities, and cultures: It is a developed subjectivity capable of transformation and relocation, movement guided by the learned capacity to read, renovate, and make signs on behalf of the dispossessed in a skill that Anzaldúa calls “la facultad” (359).

While La Frontera can be thought of as an abstract theory, there are, of course, many “cross-roads” that are very much physical spaces in which people of many cultures reside, work, clash, and play in every day. It is because of bordertowns, such as Juarez, where the blending of cultures is so commonplace, that the idea of mestizaje as method becomes abundantly clear. Because of the undefinable nature of places like Miami, worlds unto themselves in their intense mixing and negotiation of different elements, we can arrive at more abstract meanings and uses for terms like the “cross-roads,” “borderlands” or “intersticios.” Whether physical or abstract, they are liminal spaces, which are not here or there but both and thus new. When la facultad is utilized, those spaces are claimed and owned by the individual, ever changing and evolving, growing
and receding, but undeniably belonging to her or him. Although it can be thought of as a "third" space, it is never entirely separate from the first two. Articulating and performing latínidad with *la facultad* is not an invention but a reinvention. It acknowledges not only roots, but multiple sets of roots; it never cooks from scratch but from an array of raw and prepared materials.

Another term for the idea of blending and mixing cultural elements that is extremely compatible and very helpful to scholars, theorists, and critics is *transculturation*. It was first coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940, in his book *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. He suggested transculturation as an alternative to *acculturation*, which deals only with the process of one culture being changed into another, and its many repercussions. Ortiz's project was to describe Cuban life, history, and culture through the complex transmutations of many different peoples that had come to the island. He believed that this "blend of races and cultures overshadows in importance every other historical phenomenon" (99) because "all (Cuba's) classes races, and cultures, coming in by will or by force, have all been exogeneous and have all been torn from their places of origin, suffering the shock of this first uprooting and a harsh transplanting" (100). It is essential to remember that transculturation is a painful and traumatic process; however, it is inevitable when people move or are moved from one place to another. The process can be asymmetrical in the degrees by which the various cultures are glorified, proliferated, oppressed, erased, and appropriated. It was important to Ortiz that elements of all present cultures were recognized as existing in the later

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11 "The consciousness of the 'mixed blood'" is Chela Sandoval's translation.
generations' lives. These elements may be adopted by those who did not have them previously, or changed and adapted by any party. Even if a people is obliterated, even as one culture may dominate or traumatize another, each culture present is never erased entirely: “the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from each of them” (103). Transculturation can be invoked to look toward past historical processes\(^\text{12}\) or at the processes of now.

Because transculturation emphasizes blending and denies total annihilation of any one party, it can be useful to methods of La Frontera. Transculturation can happen to groups of people, but also to individuals. It can be inevitable processes forced upon people, but also choices that people can make and perform. One can passively be transculturated by uprooting, enslavement, education, etc.; however, transculturation can also be active. It can also be thought of as a way to claim all the multiple cultures surrounding an individual. The individual may insist, firstly, that he or she retains pieces of several parent cultures, secondly, that he or she can do whatever the like with those pieces, and thirdly, that she or he may add whatever new elements from new sources that they choose. Transculturation can provide options of taking action: performing one’s identity, pushing for change in relationships and situations, and avoiding a loss of self. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Sternbach write, “the positionality of transculturation is about resistance and subversion, and not about passivity and

\(^{12}\) Such historical processes have often been the uprooting and enslavement of peoples, societal violence, and class struggles. For an excellent explanation of several people who have expanded on Ortiz’s term (such as Angel Rama, Nancy Morejón and many others) and how it blends with La Frontera, see Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach’s *Stages of Life*, 16-33.
assimilation” (21). Thus, to embrace one’s transculturated past, roots, or upbringing, or to transculturate the current various cultures surrounding, nurturing, and demanding action of the individual, can be seen as another way to use la facultad. In this sense, to transculturate is to embrace mestizaje or to enter the borderlands. Privileging transculturation in modes of inquiry

calls into question the notion of homogenous, mononational identity [...] border identities are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed as the unitary concept of national imaginary communities disappears [...] Thus transcultural subjectivity emerges in a border identity when the subject is hybrid and transnational in cultural and linguistic terms (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 33).

Thus, using transculturation, borderlands, or La Frontera, as an organizing principle, or, to use Chela Sandoval’s phrase, using mestizaje as method, can be not only helpful but liberating, exciting, and empowering for individuals and groups.

Margaret M. Montoya’s “Máscaras, Trenzas, y Greñas: Un/masking the Self

While Un/braiding Latina Stories and Legal Discourse” gives an excellent example of how choosing transculturation was empowering for her everyday life. She writes of her early childhood and her mother tightly braiding her hair before school saying, “I don’t want you to look greñudas,” (uncombed) (58). The strict braiding ritual was a defense strategy against assumptions that her daughters were dirty simply because of their “Spanish” heritage. Also, Montoya’s mother’s weaving of Spanish and English together was another way that she helped her daughters to understand and negotiate their hybrid lives:

I heard my mother saying something that went beyond well-groomed hair and being judged by our appearance—she could offer strategies for that scrutiny. She used the Spanish word partly because there is no precise English equivalent, but
also because she was interpreting the world for us. The real message of greñudas was conveyed through the use of the Spanish word—it was unspoken and subtextual. She was teaching us that our world was divided, that They-Who-Don’t-Speak-Spanish would see us as different, and would judge us, would find us lacking (58).

While the mother knew that life would be difficult for her daughters because of their Latina difference, and wanted them to be able to navigate through the white-dominated world, her use of Spanish in explaining how the world works told them not to erase that difference, or pretend it did not exist. However, Montoya did not learn the lesson of weaving both heritages together until after many years of attempting to hide her heritage. She altered her behavior as much as she could in order to remain “undetected”. For the sake of avoiding trouble, rather than blending her white and Latina identities, Montoya silenced herself: “Presenting an acceptable face, speaking without a Spanish accent, hiding what we really felt—masking our inner selves,” (59). These were relatively successful defenses against racism in that they prevented several unpleasant situations; however, she now believes that such strategies are ultimately damaging. “When we attempt to mask immutable characteristics of skin color, eye shape, or hair texture because they historically have been loathsome to the dominant culture, then the masks of acculturation can be experienced as self-hate”(60). Although she still considers herself an “outsider,” she now has better and healthier strategies for dealing with that status, which involves removing the obscuring masks of self-denial.

For Outsiders, unmasking is a holistic experience: I do not have separate masks for my femaleness and Latina-ness. The construction of public persona involves all that I am. My public face is an adjustment to the present and a response to the past. Any unmasking resonates though the pathways of my memory (60).
In addition to blending her personal identity, in both public and private persona, Montoya encourages others to follow her example and unmask; it is clear that she believes certain methods can be effective for large numbers of people, not just isolated individuals. She recommends using Latina autobiography as a discursive format in legal discourse and weaving Spanish into otherwise English-dominated turf.

We can reject the dualistic patriarchal masks that we shrank behind and seize instead our multiple, contradictory, and ambiguous identities. As we reinvent ourselves we import words and concepts into English and into academic discourse from formerly prohibited languages and taboo knowledge. The disruption of hegemonic tranquility, the ambiguity of discursive variability, the cacophony of polyglot voices, the chaos of radical pluralism are the desired byproducts of transculturation, of mestizaje. Our conceptual trenzas, our rebraided ideas, even though they may appear unneat or greñudas to others, suggest new opportunities for unmaking the subordinating effects of legal discourse (61).

For Montoya, transculturation and mestizaje are synonymous; she works with the trauma and injustice of her past, as well as new and exciting ideas, and experiences and expertise she has received, and emerges whole—multi-faceted and whole. Her acceptance and embrace of multiple worlds simultaneously changes those worlds. Her insistence on plurality within the whole locates her squarely in La Frontera. She also emphatically dismisses previous worries on how she appears to others; this implies that others will, in fact, see her. Her transculturation is not simply for private empowerment. She intends for others not only to see her new public self but the method behind it. She will transculturate in order for others, both Latina/o and not, to see, experience, and accept it.

In addition to sampling, choosing, or blending aspects of one's many cultures, there is also the option to alter them. While one may embrace or reject symbols, ideas, or practices from their culture, they can also change slightly or dramatically to suit their
hybrid identities and lifestyles. Sometimes, the claiming and altering of a part of an ideology or culture can take it to its logical conclusion or extreme; other times, it might no longer resemble what it looked like in its original form. One example of a prominent symbol that has been infused with new meaning is the figure of Malintzin (also known as Marina or Malinche) from Mexican history, mythology, identity, and emotional memory. Malintzin, the mistress and translator of Cortez, is traditionally thought of as a whore and traitor, a raped mother of a new race. Instead of accepting Malintzin as a victim, many historians, writers, and Chicana feminists have revisited her, claiming kinship with her, seeing her as a role model, a guiding figure. She is not submissive; she is an intelligent, acting subject. She is not a sexual victim, but a sexual being. She is neither unwitting nor servile in her actions; she is crafty, clever, and practical in the maneuvering of the men around her. She is also a mother, and proud of the mestizaje that became possible through her (Alcarón, 278-297).

Altering the symbol of Malintzin, who is generally known only to those who have knowledge of Mexican culture and history, is an example of applying la facultad to latinidad from below. Latinas’ transculturated performances of Malintzin speak generally to those who have prior knowledge or expectations of Matlinton that can be spoken speak to. I will now turn to examples of La Frontera and transculturation that speak also to non-Latinos/as and to the hegemonic class. Living in the United States, being subjected to its government, education, and consumerism prevents a complete and total separation from the hegemony; although one may be marked as an outsider, one can never be detached. No matter how much a person is defined by difference from the
norm, she or he cannot live completely apart from that norm. However, it is not only possible but helpful and empowering to acknowledge the larger hegemonic realm, and act within in, negotiating directly with its usual symbols. These next examples of performances will involve appropriation of symbols that are usually considered owned by hegemonic culture. The speakers claim a liminal, sentient space, consciously incorporating the “heritage” from the outside—the latinidad from above—into their performances. Latinidad can be furthered, or at least strategically complicated, by taking into account also all those characteristics troped from above—even those that are so often damaging and false—and claiming and revising them in the performance of identity. In dealing specifically with tropicalizing symbols, la facultad can reject essentialism (racial, gendered, etc.), embrace and accept whatever characteristics that an individual Latino/a chooses, and then adapt and change those characteristics until a hybrid, liminal satisfaction is achieved.

Celeste Olalquiaga advocates this kind of cultural action, naming it Latin American post-industrial pop or Latin American post-modern parody. As mentioned in Chapter One, she argues that the proliferation of Latin elements into American mainstream culture, latinization, is a fragmented and hegemonic process. One alternative to this is culture that is produced for Latinos/as by Latinos/as; Olalquiaga writes that this alternative is nostalgic and a “cultural hindrance” that “has kept the majority of Latino communities from developing” into a more sophisticated and less insular position from which to create art and culture (81). However, in a third, more aggressive and sophisticated type of art, Latin American post-industrial pop, Latinos/as self-consciously
address the fact that they are being “recycled” by mainstream culture and reclaim the stereotypes and re-recycle themselves. For one example, Olalquiaga cites a trio of astute Mexcians who, under the guise of being “authentic Aztec dancers” make a living from the gullibility of tourists in Niagara Falls. These “authentics” manage to capitalize on the belief that Latin America is a “primitive” culture by practicing a sophisticated cultural transvestism that allows them to become what they are expected to be without the schizophrenia it usually engenders in the First World. Their ability to benefit from the icons of themselves by putting them on stage for a profit goes a lot farther in undoing racist clichés than most theoretical deconstructions. By appropriating such icons and manipulating them at will, popular culture demonstrates its unequaled mastery in recycling, the game only a high-culture postmodernity was supposed to play (89).

When dealing specifically with images and ideas proliferated by latinization or *latinidad from above*, the performance of reclaiming and revising of those images can also been called *re-tropicalization, self-tropicalization*, or *tropicalization from below.* In her essay on re-tropicalizing language and literature, Frances R. Aparicio explains the process of self-tropicalization as U.S. Latinos/as engaging in discourse as recirculating particular “tropical” signifiers with newly invested meanings, at times liberatory, at others potentially oppressive in their ambiguity. Thus, U.S. Latinos/as wage a discursive war by resisting, opposing, rewriting, and subverting stereotypes. In this process, they tropicalize themselves—already tropicalized Others—assuming new discursive power as linguistic subjects (Sub-Versive Signifiers 195).

In many ways, it is at this point that non-Latinos are most directly invited to be included in the audience. Self-tropicalization is speaking back to *latinidad from above* using its own language; it speaks about hegemony using a vocabulary that the hegemonic class understands. And it is in this way that a message can be startlingly clear that the hegemonic ideas, history, and processes are wrong, both in the sense of missing the mark and in an ethical and moral sense. Of course, Latinos/as will not always be saying that,
and the messages will not always be clear. As Aparicio writes, it is possible to be
“potentially oppressive” of oneself and others with self-tropicalization; what may be
intended as parody, ironic, or embracing may still seem to silence the speaker or
audience, or place them in jeopardy (195). But no matter how a Latino/a comments upon
the tropings from above, his or her choice to act upon the stimulus is a refusal of passivity
and a refusal to allow anyone else to define him or her.

It is not randomly that these final examples will be taken from formal
performance settings. The medium of theatre (and/or performance art) is incredibly well-
suited to re-tropicalization. First, because of its instant connection to living people: the
bodies of actors become living symbols, their voices and movements speak multiple
languages and types of rhetoric; also the audience members see, hear, and experience the
performances; they are forced to receive propositions and situations that will affect them.
Second, because formal performance exists in its own time and space, it lends itself more
quickly to abstraction from the “real” world, and presenting an alternative world in its
place. This allows events to happen that would not or cannot happen in real life. It
creates an entire reality, where new rules, symbols, and values can be set. Even
absurdity, or strategic absurdity, can become reality. The stage is an excellent space for
asking, what if this happened? what if I say that? what if I want this? and for proposing
discussion. While many mediums can propose discussion or suggest using new symbols,
formal performance goes ahead and uses symbols, leaving the audience to figure out how
they feel and how they must now interpret those symbols. Audience members are
absolutely expected to respond in some way, to participate in some way, whether as
witnesses, actors, or something else. Infusing symbols with new meanings is very possible in theatre and performance art; it can be incredibly useful to disturbing of old ideas, mixing them with new ones, and allowing a group of people to participate.

The first example is Stuff, written and performed by Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante. In a highly sophisticated and complex manner, they explore, claim, reject, and comment upon the ideas and practices of consumption and tourism, especially as they pertain to Latinas of many nationalities. Postcards, an imaginary pleasure cruise, enactments of “sacred” indigenous rights, physical and metaphorical representations of food, and then a “training” session for audience members on how they should conduct themselves when traveling, are all incorporated into the show. The pulling of audience members to take part in the “sacred” ceremony and the Travel Tasters training session are especially important, as the audience must also play an active role in buying and consuming Latinas. As the Travel Tasters are selected from the audience, they are given the identities of various consumers:

EEE JONES. For this evening’s first event, you are going to be an economist in search of authentic precolombian food and music. Your name is Francois [. . .] You were orphaned at birth and you just found out that you’re Cher’s cousin. You want to train as a medicine woman. Your name is Wanda Desert Flower [. . .] You’ve been wanting to quit smoking for ages and are ready to try anything. Your name is…um, Bert [. . .] You’re a creative consultant for the Body Shop and you’re eavesdropping on my seminar. Your name is Tippy O’Toole (114).

A wide variety of reasons for consuming Latinas is given here; consumers may believe their actions are entirely innocent, noble, random, or self-interestedly calculated. That each member of the audience will have to participate in the next segments of the play,
and the fact that they have all bought tickets to see this show written and performed by
two Latinas, will implicate them all in consumerism, and question how they affect and
are affected by the transactions.

The piece is funny, moving, troubling, disturbing, offensive, and confusing.
Fusco and Bustamante play many characters and expose many layers of consequences,
and opinions upon those transactions. Attitudes of sarcasm, pragmatism, depression,
seduction, ecstasy, competition, hunger, and customer complaints/satisfaction are all
invoked. They perform roles of stewardesses, waitresses, teachers, a prostitute, a cook, a
priestess, and sellers of dildos and dolls. Their roles are Latina, non-Latina, male,
female, educated and not, American and not. They utilize character types, situations,
language, and symbols that the audience (if they have some familiarity with the United
States or Latin America) will immediately recognize, though they will perhaps not be
able to read the symbols as they usually might, due to the new ways in which the
characters speak or images are used. As the two performers take on so many personas,
the audience must question which sentiments and opinions are indeed ones that the
authors of the piece hold, if any. The text is woven with collected correspondence, oral
history, and ridiculous fabricated stories, such as the Travel Taster’s vacations, lead by
Triple E. Jones. Again, with the range of fictional and non-fictional texts, it is difficult to
find a stance or clear idea of what they want to say. This is most definitely, the point of
the piece, avoiding any essentialism or definitive answer on questions of Latina

13 For the sake of space, I have eliminated the lines which instruct the performers to choose audience
members, and the stage directions, which indicate that audience members are being chosen and brought up
on stage.
femininity, consumption, and exploitation. In the middle of the piece, Fusco reads a postcard giving a hint at their thesis:

Dear Audience, I think it’s time to explain why we are so interested in Latin women and food. Actually, this piece is about consumption—of our bodies and our myths—and food. Let’s start with anthropofagia. That’s what the Brazilians used to call it in the 1920s. An-Thro-Po-Fa-Gi-A. That was supposed to be our great creative, cannibalistic revenge. Absorb our sacred enemies and transform them into totems, they said. Take everything that is thrown our way and have our way with it. That’s how we were supposed to live up to our ancestors. So when you come charging in our direction, running from whatever it is you’re running from—you may not think that we who serve you could be eating as well. But we do. Gently, but efficiently, we devour you. The more visceral your desires, the more physical our labor (119).

The idea of anthropofagia lends itself perfectly to re-tropicalization; the characters of this play acknowledge their reality of being bought and consumed; their defense is not to deny the event or demand that it be stopped. Strategic pragmatists, the characters become crafty consumers, using the transactions and the people involved in the transactions to the characters’ own ends. It is also clear from this passage that members of the hegemonic class are the target audience. Those who attempt to consume Latinas, those who produce and benefit from tropicalization, those from the above, are the ones intended to hear this message of anthropofagia.

Stuff gives an excellent example of a complicated and multi-layered exploration and performance of appropriation and re-tropicalization: those who are so often consumed can re-consume; they can not only profit from being consumed, but they can also grow by collecting, using, and recycling whatever the situation presents. Self-tropicalization is a way to evolve with the environment, facing opposition and remaining on top of discourse.
Another excellent example of self-tropicalization can be found in the performances of Alina Troyano, a Cuban-American performance artist, and her stage persona, Carmelita Tropicana. The name Tropicana is carefully selected to invoke both a brand of orange juice and the famous Cuban nightclub with its beautiful dancing girls. Both are/were instances of American consumerism of readily available, south-of-the-border, exotic pleasures. Tropicana performs in an over-the-top style with flaring skirts and flaming red hair; she appropriates well-known stereotypes of Latinas, especially those reminiscent of Carmen Miranda, and pushes them to an extreme, exposing their roots in falsehood and their existence in the audience’s expectations. Two quotes about Tropicana’s performance are illustrative, first from Dance Magazine: “With her fiery temperament and impenetrable accent, Tropicana is a cartoon of the hot tamale; she’s so outrageously Latin that she makes Charo look like Estelle Getty.” And from Más: “Carmelita pretends to play with Latin stereotypes but what she is really doing is playing with your head,” (quoted in Manzor, 374). While recognizable, damaging stereotypes are being used, it is clear that they are being used in a new way. They are not repetitions but refracted echoes that sound strangely different. Troyano also adds new parody with gender inversion, cross-dressing, and more extreme performances of sexual stereotypes.

One of Tropicana’s pieces, Milk of Amnesia/Lche de Amnesia, deals specifically with her hybrid identity, learning to blend her Cuban heritage and childhood with her immigration and assimilation to the United States. In the beginning of this piece, Troyano’s voice narrates her actual memories, explaining how being forced to assimilate
or acculturate (being forced to drink pasteurized milk in school) to the United States
caused erasure of her Cuban memory and self:

If I closed my eyes and held my breath, I could suppress a lot of the flavor I didn’t
like. This is how I learned to drink milk. It was my resolve to embrace America
as I chewed on my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and gulped down my milk.
This new milk that had replaced the sweet condensed milk of Cuba. My amnesia
had begun (120).

The story is carried on by Pingalito, a Cuban bus driver, who has come to help Carmelita
recover from her amnesia. His attempts to help include blowing cigar smoke in her face,
giving “facts” about Cuba such as “Three-fourths of all Cubans are white, of Spanish
descent, and a lot of these three-fourths have a very dark suntan all year round” (122),
and reciting “Ode to the Cuban Man” which gives amusing commentary on race,
primitivism, exoticism, and gender: “The Cuban man has a head for business/ He
combines boobulah with the babalu/ That’s why they call him the Caribbean Jew” (123).
Pingalito represents stereotypes and damaging views of Cuban men and women; by
playing the character herself, Troyano shows the audience just how aware she is of the
troping of Cuban men and women, and insists on showing that these ideas are
simultaneously silly and hegemonically useful. Pingalito’s attempts to revive Carmelita’s
memories fail. Before Carmelita will recover her Cuban self, she will have to return to
the Cuba (narrating Troyano’s actual trip back to Cuba), and finally, be visited by a
Cuban pig whose slaughter will ultimately jog her failing memory.

PIG: When I got out of the box, I saw a man in green. He had a shiny knife. I
squealed, Mami! Mami!
(Silent. She pulls a string from the pig’s neck and red glitter gushes down, spilling
onto the white linoleum.)
CARMELITA: My vocal chords, my tonsils. The pig and I, we had our
operations in the same clinic. The clinic with the blue tiles. I remember. We are
all connected, not through AT&T, e-mail, Internet, or the information superhighway, but through memory, history, herstory, horsestory.  
*She shadow boxes as she recites the poem*
I remember  
Que soy de allá  
*She exits singing and dancing*  
Cochinito mamón  
Sandwich de lechón  
Cochinito mamón  
Sandwich de lechón

The pig is significantly Cuban; pork is one of the most popular and readily available foods in Cuba. In times of economic scarcity, city dwellers have attempted to raise pigs in their apartments for food, just as the pig in this play is. Tropicana must identify with a displaced, slaughtered, Cuban farm/apartment animal in order to reclaim her Cuban identity. The identification is strange and very funny. Yet her point is quite serious; it is through memory of violent acts that she recalls what has happened to her; meanwhile, the connection between women and food is also invoked. Troyano plays through the stereotypes as spoken and embodied by Pingalito, and then through the personal memories of Carmelita, and then the role of a pig, snatched from his natural habitat and forced into apartment-style living before his terrifying death, before she can arrive whole through her connectedness to Cuba. Troyano’s multiple identities and identifications with multiple points of view on those identities are fully realized as a performance of La Frontera. She is both Cuban and American; she is both the views that Americans have about Cuba and Latinos and Latinas, and the realities of Cuba, Latinos, and Latinas. Speaking to both Latino/a and non-Latino/a audiences, she re-tropicalizes herself on many levels, first by adopting a new name and persona (Carmelita), underscoring that the “Latin” qualities about to be performed are chosen and purposefully put on; and then by
performing, enacting, and commenting on *latinidad from above*, (by playing multiple characters) with strangely connected subject matter, from sexuality to slaughter to lunch. Because the show belongs to her and is her choice and carefully crafted statement, it is at the same time, and ultimately, *latinidad from below*. However, thanks to the medium of theatre and the possibility of having non-Latino/a audience members, and the appropriation and twisting of hegemonic images, the performance remains in some ways open to non-Latinos, and attempts a new relationship to the *above*.

No matter how much Latinas/os have in common, no matter how united they may stand in facing various problems and in raising each other up, no matter how comfortable Latinos/as may be within their own skins, feeling empowered and proud of their heritages, the problems of *latinidad from above* (tropicalization, exoticism, gendering, etc.,) still create an everyday reality that they must face. However, when creating one’s identity and actively pursuing one’s destiny through La Frontera, such troping is neither unconquerable nor an enemy. Tropicalizations can be rejected, accepted, claimed, adapted, and changed, and incorporated into one’s identity along with all the “heritage” factors. If *mestizaje* is a choice and an action, it follows that one can choose and act upon not only from that which comes by birth and socio-economic circumstance, but also from events, messages, obstacles, and advantages, and stimuli from any direction. Anything can be transculturated and performed, whether it is “real,” supposed, desired, rejected, or feared.

Examples of self-tropicalization are as numerous as they are exciting. Any kind of culture can be re-tropicalized, from food to movies to parades. Re-tropicalization is
invoked in text, by poets, novelists, essayists and critics; and in the live theatrical experience by actors, playwrights, directors, designers, dancers, musicians, artists and performance artists. All are finding new ways to respond to *latinidad from above* by incorporating it into their own identity and vocabulary, creating a new *latinidad*. This is often done in collaboration, especially on stage. As a theatre scholar I am primarily interested in examples of re-tropicalization, *La Frontera*, and of *latinidad* in general, that come from the live theatrical experience. As I have already argued, because theatre is both representational and presentational, encompassing all forms of rhetoric, and because it requires conflict and multiple perspectives in order to form dramatic action, it has a unique ability to invoke, demonstrate, and explore *latinidad*. *Latinidad* is interpreted and embodied by actors, yet left to be further interpreted and embodied by audiences; in this way, theatre lends physical and spiritual sentience to *latinidad*. It can be expressed in several ways at once, including ways that contradict others.

*Latinidad* itself, in all its complexities, is, of course, not necessarily or even usually the focus of Latina/o drama; it is usually something read from a performance by critics and scholars. A Latina/o play will be about the Latina or Latino experience, family life, heritage, economic hardship, racism, violence, young love, old love, etc.; within that subject matter, one can attempt to understand what *latinidad* means to the playwright, director, or a character. In my next chapter, I will give a reading of Caridad Svič’s *Prodigal Kiss*. Although the play never uses the words like “*latinidad*” or “tropicalization,” I believe it deals with *latinidad* directly, and attempts to encompass several of its instances and nuances through the interactions of the play’s characters.
This is a text-based drama, far more traditional in its form than the works of Fusco, Bustamante, or Troyano/Tropicana, but still just as complicated and sophisticated in its use and reworking or old symbols, both from above and below. It is not a comprehensive illustration but an excellent sampling of possibilities of ways that latinidad is manifested, enacted, and exchanged. I believe that it has, in an underlying theme, an agenda of asking Latinos/as to think of themselves as a group. It presents a wealth of diversity in its Latino/a characters, challenging the audience to consider whether they will accept each character as Latino/a. It asks the audience what their idea of the Latino/a imaginary is, and in what times and places and with what people do they find or create Latino/a communities. It asks the audiences to question whether their actions as Latinos/as have ever been damaging or violent toward other Latinos/as. And, the play also urgently presents the often-used dilemma of belonging, of home, and of finding one's identity in a new, foreign space.
CHAPTER 4

CARIDAD SVICH'S PRODIGAL KISS
AS A PERFORMANCE TEXT FOR LATINIDAD

In this chapter, I will offer a reading of Caridad Svich’s *Prodigal Kiss* as a play that addresses, embodies, and presents latinidad as a complex and contested term. It is an exploration of what it is to *become* Latino/a: each of the characters has come to the United States from a Latin American country and has forged a new hybrid identity that he or she performs and negotiates with others. Through the representation of different ethnicities and the challenging of stereotypes, this play illuminates tensions and struggles that Latinos/as face, and suggestions for alternative views and actions. How the characters create Latino/a identities, dealing with inner emotional conflicts and the harsh circumstances of their journeys, illustrates transculturation, both as a traumatic and painful process of change, echoing Ortiz’s original coining of the term, and as a borderlands action, a choice of blending and reconciliation, enabling growth and maturity. Because of the way the play depicts a Latino/a community, its rules of conduct and communication, its values, and the way its members interact with each other, the text complicates ideas of a pan-Latino/a imaginary. All of these aspects of the play enable it
to serve the Latino/a imaginary, the Latino/a theatre community, and non-Latino/a audiences.

This play demonstrates how well theatre is equipped to deal with such a complicated issue, incorporating many facets and exploring form, while still referring on some level to the tangible, living world. Rather than attempting only to discuss or summarize various arguments about latinidad, this play puts latinidad into action, as characters claim and perform their identities and nationalities, and clash with each other physically and ideologically. As actors perform characters, deciding what gestures, mannerisms, and ideas will create these Latinos/as on stage, the audience receives immediate suggestions and situations to juxtapose against their own lives. By questioning latinidad, the play asks communities how they define themselves, and proposes different views on how communities might function in the present and the future.

This chapter will be heavily informed and assisted by the ideas of Latina theatre set out by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Sternbach in Stages of Life: Transcultural Performance & Identity in U.S. Latina Theatre. This trailblazing book places many Latina plays and performers on the same discussion table to see how they compare, contrast, support, contradict, and complement each other. Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez look at Latina theatre and performance as an important and growing phenomenon, not as a few isolated instances. In my analysis of Prodigal Kiss, I will use and respond to their theories of what characterizes Latina theatre, how theatre and
performance serve the Latino/a community, and how Latina theatre lends itself to transculturation and a discussion of latinidad.

First, however, I would like to give a brief introduction to Caridad Svich and a detailed summary of Prodigal Kiss, in order to provide the reader with a bit of familiarity before I launch into the play’s complexities.

Caridad Svich is a playwright, songwriter, editor, and translator. She was born in Philadelphia and lived in several locations within the United States growing up, including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, North Carolina, Florida, Utah, New York, and California. After finishing an MFA in Theatre from UC-San Diego, she trained from 1988-1992 with Maria Irene Fornes in the Hispanic Playwrights Lab at INTAR theatre. She was also a resident playwright for two years in Los Angeles at the Mark Taper Forum Theatre. She is a member of The Dramatists Guild, New Dramatists, The Playwrights Center of Minneapolis, The Drama League, and the Theatre Communications Group. She has been the recipient of a Thurber Playwright-In-Residence Award, an NEA/TCG Playwriting Residency, a TCG Hispanic Translation Commission, a TCG/Pew Observership Grant, a California Arts Council Playwriting Fellowship, a PEW/National Theatre Translation Fund Commission, a Bunting Fellowship from Radcliffe University Institute for Advanced Study, and a Royal Court Theatre/ASK Theater Projects Playwrights Exchange. She has co-edited books on the life and work of Maria Irene Fornes and on Latina Theatre. Some of her play titles include Alchemy of Desire/Dead Man’s Blues, Fugitive Pieces, Prodigal Kiss, Brazo Gitano, Twelve Ophellas, Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart, Perdita Gracia, Any Place but Here,
Gleaning/Rebusca, Pensacola, In the Upper Room, Steal Back Light from the Virtual, Turn the Dark Up Bow This is a Hymn, Shelter, Waterfall, Torch, Scar, and Carnival.


Svich is interested in complicating Latino/a identities, and in speaking to audiences inside and outside of the Latino/a imaginary. She is a second generation Latina, with heritages in Cuba, Argentina, Spain, and Croatia. In “Home, Desire, Memory: There are No Borders Here,” she writes that each of these heritages is important for her and her work, especially as a Latina in the United States.

These phantom images of countries that are in my blood-memory have created in me an añoramiento, a longing, for places I hardly even know, and have made me feel as though I am also an exile. Out of this paradoxical state, I write, re-imagining the United States from within (320).

Like her mentor Fornés, Svich does not always write plays about Latinos/as; her work fits neither into “Cuban American theatre” or even “Latino/a theatre” categories. Any Place But Here, a relatively traditional play, with naturalistic dialogue and an episodic plot structure, depicts two working class couples in New Jersey; there are no Latinos/as present. The Booth Variations is a multi-media presentation, a one-man show with video, music, and on-stage technicians who double as character voices. It depicts the struggle of Edwin Booth, seeking to free himself from the shadows of his alcoholic father and notorious brother. Again, the world of the play has generally nothing to do with
Latinos/as. Contrastingly, Svich has also written pieces like *Gleaning/Rebusca*, which depicts two Cuban-American single women, struggling in their professions, romances, and their friendship with each other. The play freely mingles Spanish with English, and the women discuss many aspects of being Latina: what their mothers taught them, how Latinos treat them, and how white people treat them.

In her *testimonio* “Home, Desire, Memory,” Svich makes several points that show that she is interested in not allowing Latinas, or their theatre, to be limited and essentialized. First, she narrates how after many years of attempting to write about men, she decided no longer to deny her own identity in her work:

> Writing without denying my sex liberated my imagination. Coming to terms with my identity as a Latina playwright freed my work even more…I have to admit that my work, my way of seeing, is naturally influenced by who I am, who my parents are; my background and my upbringing.” (“Home, Desire, Memory” 322).

Second, she states clearly that being Latina does not mean that she will subscribe to any ideology or model of playwriting. “I must admit that I still see myself as a writer first: no borders, no party lines, just my imagination and what it can produce” (322). Thirdly, she identifies essentializing of Latina theatre and Latina identities as a major problem.

The main obstacle I have encountered as a Latina playwright is that most theatres have an idea of what a “Latina” playwright should write…an unmistakable brand of tokenism has crept into our mainstream stages. Slowly, and often presented in a manner both obsequious and patronizing, expectations are leveled at writers who must fit a pre-determined slot. Thus, one finds theatres overcome with dreaded “good intentions” who feel that a “Latina” writer must only write specifically “Latina” material (323).

Svich describes the expectations for this “Latina” material in her introductory essay “Out of the Fringe: In Defense of Beauty.” Generally, theatres that will produce Latino/o plays insist on seeing works that deal with the Latino/a experience as exotic, or imitative of
other immigrant experiences (x). These plays tend “to follow the established modes of boulevard comedy, the educational/historical play (and) melodrama” with special emphasis on, again, the immigrant experience (xi). Thus, the work produced tended to be endorsed by white audiences as properly “exotic” or by Latino/a theatres as “correctly ethnic” (xi).

This last point shows that Svič is aware that strict limitations on Latinidad can come from both above and below. Her mission in theatre and her personal writing aesthetic resist essentialization from both directions. She writes,

I am a first generation hybrid, a daughter of a hybrid sensibility, which is neither fully Latina in what may be termed a conventional sense nor fully “American,” but rather a sensibility in flux: bilingual, multicultural, female” (“The Writer Speaks” 94).

Prodigal Kiss is a study in hybridity, in a sensibility in flux, in what it means to be Latina, and in what it means to be American. And, it, too, resists limitations created by Latinidad from above and below, by defying stereotypes and troubling traditional forms and ideas.

INTRODUCTION TO PRODIGAL KISS

Prodigal Kiss (a play with songs) was workshopped at the Playwrights’ Center of Minneapolis’ Play Labs in the summer of 1999. It was also presented at the Key West Theatre Festival on October 8 of 1999. It was published in 2001 in the anthology New Playwrights: The Best Plays of 1999, edited by Marisa Smith. All of my quotations of the play will come from this publication.
*Prodigal Kiss* is decidedly Latino/a theatre; it deals very specifically with Latinos/as. In fact, it speaks directly to the process of *becoming* Latino/a. Each of its characters has faced crises of being displaced, of loss of a previous sense of self, and of being confronted with a new world in which they are not comfortable. The story is not of just of immigration; it is the latinidad of immigration. Before the characters arrive in the United States they are Latin Americans or Caribbeans; after they move, they are not Americans, but some Latin Other. How they negotiate this otherness, how they choose their Latino/a identities, provides the dramatic situations in the play.

The play’s central motif is traveling, physically and emotionally; the characters’ transitions are formidable and at times all-encompassing. An important physical-yet-poetic circumstance is that they have all come from a city called Santiago; this factor is just important as the fact that they are all Latin American and Caribbean immigrants. Santiago is named for St. James, the patron of travelers. Although the Santiagos are in different countries, each city shares in the myths of St. James. The characters all share a deep love for their cities; their identities were at least at one point wrapped around their homes. That the specific, geographical place that all the characters long for is characterized by travel and homelessness may seem ironic, but it is important to remember that St. James is the protector of travelers and that Santiago is often the hopeful final destination of a pilgrimage. It is thought of as a place of solace. This is described quickly at the beginning of the play by Ignacio, who is from Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

All roads lead to St. James. That’s why people go to my Santiago. Flocks and flocks of mad pilgrims seeking to be blessed by St. James’ hand, seeking to be
healed, so they can put a part of their lives behind and spend the rest of their lives in grace (245).

Although he is describing the Santiago of his past, Ignacio is also describing the characters of this play. They are all pilgrims in the United States. Each of them is seeking to put a certain part of their lives behind them. That they cannot, or that they do so at a terrible price, is a critical dramatic tension of the play.

Santiago de Compostela is, of course, not the only important Santiago. Through the power of the saint, all the Santiagos are connected. One leads to another, providing guidance and protection on the journey. This is invoked several times, but illustrated particularly well in an exchange between Marcela, from Santiago de Cuba, and Mocha, from Santiago de Argentina. They sit in an unspecified part of the American West, facing an also unspecified border.

MOCHA. As if all the Santiagos in the world were connected to this band of sky.
MARCELA. The Milky Way.
MOCHA. More like the ghosts of St. James himself, who instead of choosing in which Santiago to rest his soul, has let himself be scattered among the five moons, and so shine down on this spot of earth, In hope that some pilgrim will take this as a sign of comfort along her travels, and be relieved from the weariness of the road.
MARCELA. In the dark sky, when I was on the water on the boat of scrap lumber on my way from Cuba to here, I saw five moons lit up at different points in the sky, and I thought of my Santiago.
MOCHA. St. James. A piece of him on each moon, on each star. His body stretched out from one part of America to the other.
MARCELA. And I though, “If I just stay close to the sky, I’ll find my way.”
MOCHA. Land and sky connected to each other all because of a name, all because of a restless saint (286).

Because there is a patron saint who looks out for the travelers, who gives them rest and protection, and who, by his name and holy body connects all the Santiagos, there is a sense of connectedness and home possible in the pilgrimage. Because of this, the
characters truly have a community: bodies and spirits, land and sky all have the possibility for unification. Furthermore, it is not just that Spain, Latin America and the Caribbean are connected; the United States is included as well.

The play is relatively elusive in terms of how to categorize its form. The language of the dialogue between the characters is usually naturalistic but forays frequently into poetry in long monologues. There are also several songs interspersed between the longer scenes, which center on the character of Marcela. She is the only character who sings in soliloquy. The song interludes intensely evoke Marcela’s yearning for and devotion to Santiago. They have titles and contain several set details and bits of action that defy realism. In Invocation: Santiago, Marcela stands on a board in the middle of the ocean; in the Hymn to Oblivion, which takes place immediately after Marcela is shot on the floor of a train, she is suddenly on a road. She meets a woman wearing a dress of silver rose petals; the woman hands Marcela a red sash. The interludes could be thought of as hallucinations, or looks at Marcela’s inner emotions; what is clear is that the songs exist in their own space and time and depict a reality that is different from the physical world where characters meet.

The title of the play refers to the Marcela’s misplaced devotion and love. This love should be the love of her self, her identity, and her place in the world. Because of her uprooting from Santiago de Cuba, she has lost her ability to love herself. She defined herself entirely by her relationship to Santiago; as she wanders through the United States, her self-love also wanders, prodigal from its rightful place. When she learns to rethink
her identity in relationship to home, place, and her surroundings, then Marcela’s self-love and sense of peace can return.

In the first scene, Marcela sings as she stands on a board in the middle of the ocean. She sings of her love and longing for Santiago de Cuba, and of her sadness because she cannot go back to it. The second scene opens with Marcela examining saw grass in Florida with a suitcase in her hand. Ignacio, a sunburned, U.S. traveler, originally from Santiago de Compostela in Spain, approaches her. They discuss the lore of Santiago and St. James. Marcela shows Ignacio a letter from her Aunt Lise in New Jersey and he gives her practical advice about how to purchase bus and train tickets. Marcela reveals that she left Cuba on a boat made from lumber that she purchased; she is a balsera, a rafter. She and the others on the boat nearly died from thirst and exposure until they were rescued by a plane. Ignacio scoffs at her story and claims to know everything about her, calling her a jinetera, a word for Cuban female sex workers, and harassing her. When he moves to attack her physically, Marcela beats him with her suitcase, which is full of Cuban dirt, and leaves him.

Scene Three opens on a train car. Marcela is approached by Coral, an elderly woman, originally from Santiago de Chile, who lived in New York City and St. Louis. They also discuss the myths of Santiago, and Coral reveals her lifelong love of singer Bessie Smith. She tells of her progression from pet daughter to young prostitute to factory worker to mother to permanent train rider. Marcela tells Coral about her ill-fated relationship with a man named Chucho, how she gave up the son they had together, and about her Aunt Lise. Coral speaks grimly of the cornfields that Marcela admires, and
works herself into a coughing fit. She then tells Marcela to get off the train and predicts that Marcela will not last a week. When Marcela disobeys the order and disagrees with the prediction, Coral robs Marcela, shoots her, and leaves her for dead. In Scene Four (*Hymn to Oblivion*), Marcela sings about sensual memories of Cuba and everything she loves there. She meets a woman wearing a dress of silver rose petals and a red sash; the woman gives Marcela the sash. Marcela follows the trail of petals the woman leaves behind.

Part Two (Scene Five) begins with Marcela standing and singing, wearing the red sash. She describes the images she saw on various street corners and concludes “On the corner of Fifteenth and Wherever/...I lost my mind” (269). In scene six, Marcela faints from hunger next to the water of the harbor in San Diego and is revived by Rafael, a man originally from the Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic, who now earns a good living from pimping a mysterious younger man, Rider, to “suits” and sailors. Rafael sends Rider to bring Marcela food, and talks with Marcela about his life in the United States and how he too left behind a child. Marcela speaks of her child and of Aunt Lise. When Rider returns with only fries and no change from the twenty-dollar bill that Rafael gave him, Rafael accuses him of taking a client independently and spending the cash on drugs. Rafael beats Rider; when Marcela protests, he beats her too. Rafael cuts Rider with a knife until he collapses, and then takes him away to get him cleaned up.

In Scene Seven, by a harbor in an unspecified place in the West, Marcela meets Miriam Mocha, a free-spirited, wheelchair-bound woman from Santiago del Estero
(Argentina), who came to the United States to avoid getting “disappeared”—being kidnapped and murdered by the military regime, presumably during the Dirty War (1976-1983), a time period in which the regime disapproved of independent women. A drifter, Mocha has made her way all over the United States and pinned the names of locations on a blanket, just as the pilgrims who went to Santiago de Compostela. Marcela is in despair, but Mocha is cheerful and muses about St. James. She combs Marcela’s hair, gives her a ribbon, and invites Marcela to cross the border with her. Marcela decides that she has died; the only things left for her to do are to become a new person with a new name (Sharon, provided by Mocha), and finally visit Aunt Lise in New Jersey. In Scene Eight, on a train platform, Marcela sings again poetically of Santiago and how she suffers without it, in Spanish. She repeats the song in English on the train, while lying on her back, a half-dressed john on top of her. In Scene Nine, Marcela is getting friendly with a recent Cuban immigrant named Paco. She claims to be Sharon, an American, and he insists that she seems Cuban. As he tries to get more personal, Marcela pulls out a knife and robs him. After he leaves, she vomits silver coins.

In scene ten, wearing mostly new clothes but still the red sash, Marcela contemplates the snow in New Jersey. She is given a coat by Carlo, a man born in the United States to immigrant parents who changed their last name from Pietroponte to Cahill. Carlo says that the name Marcela suits her better than Sharon does. Marcela snarls at him, assuming that he thinks of her as not good enough for an American name. She begins to leave but stops when he says he knew Aunt Lise. Lise came to the market where he worked, always buying the same items; he also knew her because she would
occasionally attend his church wearing a red sash. He reports that Lise has died and her
house has been torn down. Marcela shows him the letter, then tears it up. She says she
does not know what she will do next; Carlo haltingly asks if she would like to have a
drink with him. She says no, but perhaps later. He gives her directions to the market and
tells her to keep the coat. After he exits, Marcela lays the red sash on the snow.

In Scene Eleven, Marcela recites the letter from Lise and we find that Lise never
understood, became accustomed to, or loved her new home in the United States. She
describes her life, what she eats, the places she goes, the availability of multiple brands of
cigarettes, and how barely recalls Santiago, St. James, and the memories of her past.
After a light change, Marcela begins to sing a variation of her first song, acknowledging
multiple Santiagos and the guidance that they extend to her. It ends, “On this ground of
cement/On this ash floor/The stars of Santiago/Let my heart be restored” (301).

This play incorporates many aspects of the Latino/a experience as well as many
different Latino/a perspectives. Each character, with the exceptions of Paco and the
undressed john, is dynamic and three dimensional; this enriches the dynamics, conflicts,
and relations between them and Marcela. The play is simultaneously an exploration, a
description, a proposal, a discussion, several contradictions, and several more
embodiments of latinidad.
INTRODUCTION TO *STAGES OF LIFE*

I will now turn to *Stages of Life* (University of Arizona Press, 2001) in order to utilize some of its helpful vocabulary and theories for thinking through Latina theatre and performance. This book is a theoretical response to the enormous wealth of manuscripts that Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez received when they began putting together an anthology of Latina theatre. While they found playwrights and theatre practitioners from vastly different places, ethnicities, ages, etc., they still found that there were reasons to think of the group of works as a whole.

Examining the ensemble of such work suggested a way to theorize the emergence of Latinas on stage. And understanding these theatrical productions in given historical conjunctures clearly called for a theory born in Latin America, but applicable to U.S. Latinas—namely, Latin American theories of transculturation\(^{14}\) (4).

Firmly believing that theatre is an excellent space in which both characters and audiences participate, Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach show how Latina theatre has advanced and developed into its own aesthetics and genres, and how it has served, and continues to serve, Latino/a communities. In addition to providing representation in art, giving communities the types of art and entertainment that they desire, theatre allows the audience to enter into dialogue, receive affirmation, and change, presenting choices and possibilities. One of the best methods for doing this kind of work, and one of the most common attributes of Latino/a theatre, is through literature characterized by resistance.

Centering on theatre in their own image and on the deconstruction of stereotypes, practitioners of Latino theatre saw the genre as a way both to create new dramatic

\(^{14}\) Transculturation, while applicable to many situations, nations, points in time, and cultures, was, as I explained in the previous chapter, coined specifically for Cuba, not Latin America in general.
models and in the process to educate audiences on political issues that affected their everyday lives (6).

Although the authors do not invoke the term latinidad directly, this study of Latina theatre is, in itself, a study in latinidad. Latina theatre, firstly, is not other kinds of theatre, and secondly, has its own set of qualities (such as resistance) that set it apart and give it its own sensibility. Describing that sensibility, including its characteristics that are supposedly intrinsic and inherent, and those that are conscious choices, is an articulation of latinidad. Because Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach focus on the usefulness and positive functions of Latina theatre and the Latina/o community, their book is a celebration of latinidad as well. They celebrate how Latina/o communities have responded to latinidad from above, and affirm how communities have created latinidad from below. Their highest praise, and most important argument, is that that Latina theatre has progressed thus far, becoming increasingly better at negotiating with others, resisting hegemony, and serving its communities or imaginaries, because it has become enriched with, and adept at using, transculturation. Transculturation, incorporating and blending multiple sources, heritages, and perspectives, is intensely empowering, especially when dealing with issues of identity and a sense of self.

The dramatic action in these works typically moves from crisis to negotiation, from incertitude to accommodation, from ambivalence to reconciliation. As new protagonists stage moments of all these dramatic situations, they articulate and develop a sense of self in the world; that is to say that who they are and where they are located are inextricably linked.15 These subject positionalities place them in social contexts that constantly demand the enunciation of an ever-evolving self within shifting identity formation. Given that the protagonists in Latina plays and performances deploy the theatre as the means by which these transitions occur, we decided to center our own work on these selected

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15 Authors' emphasis.
paradigmatic moments when identity in all its provisionality and cultural transformation is questioned (7).

Because transculturation, as a borderlands action, is flexible, resisting essentialism from both Latino/a and non-Latino/a pressures, it is useful for resolution, without erasure, of difference within and between individuals. Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez believe that transculturation is present and active in Latina theatre today, and is thus an excellent lens through which to view the plots, characters, and possibilities of these play texts.

Opposing forces and characters never come to an easy resolution; one rarely “wins” over another. In fact, there is rarely “resolution” in the sense that an issue can be put aside or finished; instead, moments and situations (not the issues) are mastered and characters carry on, bringing new insight to new challenges. Characters and audiences do not have to give one definitive answer to the questions asked. There is also the encounter and embrace of difference, whether that is of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, nationality, etc. Contradiction and conflict are not necessarily bad and can lead to compromise. Through theories of transculturation, Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach argue, Latina theatre can be located in “given synchronic moments and processes that show how they build on politics of representation, identity, location, and affinity”(4). It is with these four organizing types of politics that I will begin to apply the ideas laid out in Stages of Life to Prodigal Kiss.
THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez write that the politics of representation is "the double-pronged process whereby playwrights dismantle and undo dominant stereotypical representation at the same time that they revise and rearticulate new ways of seeing" (4). Resistance and pointing out the falsehood of stereotypes are primary concerns. It is not a simple matter of newer ideas replacing older ones; there is a moral urgency to reveal how those older ideas and beliefs are damaging and false. Then, new ideas can be strategically formed to extinguish barriers, boundaries, and limits set by the previous ideas and beliefs. Playwrights do not present "truths" to replace the stereotypes, but possibilities of manners of living and understanding that undercut the need to essentialize and force such expectations in the first place.

Prodigal Kiss confronts and disturbs stereotypes in many scenes; most of these moments involve the main character, Marcela. Some prominent stereotypes in the United States about Cuban-Americans, generalized from the first wave of immigrants from the early 1960s, are that they are politically conservative, hate Castro, and came to the United States to avoid becoming victimized or persecuted after the 1959 revolution. Another assumption is that they live in the past, longing for Cuba the way it was before the revolution. Silvia Spitta describes the way the Cuban-American dilemma is often seen:

Since the "here" of the enunciating Cuban-American is always split between the desire to acculturate "here" and the nostalgia for a Caribbean "there," which is experienced as a lost paradise and conflated with a lost paradisical childhood, the "I/eye" of the Cuban-American is also split (172).
The words “nostalgia” “lost paradise” and “lost paradisiacal childhood” carry connotations of emotion (rather than rationality), futility, injustice, and an inability to move on from personal tragedy. Spitta’s explanation of the Cuban-American identity resounds relatively truthfully in prominent, established communities, such as in Miami. Communities like this one often have families that stem back to the first wave of Cuban immigration. These immigrants were generally white, upper class, and opposed the revolution; and many of which came over as children. There are no doubt individuals who fit those circumstances (white, upper class, etc.,) but who do not agree with the described views (conservative, etc.). There are, obviously, also many Cuban-Americans who do not fit the circumstantial descriptions at all. Describing Cuban theatre in the United Stated, Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach illuminate this prominent understanding of Cuban-Americans further:

Cubans, because of their imposed exile, channel their nostalgia into a Cuba that no longer exists, a mythified, prerevolutionary, middle-class and upper-class island fantasy of property owners. Of course, these utopias were inherited by second and subsequent generations, who wrote longingly about their parents’ imagined homeland and national communities (48).

The words “lost” “paradise” “utopia” and “mythified” all imply that the Cuban-American dilemma is irreconcilable. It is a mournful fantasy, implying that Cuban-Americans are not connected to the Cuba, or any other place, that actually exists. While the troping of nostalgic Cuban-American as nostalgic is no doubt based in research and the individual reality of many people, there are additional realities that do not mesh with the mentality of nostalgia.
Marcela is an example of this difference. While she is indeed split in her desire and identity (which I will address in the next section dealing the politics of identity), she is in no way nostalgic. She does not think of a fictional Cuba, but simply remembers the one that she just left—beautiful, but very difficult to live in. She does not base her ideas of Cuba on a far-off past or other people’s accounts, but her own upbringing. While she loves and longs for Cuba, she has no illusions about it being paradise or perfect. In her first song, in which she says how much she longs to go home, she has a very realistic picture of it:

A sky of silver
Hangs over a tobacco slum.
I dream of Santiago
And a child drowning in the sun.

With copper coins in the mouth
And hot ferns beating.
Cigar paper hands
That won't stop bleeding (243).

The verses invoke images not of paradise, but of a land of harsh survival. They invoke a merciless heat, poverty, and hard, manual labor. While poetic, the picture painted is not idyllic or unrealistic.

Marcela also does not believe that her home was lost or taken from her. She chose, and indeed struggled and risked much, to leave. She struggled to earn the money to buy the lumber for the boat, then endured salt spray, wind, sun, and risked drowning, starvation, thirst, and sharks to get to the United States. Her actions were decisive and final. Her migration is not temporary. She closes the same song, Invocation: Santiago with, “But I cannot go back/ To my country./ No. I cannot go back/To my
sierra/To the land that I know" (244). While she experiences loss and sadness over being unable to go home, she never claims to wish to return in the non-singing scenes. When Ignacio asks her if she would return, she replies, “To Cuba? I’ve nothing to go back to” (248).

In addition to not mentioning a Cuba of the past, Marcela never mentions Castro and does not seek political asylum. Prominent assumptions about Cubans seeking asylum also include the first and second wave of immigrants. This second wave, from the 1970s and 80s, was generally made up of anyone who had fallen foul of the Cuban regime, many artists and homosexuals among them. While their reasons for leaving were mixed, many loved Cuba and the revolution, they had to seek exile in order to avoid imprisonment and abuse. However, rafters in 1990s, Cuban refugees to the United States who brave the dangers of the sea on makeshift, often fragile, watercrafts, are not necessarily dissidents or delinquents. Many of them have no love for the United States, and no desire to leave Cuba. However, the economic hardship that Cubans experienced during the Special Period, after the Soviet collapse which caused an 85% of loss of the Cuban economy, simply leaves many Cubans with no choice. Marcela reflects this new wave of immigrant reality, neither fleeing Cuba or Castro, but simply poverty: “You think I haven’t been through anything? I’ve been washing myself out of a bucket for years, walking on dirt roads with bare feet, picking at wounded mangoes to eat” (263). Although she admits in scene three that she once served a one year sentence in prison for “disturbing the peace” (263), she never speaks of Castro, socialism, or politics; she does
not seek political asylum. By not having any of these traits, the presence of her character challenges many of the assumptions people have about Cubans and Cuban-Americans.

While Marcela's account of her ordeal is realistic, describing what actual rafters often face, she also challenges an assumption about rafters. This is that making the rafter's journey is a masculine act. Juan León writes that the word balsero does not generally come with its complimentary equivalent balsera, in the way that other Spanish nouns might:\footnote{Some examples of this are doctor/doctora, bailador/bailadora, escritor/escritora, etc.} “The clandestine assembly, provisioning, transportation, and launching of the raft takes heroic cunning and discipline. Rafting is undertaken by men” (220). The fact that Marcela is a female rafter—she was even the one who bought the lumber to construct the boat—goes against the usual expectation of a rafter. It immediately (yet not polemically) points out that the difficulties, suffering, and courage can also be a woman’s.

This is only the beginning of how the play challenges stereotypes of gender. Marcela does not fit into any of the gendered roles usually assigned to Latinas. She is neither mother nor daughter nor wife; Marcela has no family. She never speaks of her upbringing and gives only a fleeting reference to her mother. Neither her parents’ effect on her, nor their presumed deaths, factors largely in her current identity and dilemma. Although she speaks frequently of her Aunt Lise, Marcela has never met her. Although she reveals in scene three that she had a child, Marcela has not played the role of a mother. She did not nurture her child; she gave him up. While this has many consequences for her inner struggles now, she has none of the qualities of a family
woman; she is not a caretaker. She is comfortable with being alone. She does not long
for a man or even a group of people to live or travel with. Marcela is the epitome of
independence, not because of any advantages she has, but simply because of her choices
and will to survive. Because Latinas are so often defined as to where they are located in
family dynamics, Marcela’s position in the play challenges this stereotype.

Marcela is also neither virgin nor spicy sexpot. We know that she had a
relationship in Cuba that included sexual relations; she is neither naïve nor innocent
about how the world works. During the play, Marcela demonstrates virtually no desire
for human sexual contact throughout the entire play; she is not “hot-blooded” or even
lonely. It is not sex or a romantic relationship with man or woman that will fulfill her.
Marcela is also keenly aware of the stereotypes of Cuban women and girls as jineteras
and whores and will not be likened to one or used as one. In scene six, Rafael offers to
let her buy Rider and threateningly teases her:

    RAFAEL. After all, you’ve come all the way from Cuba.
    RIDER. Yeah?
    RAFAEL. Land of the jineteras.
    RIDER. Like rum and shit?
    MARCELA. I am not a jinetera.
    RAFAEL. You’ve never screwed for dollars?
    MARCELA. Not everybody in Cuba is a whore.

Marcela recognizes Rafael’s assumption that she is accustomed to being taken advantage
of, which will therefore make her comfortable with taking advantage of someone else.
She will not play his game and contradicts his punchline before he can weave his cruel
joke any further. In scene two, when Ignacio goads Marcela, saying she must have sold
her body in order to get out of Cuba and calling her a jinetera, she slaps him. When he
attempts to rape her, she defends herself, beating him to the ground with her suitcase. She knows that he views her as easy prey because she is, firstly, a recent immigrant, secondly, female, and thirdly, perhaps most importantly, from the Caribbean. The colonial belief that the New World was ripe for the taking, and the history of Cuba being used as a pleasure garden for foreigners, are prominent here. Ignacio represents the traditional, dominant, sexist system. He is confident in that system, puffed up by the rules of Machismo: any girl alone is prey to a man like him. However, Marcela will not stand for it.

(Marcela slams him with the case. Ignacio falls.)
IGNACIO. Coño.
MARCEL. That’s right. Coño, carajo, y mierda. What the hell do you think you’re doing going around trying to stick your cock in everybody’s face whether they want you to or not? What do you think I am? Huh? What the fuck do you think I am?

In this line, Marcela contests and condemns the world of Machismo; she refuses to live in that world. She addresses the fact that he thinks he is allowed to take advantage of her; she proclaims the action unthinkable, both in terms of who he is and who she is. Her physical defense proclaims that Latinas are not vulnerable or easy prey. Her words and actions proclaim Machismo as unnatural. She continues

MARCEL. And don’t think I don’t know that you’re awake. Cause you are plenty awake, cabrón. You are awake and living in America and thinking you can fuck me over cause i just got off the boat. Well, let me tell you: I got some soil here, I got some soil in here that’s got nothing to do with you.

(Marcela opens the case. It is full of dirt. She pours it on Ignacio.)
MARCEL. Feel it? This is that sweet Caribbean ass you want to fuck. You want to taste it? Here.

(She takes some dirt, grabs him by the hair, lifts his head, and rubs his mouth with the dirt.)
MARCEL. This is what it tastes like. This is what your rum-and-sugar dreams taste like, cabrón (255).
This is a bold performance of latinidad as resistance. In addition to being a strong-bodied and strong-willed person that will not be taken advantage of, Marcela is defending the identity and honor of Cuba and the Caribbean. She affirms her heritage and origin, making her verbal and physical defense of her self stand also for her country. Ignacio assumed he could use her the way that many countries have used Cuba. Marcela does not contradict his analogy of equating her with Cuba; she agrees to be a symbol of Cuba. But instead of performing Cuba his way, she performs it as a fierce and self-possessed entity. She literally uses Cuba (in the form of soil in her suitcase) to beat him down. In fending him off she vanquishes an attacker of Cuba. Thus, in both physical and symbolic ways, Marcela addresses racism and sexism as a Latina, and performs latinidad.

In an earlier, less intense exchange, it is possible that Marcela is also willing to extend her claims of sentience to all Latino/a immigrants. Again, Ignacio is equating Latinos/as with whores. Because Ignacio is speaking aggressively, using uncomfortable subjects, Marcela is wary. When she finally decides to contradict him, it is not a matter of defending just herself or Cuba’s integrity. It is a matter of fighting for the integrity of Latinos/as in general. Ignacio describes some girls urinating in public:

IGNACIO. I watch them. Yes. They remind me of the girls in my village. Like you.
MARCELA. I don’t lift my skirt.
IGNACIO. But you piss, don’t you?
MARCELA. We all piss.
IGNACIO. But not against the wall. Not so anyone can see. Putas. You know what I mean?
MARCELA. Are you calling me a puta?
IGNACIO. Not yet.
MARCELA. In Cuba there’s a saying—
IGNACIO. In Spain there's a saying too. But we're not there anymore. This is a whole new land you've come to. We're all the same—rich, poor, and in-between. Whores. That's what all we are.
MARCELA. You're wrong.

Ignacio insists that immigration causes one to prostitute oneself; the "whole new land" requires it. Although less dramatic than the later exchange, Marcela is still refusing to agree to this generalization of Latino/a immigrants. She does not say, "you and I are different" or claim to be an exception to the rule, she flatly refuses to go along with that view of people or the new land she has come to.

Thus, through both the background and situation that she is given, and the words and actions she chooses in confrontational moments, Marcela contradicts and fights stereotypes. The politics of representation is invoked directly, with her claiming to be Cuba for a moment when defending herself against an attacker, and indirectly, from the simple fact of Marcela being female, a rafter, not concerned with politics, not hating Castro, and not longing for a Cuba that is a fantasy. She represents many things, some common, some exceptional, but always on her own terms and in her own way. She will not be represented by anything that comes before her.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

The politics of identity portrayed and embodied by the character of Marcela asks and suggests many answers to questions like, "What does it mean to be Latina in the United States?" "How is Latina-ness performed?" "How might one person's latinidad be
challenged, disturbed, or placed in crisis?” and “What can be done when latinidad is in crisis?” Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez describe the politics of identity, as the process by which a speaking subject constitutes herself in given social relations of power and discursive formation, while at the same time positioning herself in the dialectical “give and take” of a subjectivity in process—known as the ‘toma y daca’ in theories of transculturation (5).

This notion deals with constructing transcultural mestiza identities “in the face of a politics that previously essentialized them in nationalist, patriarchal, heterosexist models” (5). While I have already shown ways that Marcela directly and indirectly works against tropicalizing assumptions and actions, the most important essentialist models that Marcela faces are, firstly, that identities are defined by homes, and secondly, that individuals can only have one home. These beliefs or assumptions, which essentialize people by their origins and/or locations are the antagonistic forces in the play. As Marcela negotiates and forms a new identity for herself, she wrestles with these two ideas.

It is not only external forces that present these models; internal forces are heavily at work as well. No one in the play explicitly tells Marcela, “You are either Cuban or American.” Marcela defines herself by place; in many ways, it is her own identity models that she must fight. The uprooting and displacement of her journey are painful; accepting her losses and rebuilding a hybrid identity is not an obvious or favorable-sounding option. Before she experienced transculturation, in Ortiz’s original meaning of the term, this identity model remained unchallenged. As she goes through the process of transculturation, her identity goes into a severe crisis. Being bicultural is difficult; Marcela seems to think that being one or the other is preferable. “Cuban-American” is
not a term or identity that seems applicable to her. She never seeks other Cuban-Americans after she arrives; she does not try to find anything that resembles her home—not even the one person she knows of, her Aunt Lise.\footnote{Coral guesses that Marcela has attempted to call Lise many times on the telephone, but, like Ignacio’s guesses about Marcela’s sex life in Cuba, this guess is not necessarily correct.} Despite her constant rereading of Lise’s letter, and her frequent mentioning of her Aunt and New Jersey, Marcela makes no attempt to go there until almost the end of the play. This shows, firstly, that she is not seeking a normal immigrant route; Marcela is not trying to “make it” or embrace the American dream, setting up a home and finding work. Secondly, neither having a family, nor a blood-tied companion, nor someone to talk to who knows Cuba, who has also come from Cuba, is valuable enough to Marcela for her to go in search of it.

However, despite all the hardship and danger she endured getting to the United States and despite her full understanding that she will not return to Cuba, Marcela pines for Cuba and her hometown of Santiago throughout the singing sections of the play. \textit{Invocation: Santiago} first begins by saying she is going there; after describing it and expressing her longing, “I dream of Santiago/ And its trembling shore,/ Under an umbrella of stars/ That leaves me hungry for more” (243). Then she states that going back is impossible, and concludes, “I dream of Santiago/ As it fades into the void,/ On a boat of black water,/ Let my heart be destroyed” (244). The song announces an end to her Cuban life and a formidable sadness and desperation she will deal with for the rest of the play. The poetry of Marcela’s songs is beautifully image-based, usually invoking colors and parts of nature. She loves and misses the sea, the sun, and the stars over her home,
the music and the food of Cuba, and her son Ambrosio. The *Hymn to Oblivion*

incorporates all of these:

A wounding *bolero*
*Guaguánco*
and a *clave* and *tres*,
Keeping tempo.

Where is the mamey,
The coconut and persimmon
Fruits of my childhood,
Now buried in boats of snow?

I can smell their seeds.
I can taste the delirium
As a thousand sunflowers
Shiver in the cold.

Where is my Cuba?
Where is my son?
My lips turn silver
Looking for your tomb (267).

Marcela’s heart is in Cuba while her body is in the United States. She thinks of her hometown, her son, and her Aunt in every single scene; she has not forgotten, or gotten over, any of them. Her loss is massive. This is clear instance of transculturation, in its original use by Ortiz. Marcela is experiencing an ordeal, crushed and left without her culture. The United States in no way resembles what Marcela knows as home, and she cannot accept the unknown as home. She has to feel connected and intimate with a space before she can be comfortable in it; she wraps her entire identity in her idea of home. Not wrapping her identity in home does not occur to her. She does not know how to be Cuban in the United States; she wants the United States to replace Cuba entirely so that she can belong to one place alone: “[...] there has got to be a place in this land where
where I come from won’t determine me” (269). Transculturation as a borderlands action, if that is a solution to her dilemma, does not happen automatically; it is no simple feat. As exciting and useful as it may be, it is neither easily nor quickly achieved. It is not easy to claim a new place as one’s own, or even certain parts of it. It is not even an obvious option.

Marcela’s unstated plan is to take in as much of the country as she needs to before it feels like home. Rather than find a place to live, she chooses to experience the land until she can call it her own. Marcela does not stop herself from dreaming of and appreciating new beauty. It is no surprise that most of the things that catch her attention come from the natural landscape of the country. In scene two, she is transfixed by Florida saw grass: “It’s like a green bonfire. I bet if I put my hand to it, it would holler with promise” (246). She is full of hope for what she might discover in her new home and willing to have all sorts of new experiences:

Whatever comes to me. Let my eyes cast down on wheat field and desert, and tall buildings that reach into infinity, and red mountains that will take my breath and just split it into a hundred million pieces, because that’s what beauty can do. It can change you (246).

Marcela assumes that the United States will have its own charm and wonder, and that once she has experienced enough of it, it will alter her, make her less Cuban, and more American. Scene Four opens with her singing as she looks out of the window of a train:

A blush of barley,  
“Over here, Marcela. Can you see?”  
Fields of corn waving, “Come to me.”  
And I feel the heat upon my skin  
As my eyes drink in the brilliant… (256).
Throughout the scene she will be constantly distracted by the view out the window and return to contemplating “Fields upon fields bursting with corn” (262). As she watches the scenery go by and she and Coral talk, Marcela explains how she used to travel in her imagination through listening to Bessie Smith and other musicians on the radio. Eventually, she reveals not only that she wanted change (261), but that she always “knew there was somewhere else” (263). Trusting Coral, she articulates her desire to find something special in the United States:

(Marcela pulls out the folded piece of paper from her bra.)

MARCELA. My Aunt Lise sent it to me. She talks about the greens of this earth, the lush greens, and she’s not talking about money. She’s talking about possibility, you see? The kind that carries you even if you’ve got no compass. Like the kind your father talked about when he was talking about Santiago and the stars, about being able to feel connected to something, to feel your life means something, just by looking up at the sky. And I figure if Aunt Lise found it here...

(263).

It is clear, when this speech is juxtaposed with the song interludes, that Marcela feels passionately in contradictory ways. She almost seems lovesick with the idea of being in the United States; a strange occurrence when earlier she spoke of Santiago as the only place she knew and loved. Was her desire to find something to connect to in the States as strong as the economic necessity that prompted her to leave Santiago? Does she now regret her decision to leave? Has she created this desire now, convincing herself that it is real, to console herself after her loss? Or are the two feelings unconnected; does she adore Santiago, ache over its loss, and simultaneously enjoy dreams of possibility?

Were Marcela able to continue simply taking in the natural wonders of the United States, the conflict of the play might remain entirely internal. Marcela plays her own antagonist, providing plenty of conflict to sustain the two-act drama. However, it is
almost immediately after her speech about possibility that Marcela faces a far more pressing concern: survival. Coral robs her of everything and then shoots her. The physical trials have only just begun. In Scene Six, we discover that she managed to crawl on the floor, jump off the train, and wander alone and penniless, suffering from hunger and thirst. She has hitched buses and trains and has ended up by the harbor of San Diego where she gushes out with, “What I need is to let be. Ever since I come here, everyone’s done nothing but BE at me: Where are you from? Where are you going? Do you want to go by bus or train?” (269) before she faints from hunger. Marcela has lost her whimsical optimism, and will spend most of the scene too weak to stand. It is important to note that the internal conflict has not been replaced by physical difficulties; the two have simply combined and exacerbated each other. Hunger and physical pain have not caused her to forget her dreams, desires, or emotional pain. Although she is not yet able to stand, she is intensely curious when she finds out that Rafael also left a child back in his country.

MARCELA. You miss him?
RAFAEL. I think about him. Sometimes I see him. Like you. With that boy on the road.
MARCELA. My whole body aches just thinking about him. I mean, I gave him to this lady back in Santiago who said she’d take care of him, but ... how do you know?
RAFAEL. You don’t.
MARCELA. What do you do?
RAFAEL. I don’t worry about it. He’s there. I’m here. Simple.
MARCELA. I wish I could think like that (273).

Although Marcela could talk about her aching and exhausted body, instead she says she aches over her son; she wants to discuss her son and her feelings. The main conflict—that Marcela cannot reconcile being Cuban when not in Cuba—that she cannot stand not belonging to this new land—is still evident.
In Scene Seven, Marcela has lost hope. Shivering by the water, begging for money, she encounters, for the first time, a friendly, harmless fellow traveler. However, Marcela is no longer willing to casually chat with strangers; she has become disillusioned and cynical.

MARCELA. Everybody's looking for coin. See that yolk of pale star? It's turned to piss.
MOCHA. What happened to you?
MARCELA. Everybody wants something. Sometimes even when you're not after anything, things come after you (284).

While Mocha's gentleness and practical outlook coax Marcela into conversing further, she is different from all the other characters in that she can speak of Santiago, and every other place she has traveled, with ease. She does not seem to feel that she has lost any of them. Mocha does not define herself by where she has been or where she is from; she has, in a way, rejected the idea of home altogether. While all the characters of this play are travelers and homeless, Mocha is content with that existence. She suggests Marcela also embrace that existence and come with her. However, Marcela is at a breaking point and will not be consoled or inspired by Mocha's example. She still wants something to connect to, something special. Her failure to connect or find a home has left her utterly lost. She finally announces,

I have been assassinated by the sky.
Marcela has died,
Drowned in the ocean's swell,
Covered in seaweed and stagnant black water.

And it is I who have been left,
This I without a name, without a country—
This spectral I who roams the land
Escaping from wounds newly bled,
With a cold spoon in her open mouth,
And a serpent at her throat (289).

The journey has been too taxing; Marcela’s need for home has not been fulfilled and she cannot go on. She proclaims that the person she was is dead; the woman that was Marcela could not exist without being connected, and has thus perished. The Marcela of Cuba needed either Cuba or a surrogate new home; lacking both, her sense of self is lost. While this might be construed as defeat, giving up, or possibly hints of suicidal thoughts, by the end of the monologue, it is revealed that killing off the “I” of Marcela is actually a strategic move for survival. She apparently believes that although she cannot rid herself of one home and claim another, she can kill off one self and gain another.

Oh to be christened now with another name,
A name that will fit this sun-patched, stone-bruised I
Who is eternally homesick,
As benefits one from this land where homesickness is a national disease.
Christen me, Mocha. In the here and now, christen me (290).

Taking a new name will create a new self that copes better with this harsh land, or, perhaps, does not have to cope with it but is fed and nurtured by it. Marcela has found a new tactic to attempt to achieve her original objective—not to integrate her Cuban self into a new home, but to define herself by wherever she is.

In an ironic addition to this new survival tactic, Marcela finally makes the decision to go to New Jersey and find Aunt Lise. Mocha points out that this decision is inconsistent if “Marcela” has ceased to exist; Marcela replies, perhaps lamely, “...One last thing” (290). Perhaps she means that this action will bring the closure to finally put Marcela to rest. However, this contradiction that Mocha points out reveals the chink in Marcela’s (or now, Sharon’s) new armor. Killing off one’s old self entirely is not as easy
as taking a new name. Although she insists to Paco, the immigrant she meets in Scene Nine, that her name is Sharon and that she was born in the United States, she spends her entire session with the john in Scene Eight singing to Santiago:

Santiago
From the bottom of our oceans,
From your nights, your cane,
Give me your fevered kisses.

Give me breeze
Give me sand
Give me milk
From your dark mouth
Give me the air, the wind
From your unrelenting tongue

Santiago
My soul is dying
Without your dreams
Without your love (292).

If Marcela’s soul is dying, it cannot already be dead. Clearly, “Sharon” has not been created entirely, and Marcela, as well as her longing for Santiago, for her past, and for her identity, remains. Carlo, whom Marcela encounters in Scene Ten, figures out as much within moments of meeting her. He says that Sharon is a funny kind of name for someone from Cuba, and Marcela admits that the name is new (295). Carlo claims to prefer Marcela to Sharon, and when Marcela disagrees with him, he tells a story that introduces a possibility of transculturation as act of reconciliation.

CARLO. My folks changed their name when they came here. This was way back, before I was born. They wanted to sound like they belonged, so they went from Pietroponte to Cahill in one day. But when it came time to name me they went ahead and called me Carlo after my dead uncle. I’ve spent my whole life stuck with the ill-sounding name of Carlo Cahill just because my folks wanted to belong.
MARCELA. Doesn’t sound so bad.
CARLO. Sounds god awful when you put it next to other people’s names. But I can’t change it. Not now. I’ve lived with it too long. But you’ve got a perfectly good name, one you were born with. It may not sound right, here, now, but I bet it’ll come to suit you fine (296).

With this story, Carlo shows that it is possible to survive having pieces of you that are both foreign and local. He suggests that getting rid of one’s past is both impossible and unfavorable. With just these few lines, he tells her that her Cuban heritage, her past, her old identity, is not only thoroughly hers, but that it can, in fact, function in this new place. While he acknowledges the awkwardness and difficulty of it, he believes that she could be the old Marcela, just in a new place.

While Marcela reacts violently to Carlo’s suggestion, she remains to listen to him when she finds that he knew Aunt Lise. As he describes Lise, we finally see a picture of what this woman and her immigrant experience was like. She always bought the same food: black beans, white rice, and cocktail franks, with the occasional splurge on Spanish wine. She carried black rosary beads and wore a red sash to “keep the spirits of the earth in line, keep protected” (297). We also find that she has died and her house has been torn down.

Marcela’s reaction is to show Carlo Lise’s letter, and then tear it to pieces. Carlo protests, but she replies, “Last bit of Cuba I got left to get rid of, last bit of fucking…” (297). I would argue, however, that this is not a performance of tearing up Cuba, or her love of it, but her former ideas of how to find a home. She is tearing up the antagonist of the play, the idea that she must be defined by a place, and only one place. It is as though the letter is the barrier that separates the Marcela who can only be determined by Cuba, and the Sharon who is only defined by the United States. Marcela’s line continues with,
“Can’t walk around with a dead woman’s letter next to my skin. Will start to feel dead myself” (297). Again, the tearing of the letter is not Marcela rejecting her connection to her aunt, but of the fantasy that Marcela created with the letter. Throughout the play, Aunt Lise has not been a symbol of Cuba, or of love and family, but of a reason to chase a dream. It was in one letter where Lise described some of the strange sights of her new country that Marcela based her hope that she might find a place that can fulfill her more than Cuba. Finding Lise herself and taking refuge in Lise’s home, a seemingly logical survival strategy, has never been part of Marcela’s plan. By tearing up the letter, Marcela’s accepts that her vague but passionate dreams of finding enough beauty to replace the sense of connection she had to Santiago are unfulfillable. This line also gives a hint that Marcela is admitting that her old self is not dead, and she does not want it to be so. The “I” of Marcela is resurfacing, along with her old drive and perseverance, but with a new definition of herself.

The journey from Cuba to the United States caused a painful transculturation in Marcela. But is she now able to see herself as transculturated in a borderlands sense? Is she beginning to transculturate herself, actively choosing how to negotiate her identity? Is she now willing to embrace aspects of her past, her nationality, and her culture while adapting to her new surroundings? We are given two quick and subtle hints, both in her final exchange with Carlo.

   CARLO. What now?
   MARCELA. I don’t know.
   CARLO. You can’t stay out here.
   MARCELA. No, although it sure feels good to look at snow. Ambrosio might like it here.
CARLO. Who?
MARCELA. This little boy I know (297-298).

In this passage we can see that, at least in one way, Marcela is back at a kind of square one. All the recent trials have faded enough to allow for a new beginning. She is not certain what it is exactly, nor how to go about it. However, she allows her appreciation of beauty to resurface and simply gazes at the snow. Even more significantly, she thinks of her son, a deep and important part of her past, without shame or angst, then refers to him as just a little boy. She is emotionally letting him go and at the same time, able to think of him without feeling lost or guilty. This small reference suggests a world of healing and maturity is beginning in Marcela.

The second hint comes as she and Carlo speak to each other as two interested human beings; the possibility of human connection—friendship? romance?—surfaces.

MARCELA. (Simultaneously) You want--?
CARLO. (Simultaneously) You want--?
MARCELA. Go ahead.
CARLO. I was just going to say...if you wanted a drink or—
MARCELA. No.
CARLO. Oh.
MARCELA. Not yet.
CARLO. But later?
MARCELA. Maybe (298).

While Marcela has grown more than a little wary and suspicious of men and of strangers in general, something has happened within her that is willing to give Carlo a chance. Although she tries to give him back the coat he has lent her, he insists that she keep it, and she accepts. This is a major difference from her immediate assumption that Rafael will expect sexual favors for buying her food, or her coldness with Mocha, despite Mocha’s cheerful and unassuming talk. The idea of going out for a drink—a social
engagement—is strangely new in this tale of harsh, unpredictable human relations.

Marcela’s subtle acceptance of the possibility of friendship and enjoying another person’s company show that she is moving on, changing her ideas of how the world works and how she works within it. She does not forget what she has learned or suddenly believe that all will be well, but she has opened herself to new, pleasurable and fulfilling possibilities in her new place.

The last moment of the play is definitely a moment that is triumphant in transculturation as a tool for empowerment. Marcela sings a variation on the Invocation from part one, and proclaims new insight and new feelings.

The palm of Santiago
Burns in the sky
As another Santiago
Shines in the night.

And a pale arm of Santiagos
All around me.
A rain of silver light
That longs to guide me.

On this ground of concrete,
On this ashen floor,
The stars of Santiago
Let my heart be restored (300-301).

With this ending, the playwright gives the audience a comforting and empowering closure and resolution. Marcela has a new understanding of Santiago and what a home can be; the fact that there are many Santiagos is no longer confusing but comforting to her. For the first time, a benevolent outside source is described—Marcela feels that she can be guided. And, in the final stanza, she proclaims that it is most definitely in this place, this strange new home, where she will grow and live. It is not that location is no
longer important, but she can create a new way to love and understand herself by incorporating both her past and present locations.

Thus, the politics of identity is absolutely at the center of *Prodigal Kiss*. Transculturation is seen as a traumatic process that happens to a person, and as a choice that can enable a person to maturity and freedom. MarceIa most definitely engages in “the process by which a speaking subject constitutes herself in given social relations of power and discursive formation” (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 5), in every interaction she has. She experiences her new location, new acquaintances, and the new system of power, and reacts. The ability to remain a speaking subject while also avoiding being silenced or killed, is a highly intense plotline. Transculturation is never simple, whether it is experienced or performed. While a healthy transculturated subject, according to Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez, will position “herself in the dialectical ‘give and take’ of a subjectivity in process—known as the ‘toma y daca’ in theories of transculturation”(5), this play shows that this “give and take” can be a physically and emotionally dangerous realm where gaining any favorable position requires a fierce struggle. The fact that MarceIa does begin to give and take, the fact that she does learn to look on her past as something that drives her on, not something that holds her back, and that she learns how to let neither Cuba nor the United States define her entirely—all these are significant triumphs. By showing transculturation both as a painful experience and a possibility for active choice in a liminal identity, *Prodigal Kiss* is a careful study in latinidad.
THE POLITICS OF LOCATION

The next of Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez’s politics that I will explore is the politics of location, which “situates a subject in a given geopolitical space, acknowledging the relations of power within that space and the identity formations that emerge from it” (5). The politics of location is central in Prodigal Kiss because physical and emotional journeying are the entire frame for the conflict of the story. The physical spaces she occupies are many and extremely spread out—Florida, the mid-west, San Diego, the “West,” and New Jersey. However, the power relations she experiences in those physical spaces are consistent enough that we can think of the play as presenting a single politics of one location: it is where one becomes Latino/a. It is the location of the moment, series of moments, or the life-long process, of no longer being Latin American and becoming Latino/a, and not “American”. The “relations of power” and “identity formations” are carefully set out to create tension, conflict, and relations between Marcela and the other Latinos/as that she meets inside that location.

The physical realities of the politics of location in Prodigal Kiss are those of newcomers who have nothing and know no one in a new place. The circumstances are of having no home, no citizenship, and no companions or family. All four of the major supporting characters, at one point, were broke, had to learn new ropes fast, and dealt with displacement from their former locations. Because each character is now Latino/a, it is possible to describe the politics of location in this play as a landscape of a latinidad—a system of identification and action for Latinos/as. It is an illustration of the
physical and emotional perimeters of a Latino/a imaginary. Most of all, because each character is from Santiago, a place known for pilgrims, the play becomes a poetics of traveling. How will each character make the journey from being “Latin” to being “Latino/a”?

Marcela is the traveler that links all the others. She is the newest arrival, and it is her specific journey from being Cuban to Latina that will reveal just how different those locations, and the identity formations within them, are. She must face a new world with power dynamics that frighten and abuse her; and the fact that it is other Latinos/as that do her such damage is highly significant. This is not the politics of location for all immigrants to the United States; it is very specifically, a politics of latinidad.

Ignacio has rejected his Spanish origin, and the connotations of origin in general. He resents that his origin defines him in the United States; it is clear that he has experienced latinidad from above, or tropicalization. “They think you haven’t been anywhere except where you’re from. And I’m not from damn Spain anymore” (247). He has coped with economic scarcity by finding unscrupulous ways to “get around” paying for travel, which he has adopted as his new lifestyle and occupation. He has no interest in settling down or finding a new home; he is a hardened pilgrim, uninterested in delicate or passionate feelings, and seeking nothing resembling enlightenment, forgiveness, love, or any of the other common reasons for pilgrimage. In fact, he scoffs at the notion of pilgrimage. He unabashedly recalls throwing rocks at pilgrims until they bled and proclaims “I don’t read letters. I don’t want signs. I got enough with a ticket” (247). He has equated latinidad with prostitution, attempting to justify (or perhaps understand) his
actions and position in this new world. He is in every way an opportunist and enjoys telling others how he expertly plays the field. Meanwhile, he intends to use whomever he meets in whatever way he wishes.

Coral is twice displaced, first from Chile, second from her father's Wall Street world after his death. After not quite growing up in her impoverished relatives' house, she leaves for St. Louis at the tender age of thirteen, and is plunged into the world of prostitution. She finally leaves that life for factory work, and then enters a marriage, and then motherhood. In her old age Coral is alone again, and committed to constant travel on trains. Coral has traded her Chilean Santiago identity for an identification with singer Bessie Smith, whom she never met yet loves far more that her own daughter:

She walked down the street without a care, wrapping her strong laugh around tender young men and tall, wide-hipped women with the smell of marigolds in their hair. I though, "I may not know much, but I know what I want. That's the kind of woman I want to be: someone who belongs to everyone and no one, a self-made, self-possessed bird with the taste of poison on her lips (258).

An actress playing Coral will have to decide what this connection means; perhaps Coral is a woman of color and sees Bessie as an example of someone who has not allowed her colored status to control her destiny. Perhaps Bessie's independence and confidence contrasted sharply with the roles given to Coral by a conservative Chilean upbringing and a strict father. Whatever the reason, it is clear that Coral wanted to form her Latina identity through an affinity with Bessie Smith. The moment she was old enough to travel, she went to St. Louis to seek what Bessie sang about. However, while Coral is now an eternal traveler, she seeks nothing—certainly not herself. She knows who she is, and constantly performs that identity in order to keep it in place. She does not travel to
particular places; she is more interested in departing from them. Having experienced emotional attachments, she travels to flee from them. She claims to understand America, and to reject whatever it offers to her, constantly referring to the corn out the window as useless and a waste. She robs people, sometimes even killing them, in order to make ends meet. She has accepted the harsh realities of America, and has decided that this is what being Latina means for her.

Rafael began working immediately after he arrived from the Dominican Republic, but found that the poor pay, nasty working conditions, and hard labor were not worth the effort. He too has distanced himself from his Santiago, from his girlfriend and son, explaining simply, “I don’t worry about it. He’s there. I’m here. Simple” (273). Although he seems to have few worries, it takes very little for Rafael to lose his temper; he is not as secure as he lets on. Rafael has integrated himself into a system of prostitution and drugs, using a younger man named Rider to make money. He has no scruples about physically abusing Rider (or Marcela) with his fists or a knife; it is important to note, however, that he does feel the need to justify how he treats Rider. He says that he takes care of Rider, keeping him out trouble and preventing him getting killed. Rafael says that he makes Rider feel “wanted” by having sex with him occasionally, and valuable by calling him “best meat.” The fact that he still wishes to convince himself of ethical standards shows that Rafael is not made of pragmatic ice, but it still negotiating and dealing with the ugliness of his situation.

Finally, Mocha has learned how to function in this strange new country. Although she seems very different than the previous characters, not wanting to hurt
Marcela and posing no threat (being disabled and unarmed), Mocha also lives a fairly harsh reality. Despite her positive outlook, we hear quick hints about her situation—first that she had to leave Argentina in order to avoid being disappeared during the Dirty War (286), that her own income is iffy at best, “I’m looking for coin myself to take me across the border” (284), and that she has to fend off whomever comes her way: “You got to get yourself a mirror. I had one, but it got broke by some asshole who had nothing better to do than smash up what didn’t belong to him” (288). Mocha has dealt with her loss of Santiago de Argentina by remaining connected to it through the myths of involve St. James. From the many slips of paper pinned to her blanket, it can be inferred that Mocha has become a pilgrim of St. James. We are not told what she seeks, or what the pilgrimage means to her, but it is clear that she is more comfortable in her own skin than any other character. Mocha’s free and fanciful musing about St. James shows that it does not bother her to think or speak of her heritage; meanwhile, she finds ways to get around, despite her many obstacles. For Mocha, becoming a pilgrim of St. James means that she will always, in some way, be home, although she will never settle down in any one place. Through the art of traveling, she connects Chile and the United States and thus forms her Latina identity.

The “relations of power within” (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 5) the politics of location presented in this play and “the identity formations that emerge from it” (ibid.) can be described as a system where everyone must take advantage of someone else in order to get by. In order to survive the ravaging of transculturation, one must become a predator. This is a location where prostitution, a selling of oneself, or at least the
compromising of what was once thought of as priceless, is the norm. Ignacio says plainly, “I’ve always been a whore. That’s clear” (253) and, as mentioned earlier, insists that “We’re all the same—rich, poor, and in-between. Whores. That’s all we are” (249).

When Coral describes the desperation of her childhood situation, Marcela supplies the expected word:

CORAL. I found myself in a whole world of bent rivers. Right smack on the heels of Prohibition’s repeal. Now, what is a shy girl of thirteen with a fool name like Coral going to do in a town busting open with liquor and industry, when all she’s got is a crooked smile and a couple of dollars slipped into her brassiere?
MARCELA. Whore.
CORAL. That is an unkind word.
MARCELA. I’m sorry. I don’t know why—
CORAL. Although it’s true (259).

Coral may have once smarted from having to prostitute herself, but she now sees it as inevitable within the system in this location. Rafael echoes the sentiment as he tells how he attempted to make a living on the “straight path” but it took him nowhere. “So I took a different path, cause I wasn’t about to get by. A drop of fag’s blood, a drop of sailor’s blood, what’s the difference? It’s blood. We all swim in it” (274). Finally, Mocha is not cynical or eager to proclaim the harshness of the power relations of his location; there is no guilt in her as she does not abuse other people. But she is also currently selling her body; others take advantage of her. She speaks of having to trade in order to survive; Marcela is curious: “You trade things?” to which Mocha replies, “Many a suit’ll give me solid green to have me screw them in daylight” (288).

The politics of location in this play are unjust and crazy to Marcela. Once she sees them working within their system, once she sees how Latinos/as perform their identities, and survive in this place, she feels more foreign than ever. However, because
she is Caribbean, because she is “Latin,” because she does come from Santiago and is making a long pilgrimage, there is a definite expectation that she will end up like the others—she will be incorporated into their latinidad. At first she insists that her latinidad is different; she cannot fathom how and why they live these lives. At some points she denies that life here will be the same for her, thinking that she will have other options. She assumes that Ignacio’s actions are wrapped up in his Machismo and Spanish imperialistic views about the Caribbean. She is taken utterly by surprise when Coral also turns out to be a threat, and pleads with Coral that such a life is not necessary, right up until Coral shoots her. Marcela begs Rafael not to hit Rider: “There’s no need for it” (277). She does not want to accept that these are, in fact, the established power dynamics of her new home. When, in despair, she finally realizes that this is generally the way it works for a penniless Latin immigrant in the United States, she is sitting next to someone who seems at peace with the state of things, even with the added disadvantage of not being able to walk. It is at this moment, because she feels that she cannot cope with the politics of this location, Marcela announces that it has killed her. In order to keep going within this set of politics, she needs to become someone new.

After Marcela takes the name Sharon, she ceases traveling around the country receiving whatever comes to her; she no longer drifts. Instead, she actively pursues goals and succeeds in them: she acquires the necessary means to get to New Jersey. Through becoming Sharon, Marcela resigns herself to the politics of this location and masters it—in other words, she now, for the first time, assimilates. That is, she becomes adept at working within the system of her new country. Perhaps both the change in her behavior
and the new name, are a performance of her new nation, this perilous United States that has dealt her nothing but blows.

It is interesting to note that assimilation in this play has nothing to do with steady work, economic prosperity, giving up one’s language, or adopting more mainstream, and less Latina/o cultural practices. The hegemonic forces are not white Anglo-Saxon, but a cutthroat atmosphere where nothing is held sacred, and which, horribly, is inhabited, accepted, and performed by Latino/as. Non-Latino/a influences (perhaps mainstream, white, etc.) are not entirely removed; many characters speak of learning to fight for themselves in a world that is decidedly not Latino/a-dominated, such as Coral’s tale of being called “the Spanish bit” despite her protests that she was from South America (260)—a clear example of latinidad from above. However, it is only a reference. The tensions and stakes in this landscape are all created by Latinos/as. They have created their own system, which is (in this play) inhabited only by them—a latinidad from below. What Marcela assimilates into is a politics of location where bodies are sold and everyone takes advantage of others in order to survive. In the next two scenes, she is seen in a sexual transaction with a john, and then robbing a newly-arrived Cuban immigrant at knife point. Marcela, who fought so hard against being called a whore, and who refused to accept a world where she would need to hurt others to get by, is dead. Sharon, apparently, has the numbness, or drive, or both, to have sex, and cut the flesh of someone from her own homeland, for money.

When Marcela ceases to be passively transculturated by her circumstance, and begins a process of transculturation of her own, only then she is able to meet her location
on different terms. Until she can be free from her imprisonment over her loss of Santiago and her son, until she finds closure with Aunt Lise, and until she learns to move on from traumatic experiences, Marcela will continue to wander, connected to nothing and no one and trapped in a politics that only allows whores to survive. Marcela remains at the mercy of this politics of location as long as she remains at crisis between being Cuban and American. Becoming Sharon helps her to survive within this politics of location, but this identity performance denies her past; it is incomplete and ultimately not helpful. She is neither comfortable nor content as Sharon. However, by returning to Marcela and transculturating who and what Marcela is, she stops defining herself by one place or home. She can see the location in a new way and create her own latinidad within it. Choosing to incorporate her Cuban past with her American present allows her identity to be maturely complicated, successfully resisting being essentialized. In doing so, she leaves this politics of location. She forms a Latina identity that is not characterized by displacement only; her new identity acknowledges loss but retains as much as it can. It can begin to let go of certain attachments, keep others, and negotiate and react to whatever new comes her way.

The way in which Marcela deals with politics of location in Prodigal Kiss is not the way that Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez say that it is usually used in Latina theatre. They use the politics of location in examining how Latina protagonists alter the power relations and dynamics of a space, by negotiating with and relating to the others within it. They are interested in how, through transculturation, protagonists “change the function of the spaces themselves” (8). After a protagonist finds herself within a certain politics of
location, she clashes with it, challenging, questioning, and learning about it and its complexities. She also introduces new ideas, feelings, and beliefs into it. By establishing a firm place for herself within the network of individuals of a space, often a community or family, a protagonist helps others to improve both their inner and outer realities. She transculturates her identity and provides options of transculturation for the entire community. Thus, the community becomes more flexible and accommodating for different individuals, and also a closer, stronger unit.

THE POLITICS OF AFFINITY

While Prodigal Kiss does not utilize the politics of location in the way the Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez usually do, it is necessary to understand their use for it in order to understand their politics of affinity, which recognizes difference without attempting to erase uncomfortable and painful issues such as homophobia, racism, class boundaries, and AIDS. A firmly placed politics of affinity enables [...] protagonists [...] to derive strength from their communities and their agencies (5).

It is also useful here to note how Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach characterize Latina theatre, as it will lend insight into what they mean by “community.” They write that Latina theatre is a woman-dominated genre—that is to say that the majority of the characters are women [...] As a result, mother-daughter relationships are emphasized, and at the closing of the plays the characters celebrate womanhood and these newly forged coalitions among themselves (50-51).
Hand in hand with female-dominated characters comes female-dominated spaces, or spaces which are traditionally regarded as belonging to females:

[. . .] the kitchen, the botánica, the factoría, the bedroom, and the bathroom [. . .] permit the protagonists to interact within and to transact—and, as we argue, to transculturate their women’s world of intergenerational families, women’s bodies, identity affirmation, and ultimately, community (68).

It is interior spaces of the home that Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach take note of as they make their survey of Latina theatre, and traditional nuclear families are the center of the action, although without the presence of men. These locations are small, intimate, at times stifling, and the characters have long, shared histories in them. Ideas of a healthy, loving community, full of support and solidarity—the politics of affinity—are of utmost importance to Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach. While their observations are astute and accurate for the plays that they choose to analyze in their book, it is at these junctures, with the politics of location and with politics of affinity, that Prodigal Kiss ceases to fit into Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach’s paradigms. Because the politics of location is not used in the way they describe, it also does not lead or fit into the politics of affinity. Marcela’s solution of transculturation is private; it is not offered to the community she has been in; she does not change the function of the space. It would hardly have changed anyone if she did attempt to influence them; her triumph is small, tenuous—just enough to gain the strength to keep going and start again. If it is a call to revolution, it is an extremely quiet one, and heard only by the audience.

The play does not utilize the politics of location as a mode of strengthening; in fact, it contests the very idea of affinity. A politics of affinity is questioned, disturbed, and confronted. The play shows, in given circumstances, that the idea that Latinos/as
have a community from which to derive strength can be false and damaging—an excellent and important performance of latinidad, especially as a statement of difference for Latinos/as who may not have the means to speak as loudly as others.

As we have seen, the play does work within a pedagogical function of providing an example of a complex process of transculturation, an exciting and empowering demonstration of latinidad as a borderlands action. However, first, it also illustrates transculturation as a traumatic experience, and the only thing that Latinos/as have in common. The community is based only on a common displacement; and the members of the community do not support and heal each other because of it. Instead, they are all perpetual travelers who ruthlessly take advantage of each other in order to survive. Thus, the latinidad in this play is a name for a problem, on multiple levels. Because all the characters are Latins-turned-Latinos/as, their actions perform a specific latinidad from below, and show dramatically how much symbolic and physical damage Latinos/as can do to each other. In a perhaps secondary function, outside the world of the play, many of the elements put together in the script stand out in firm difference from some of the paradigms set out about Latina theatre, which contests several other essentializing ideas in latinidad from below. The particular paradigms that I am concerned with are those set by Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez.

As stated earlier, Marcela does not alter the politics of location presented in this piece in the way that Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez say that Latina theatre protagonists do. The politics of location in this play are too strong for Marcela to influence them in a major way. Marcela cannot stop the process of transculturation;
displacement happens and she cannot make it less painful. The only way she manages to escape being a victim or a perpetuator of that trauma is by departing from that particular politics of location. She quits them—not the location (obviously, she physically remains in the United States) but the politics of it. She does this by finding a way to negotiate her own identity that allows and influences her to make physical choices that will bring her to a new way of life, away from these individuals. And, perhaps ironically, this process is also called transculturation. Marcela does not derive strength from her community and it is not more flexible at the end. It has also not become stronger at the end. She has no, or chooses not to have any, affinity with this community.

It is not that there is no community or no Latino community; the playwright has chosen characters that, first, are Latino/a—more specifically, they are characters who have had to become Latino/a. This common situation has caused them all to create distinctly similar beliefs and act in certain ways—this creates, as I have shown, a politics of location shared by all. However, this community does not resemble in any way the type of family or home-inspired structure that Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach find so prominent in Latina theatre. It is not an interior space; it is not a woman-dominated space; the characters are not family members and have no shared memories. This is not a community that functions like a family, not even a dysfunctional or patriarchal, oppressive one. There is no leader, no hierarchy of generations, and no rules and expectations for belonging. Expectations of a familial Latino/a community in a play are articulations of a particular Latino/a imaginary. By presenting such a different version of

\footnote{The only character seemingly outside this politics of location is Carlo, who also bears the distinction of being born in the United States.}
a Latino/a community, Svich deeply troubles that familial Latino/a imaginary commonly assumed for Latina Theatre.

The wide variety of nationalities that have all turned up in one play, and the choices of which nationalities have been represented, are also significant in standing out from traditional Latino/a theatre. The nations chosen—Cuba, Spain, Chile, the Dominican Republic, and Argentina—are unusual. Only the Caribbean and South America are present, and only one of the major Latino/a ethnic communities is present—Cuba. Neither Mexico nor Puerto Rico show up. The addition of Spain is interesting because, despite often being lumped in as Hispanic by the mainstream, immigrants with Spanish heritages often feel they have very little in common with immigrants from the new world, and sometimes refuse and/or are refused the name “Latino”. They are often considered (by others as well as themselves) European and having no affinity with developing countries or “banana republics.”

As stated earlier, what this group of people has in common is specifically, and only, that they are, and have in their lifetime become Latino/a. They have experienced the pain of transculturation and somehow survived. They have come to the United States after having at least some growing up in another country. The running gag of the play is that, having all come from Santiago, when they hear that someone else is from Santiago, they light up, assuming it is the same as theirs. The Santiago connection is also poignant and somewhat tragic as they all seemed doomed to eternal travel; pilgrims without real destinations and St. James nowhere in sight. They have all at least begun with nothing and endured severe poverty at one time. They have all experienced racism and
difficulties in assimilating into some sort of “American” life. And, because of those difficulties, they have all learned a system of prostitution, partially forces upon them, partially created and perpetuated by them, in some way to their benefit.

By creating the situation of the play around Marcela, a sympathetic person, and by showing how this community abuses and damages her, Svich paints an excellent picture of how problematic latinidad from below can be. One could consider the play to be a critique of latinidad from below. Marcela is an open and kind individual who in no way expects other Latinos/as to interact with her in this way. While she does not necessarily expect the community to embrace her, there is at least some anticipation in her that other Latinos/as in the United States will be worth talking to. She is willing to listen to them and learn from them. She does think that they can connect on some level. As Marcela is shocked over and over again with the brutal nature of the community, the audience is similarly shocked. The lines “I didn’t come here for this” (255), and “There’s no need for it” (277), echo out of their first contexts as reactions of incredulity to the system presented. Her statement, “Even since I come here, everyone’s done nothing but BE at me” (269), shows that the forming of a Latino/a identity can make not for affinity but enmity between individuals. When she says “Everybody wants something. Sometimes even when your not after anything, things come after you” (284) she is realizing that there is nothing she can do to change this reality of the community; it is set. She realizes its menacing potential and its formidable strength. The violence of the play is intense, with words and weapons. In addition to the danger and exposure of the boat crossing, Marcela endures an attempted rape, gets shot, and beaten, and goes days
without food, before she endures selling her body and committing the same violent
crimes in order to survive. The events are traumatic, the transformation even more so.

What makes the discussion more realistic and layered is that each character is
three-dimensional and a product of their circumstances. Violence is seen to be a learned
behavior; no character is inherently evil. Even Ignacio, perhaps the one who most
resembles a traditional villain, so steeped in Machismo, shows insight into his situation
that shows that there is more to him than that. Mocha is the most sympathetic of
Marcela’s encounters; she does not harm Marcela in any way. However, it must be
remembered that Mocha is harmless by necessity; she is unarmed and cannot get out her
wheelchair. She is more likely to benefit from Marcela by being friendly; it is
conceivable that she hopes to gain a measure of protection and more earning power if
Marcela travels with her. The most heart-wrenching relationships, however brief, are
contained between the Ignacio and Mocha encounters. Marcela shares so much in
common with Rafael and Coral, yet they both utterly dominate and abuse her that these
are the most intense and demonstrative scenes in the play.

Rafael is the first character to make a gesture of kindness in the play, sending
Rider to buy food to keep the fainting Marcela alive. There is nothing that makes him do
it; he is not, despite her immediate suspicion, planning to abuse or take advantage of her.
He explains why he is doing it for her: he too knows hunger and can sympathize with her
situation (272). This is the first instance of empathy in the play. It is a connection,
something worth acting on. As they talk, they find that they truly have many things in
common. They both are from the Caribbean and from Santiago; Rafael even says,
“We’re neighbors, *como quien dice*¹⁹” (272). They also both left behind a lover and a child; both admit to having many thoughts and questions about their offspring. The similarities are substantial; it seems Marcela might have made an actual friend. However, this idea evaporates fairly quickly as Rafael nonchalantly describes his lifestyle and occupation. Not thinking of how he might react to being judged, Marcela voices her dismay.

RAFAEL. He don’t look it, but Rider’s got some ass. The sailors and suits can’t get enough of him.
MARCELA. And you?
RAFAEL. I do him every once in awhile. Got to make sure he’s still sharp, got to make him feel wanted. He’s an orphan for Chrissakes.
MARCELA. But you don’t mean it.
RAFAEL. I keep Rider out of trouble. He’d be dead by now if I wasn’t around.
MARCELA. But the money’s good, isn’t it? You’re like everybody else… (274).

Marcela does not think of her vulnerability or the danger she is in, despite the fact that the more she finds about Rafael, the more frightening he is. Later, she begs him to stop hitting Rider and although she anticipates him insulting her as a *jinetera*, she plays right into his game so that he can taunt her about the price her son might be able to fetch (279). As she swears at him in anger, he begins to beat her. Although he ceases when she begs for mercy and follows his orders to eat the fries he has bought her, none of her screams sway him from slashing Rider with a knife until the younger man collapses. Just after he has presented a hopeful possibility for help and support, Rafael instead becomes a picture of cruelty.

Audiences watching this play will ask, along with Marcela, why must it be this way? Why are these Latinos/as predators of their own kind? They will have to consider

¹⁹ “Like they say.” My translation.
how familiar these situations are to them; if they know them well, they will identify and feel thus moved. If they find a situation foreign, they will be reminded of Latinos/as who have a different reality from theirs. And, of course, there are many mixed reactions to be had. The audience must question where they see themselves in relation to the characters’ worldviews, circumstances, and choices.

Perhaps even more poignant is the expectation and denial of connection between Marcela and Coral. From the beginning of scene two, their conversation is open and easy; they have a lot to talk about. They speak as two people who understand each other. It may be argued that Coral is only talking in order to put Marcela at ease to make the robbery easier, but it must be remembered that Coral is surprised by how much she has in common with Marcela, and reveals far more about herself than she would have otherwise. Coral is impressed by how much Marcela understands about Santiago and its myths; at the same time Marcela listens attentively to hearing about how all the Santiagos and thus their inhabitants, are connected through the stars.

CORAL. Right on the Mapocho River, the river of milk. It can take you straight up to the stars on a good day.
MARCELA. The stars?
CORAL. “If you ride the river high enough, you can touch the stars, and go straight to Santiago.” That’s what my father used to say.
MARCELA. Santiago—?
CORAL. The one in Spain.
MARCELA. The road to St. James?
CORAL. You’ve been there?
MARCELA. No, but I’ve heard...
CORAL. My father dreamed of going there. All his life. He’d say, “There is only one Santiago, child. The one in Spain. The rest of us are stars dropped down from the heavens and scattered over the earth. Look up at the sky, child. Look at the Milky Way. You see that star? That’s us, that’s Santiago de Chile. And that one, that shines so brightly it hurts your eyes, that’s Santiago in Spain.
MARCELA. Fi-nis-terre.
Coral. Eh?
Marcela. Last place on earth before you reach heaven.
Coral. You have been there (256-257).

Coral and Marcela take each other by surprise with their common knowledge and lore of the Santiagos, not just their own towns, but also Santiago de Compostela and all the others. The two women have more and more in common as they talk. As Marcela marvels at the fields of corn out the window, Coral is reminded of herself, when she first arrived in the United States, even though Marcela has not yet revealed that she has just arrived or where she is from. Coral tells Marcela about New York and about Bessie Smith, and the inspiration that Coral gained from Bessie. As Coral describes the confident, beautiful, and sexual woman, that Bessie was, and how early Coral knew that this was exactly what she wanted to be, a fierce independent spirit is shown. Coral loves freedom and insists upon owning herself and controlling her own destiny. This very much resembles the courage and tenacity Marcela displayed in the last scene, telling of her perilous journey, describing her eagerness to experience America, and defending herself against Ignacio. Coral is then surprised to find that Marcela knows of Bessie Smith and knows her music. Bessie, as well as other American musicians, also inspired Marcela.

I would press my ear against the radio so I could shut out everything else in the neighborhood and let the songs come to me. At the end of the night, my ear would be burning, and it would hurt to even move my head to one side, but I didn’t care, as long as I could go to the places the songs would take me (259).

The two women share an intimate and truly friendly moment as they sing to each other from one of Bessie’s songs.
MARCELA. I remember Bessie because she sang about St. Louis.
CORAL. That she did.
(Coral sings a line from "St. Louis Blues.")
CORAL. "St. Louis woman, where's your diamond ring?
(Marcela sings another line.)
MARCELA. I got the St. Louis blues, and that's as blue as I can be (259).

Song is generally only used in this play in Marcela’s soliloquies; although it is still used in a realistic way in this scene, it is significant that something as beautiful as song can connect the two characters.

Marcela is shocked to hear that Coral has a daughter that she does not speak to, but as Coral explains that she was a “reckless lovesick mother” (260), Marcela reveals that she was the same way. There is a strong sense of understanding between the two women in the next passage.

MARCELA... But I thought having a baby would do something, you know change things. Didn’t change anything. Chucho, his father, would have nothing to do with him. And I sure as hell didn’t want to be a mother.
CORAL. Like me.
MARCELA. Eh?
CORAL. You loved him, this Chucho?
MARCELA. I thought I did. But he was a shit, you know. He—
CORAL. Couldn’t keep his hand in his pocket?
MARCELA. He couldn’t keep anything in his pocket. So, I gave him up.
CORAL. Chucho?
MARCELA. My son. I couldn’t stand the sight of him.
CORAL. He reminded you of his father?
MARCELA. He reminded me of all men: Everything they’d done to me, everything they’d do... (261)

Coral anticipates Marcela’s stories because she has lived through the same thing. Giving birth, giving up motherhood, and failed romantic relationships are common enough. However, Marcela still believes that Coral ought to reconcile with her child, and continues to admire the fields she sees through the window. Coral begins to give her
advice and prophesy of what Marcela will encounter here, and none of it pleasant. She attempts to break Marcela’s illusions and make her see the country and her situation realistically, perhaps because of her bitterness, perhaps because she thinks it will do Marcela some good.

And you will know that your lovers will remain photographs on a wall, in a breast pocket, 
In the inside of your seam, and the train will go on past origins and history, 
And the moon will go unburied. 
And Christ’s children will sail on tiny rafts of twigs burning in the sea, 
And they will come here, like you, like me, 
And place their faith in a brilliant fever of a dream 
Because they have spent their lives trembling, their days in want, and it is bounty that they seek 
That very bounty that is killing me. (262-263)

This is a key moment because Coral is not simply telling a story but passionately expressing her beliefs about being Latino/a. Something about Marcela and her situation inspire Coral and give her the impulse to make this impassioned speech. She gets so worked up, she goes into a terrible coughing fit. It is after this that Coral’s demeanor changes dramatically; she is now working herself up to the robbery and shooting. First she lashes out when Marcela attempts to help her as she coughs, then begins to speak coldly to her.

CORAL. You shouldn’t stay here. 
MARCELA. I’ve nowhere else. 
CORAL. Leave. Get off this train. 
MARCELA. I’ve got a ticket. 
CORAL. A ticket? 
MARCELA. From the kiosk. I got it punched. See? 
CORAL. You don’t know anything. 
MARCELA. I know how to fuck. 
CORAL. You won’t last a week.
Coral belittles Marcela and is perhaps warning her, giving her a chance to escape. Marcela never sees the danger coming and simply responds as a young person who wants to prove herself to the older generation. After learning about Aunt Lise, Coral loses patience and finally announces her intentions, first saying that if Marcela gives up immediately, she won’t cause any fuss. Marcela has no idea how the dynamic has suddenly changed; she cannot believe what this woman is about to do. Coral explains herself quickly,

I told you once, I don’t want you on this train. You stink of bad luck. You just about gave me a heart attack. I don’t need that. I don’t need another daughter. I already got one. And I don’t tend to her for the very same reason. Cause she makes me upset. She ruins my order. Now, give me your money, and we’ll call it even (265).

It is because she is already so connected to Marcela, that they share knowledge of Santiago, of Bessie Smith, of motherhood, of painful relationships, and of displacement from their countries, that Coral is taking this action now. She and Marcela are so similar that Marcela appears daughter-like to her. It is the possibility of an important, emotional, familial, connection, of people needing and tending to each other, that Coral reacts against. She will not have it. And although it is clear that Coral has done this before, today’s is not just an everyday robbery; it has become personal. Even after Marcela has meekly handed over her money, Coral shoots her anyway and leaves her for dead, singing from “St. Louis Blues” as she exits the train car.

The tragedy of the situation is gut-wrenching. Why wouldn’t two women with such a common vocabulary and history strengthen each other and take comfort in each other? When two women who have been denied fulfillment in families have the chance
to recreate a mother-daughter dynamic, why does Coral reject the option so brutally? One answer is that the brutality of Coral’s past has rendered her incapable of such positive action. She is a product of her circumstances and of the politics of this location. She believes that she cannot survive with a companion or attachment; she convinces herself that her act is one of self-preservation, despite the fact that Marcela poses no physical threat.

This extreme lack of solidarity between women, even though they are not divided by class or race,\(^{20}\) is more than disturbing. The idea that mother-daughter relationships are valuable and helpful is questioned here. Marcela’s openness and offered trust is severely abused. It seems so unnecessary, but it is not senseless—Coral’s reasons for her actions are not unclear. Furthermore, the situation does speak to a reality; what it represents is not unheard of. Women often pose the greatest threats to each other, especially after trust is established between them. The crimes they commit against each other can be just as damaging as those committed by men, and have plenty of their own facets that are worth analyzing. In this same way, being treated unkindly by a person of your own community can be just as devastating, perhaps even more so, than being hurt by someone from another place or people. This is the situation confronted and illustrated in *Prodigal Kiss*; the community represented is a Latino/a one, and all the questions asked are of immediate interest to Latinos/as. Thus the play is a direct confrontation and questioning of latinidad.

\(^{20}\) Of course, racial tension could easily be added by casting actresses of different races.
While many plays (arguably all Latino/a drama) can be thought through in terms of latinidad, often by asking “How is latinidad performed by the individuals?” “How do communities define themselves?” “Who is in, who is out?” etc., *Prodigal Kiss* takes on latinidad in a larger and more immediate sense. Firstly, without ever invoking the actual term, it very much asks, “What is it to be Latino/a?” and “What does “Latino/a” mean?” taking into account some of the most diverse backgrounds of Latinos. It contests the common ideas and images of both Latino/a communities and Latino/a imaginaries. By presenting individuals that all have heritages in Spanish-speaking countries, who have experienced displacement and transculturation, having to form Latino/a identities in the United States, yet showing how unbelievably unconnected, and antagonistic the individuals are, the play asks, “What all is truly, actually, shared when two people are Latino/a?” and “Do Latinos/as have anything to unite them?” Also, because the play also deals directly with action and with events, it can ask “What happens when Latinos/as abuse each other, in the deed and the aftermath?” “When there is conflict between Latinos/as, how is it different from conflict between Latinos/as and hegemonic forces?” “What are the points of offense? Why do they do so? What is it that divides them? Is anyone justified?” The play is a manifestation and a performance of latinidad, because it shows how complex, contradictory, and diverse a group of people can be, how difficult it is for them to form a cohesive unit, and how being Latino/a is truly a different experience and choice for each one.

What makes this play quite different from other Latino/a plays is that it depicts no established groups and does not present a positive model of community. The community
presented is hardly recognizable. Latino/a theatre frequently focuses on either families, neighbors, or workers—people who already live near each other in some way. In Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez’s case, they often focus on communities of women, especially in traditional women’s spaces, like the kitchen. They write that communities of women often are capable of embracing more difference and incorporating more diversity into the community. At one point, as they reference their four types of politics in thinking through transculturation, they note that

What is curiously “missing” from this list is a politics of “nationality” based on country of origin. Women’s solidarity and affinity supersede the divisions based on nationality that had previously defined Latino male theatre. As a result, this corpus of theatrical works can rightfully claim itself as Latina theatre (94).

Because Latino theatre has been divided by nationality in the past, Sternbach and Sandoval-Sánchez are interested in instances when those divisions have fallen away. However they do not consider why the divisions occurred or how they continue to occur. Prodigal Kiss addresses this issue at the most intimate level—between individuals. And, while not subscribing to the usual model of community, the play also manages not to allow the “politics of nationality” to go missing, but instead privileges it, and brings it to the forefront of discussion. One important example of this is in the dynamics between Marcela and Ignacio. The negotiations of a Spanish man and a Cuban woman are rich with hostilities and expectations based on their nations. Other examples appear as characters reveal the different reasons for why they came to the United States; Mocha fled the Dirty War in Argentina; Marcela was suffering from poverty and the danger of being put in prison for “disturbing the peace” in Cuba. A director will have all sort of opportunities to depict a politics of nationality by deciding how to cast the play; could an
elderly actor make Ignacio represent the old Spanish regimes? Will the tension between Rafael and Marcela increase or decrease if they are non-white or are of different races? What symbols of nations, especially those of the United States, might be utilized in sets or costumes?

Because of these tension and possibilities, the play very clearly incorporates a politics of nationality. The play is usefully inclusive, not just for bringing in more nationalities but showing how they clash with and complement each other.

Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach seem to see transculturation as a method to avoid conflict of nationality. While they do not wish to erase issues of nationality, they believe that the possibilities for a pan-Latino project are increased by avoiding problems of conflict. They believe that transculturation (again, in their sense as a borderlands action) allows for inclusion of difference without conflict:

Whereas a single classification (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Chicana/o) limits, potentially essentializes, and divides in nationalistic terms, a transcultural subjectivity takes the difference into account while at the same time facilitating a political coalescence and solidarity. In this sense, Latina/o does not replace either Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Chicano, but rather represents a processual self-definition that operates according to new identity formations of Latinas/os in the U.S., including those nationalist allegiances that usually receive less attention (44).

The two scholars are concerned with latinidad in its largest sense; they do see a reason to speak to all Latinos/as. They want to question what all Latinos/as share, and how they can learn from each others differences. By using “Latina” as a pan-Latina signifier, they hope to be inclusive for the sake of how much the Latina theatre community, and through that Latinas in general, can be strengthened in solidarity.
Caridad Svich is involved in a similar project. By writing a play populated only with Latino/a characters, and carefully including certain nationalities that are not often seen, she too is dealing with pan-Latino/a concept. However, she is adding to the diversity of the project by taking away the premises of solidarity, friendliness, and a common goal. She does not avoid the divisions of nationality or gender or any other; she courts them. While the play does deal with Latinos/as in an all-encompassing sense, it questions the very idea of togetherness, rather than taking immediate steps toward it. Svich is heavily engaged in “recognizing difference without erasing uncomfortable boundaries” (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach, 5) by illustrating conflict in violent detail. She puts the audience through considerable discomfort as they must witness how Latinos/as abuse each other. Svich is dealing with the aspects of latinidad that are difficult to talk about, presenting one layer of problematic realities within a Latino/a imaginary. That layer sits upon a second one which questions what the term “Latino imaginary” signifies, and questions when it can coincide with the term community. Svich’s discussions of difference and boundaries are direct and honest. Her depiction of the differences between Latinos and their treatment of each other, the savage power dynamics that can exist between them, and the intellectual and physical battles they fight are a reminder of a side of latinidad that is rarely examined.

Taking such bold steps to look at latinidad in such a new and uncomfortable way may come at a price. By not following the traditional paths of the playwrights of one’s heritage, and by not coinciding with the trends of one’s contemporaries, an artist may seem to not be as much a part of a movement or community as they would like. It is
interesting that Svich, as a playwright, is given a brief notice when just such a dilemma is given attention in *Stages of Life*.

Audiences expect Latina/o plays to have the barrio community and its working class, disenfranchised denizens as a referent as a proof of "authenticity." Once a playwright, such as Caridad Svich or Lynn Alvarez, de-essentializes her work by setting it outside of those expected class locations, she may find herself at odds with the very community her writing serves (35).

As we have seen, Svich not only does not restrict herself to "the barrio community," but also troubles a multitude of expectations Latino/a and non-Latino/a audiences might have for a Latina playwright. And while, I doubt that Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach would withhold the blessing of "authenticity" from Svich’s work, I would like to conclude by arguing that plays like this are absolutely relevant and helpful to Latino/a community. By working so diligently at troubling the terms of latinidad (Latino/a imaginary, Latino/a community, Latino/a, home,) I believe that Svich ultimately increases the chances for solidarity in a Latino/a community that embraces the difference within it. If "the very community her writing serves" finds itself at odds with plays like this one, it is probably a matter of unwillingness to confront the issues at hand and see itself implicated in the latinidad depicted. By writing a play that does not follow many of the trends of Latina theatre, Svich increases the diversity of what Latina theatre is. By returning to issues that other playwrights and scholars may have considered solved or less relevant, Svich points out how new "development" in dramaturgy may have been discriminatory, exclusionist, or silencing. By adding new ideas and layers to the established discussion, her work helps renew the dramaturgy. The play does not reject the possibilities and realities of established communities, it simply brings another model of existence into the discussion.
The play still serves a pedagogical function, asking audiences where they see themselves in this landscape of ideologies. How does the Latino/a community presented in this play mesh and clash with their ideas of what the Latino/a community is or should be? How are the differences between Latino/a imaginary and Latino/a community realized, as the audience sees them? The audience must consider how they fit into the story. Do they resemble any of the characters, which, and how? Can they hear echoes of their beliefs, or twisted renditions of their beliefs, in the characters' words? Can they relate to anyone's actions? Then, perhaps more importantly, how do they feel about these resemblances? And how does the play present alternatives, ideas, and possibilities for audience members that will help them to negotiate their own lives? Whether positively or negatively, how does the play inspire them to act?

By focusing the play simultaneously on individuals' quests for wholeness and a community's shocking state of dilapidated, apathetic cruelty, Svich incorporates many of the different dilemmas of latinidad. By showing several characters who have had to become Latino/a, who have had to figure out how to be Latin others in the United States, Svich goes directly to the heart of the term Latino/a—what does it mean?—and latinidad—what is this process of becoming Latino/a and how does it work for so many others? Even as individuals must find their own way through the world, coping with their innermost feelings and finding ways to survive physically and emotionally, there are others within that world, and then a whole outer world, that cannot be shut out. Marcela may have departed from the specific individuals of this play, but it is clear that her world will never be a solitary one. It is her newfound transculturation that not only allows her
to resolve the issues inside her own head and heart, but also allows her to begin to truly
give and take with other human beings again. She is, most definitely, finding a way back
into a community, just as she finds a way to create a community. The play loudly leaves
the question, “What might the community be?” wide open. Individuals in audiences will
similarly receive the play on their own, but will also have the opportunity to think
through the play with each other, and use what they glean from these exchanges with
others who were not in the theatre that night. The play, and its effects, encompass
latinidad, as a plight, a state, a process, and a solution; the possibilities—for furthering
and contesting—each of these, will be available to anyone who sees the play. They will
be left with questions that pertain to individuals and groups: what will their community
be like? How will they perform latinidad?
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

When I first began my prospectus and research for this thesis, latinidad was given a sub-point in the third chapter. I saw instances in *Prodigal Kiss* that I thought could only be described by this term that I had heard bandied about in classes, which I vaguely understood as the idea that Latinos/as were all one group, despite their incredible differences. As my advisor pushed me to articulate more clearly what I planned to do with the term, and what it meant to me, I realized I had gotten myself into a much larger and tightly wound knot than I realized. As my research became more focused, the term beginning to consume me, I continually had moments of utter astonishment because of new places the term took me. I kept thinking, “What a mess.” A newcomer to Latino/a studies with no latinidad of my own, I was terrified to have an opinion, draw any conclusion, certain that whatever I wrote produced essentializing and hegemonic consequences. While I hope to reexamine my beliefs, actions, and modes of scholarship always, I also hope that this work has shown that latinidad will always be a mess, and rightfully so. Excitingly so. The most important conclusion that I can draw, and I hope, that can be drawn from this work, is first, that latinidad is and must remain elusive and multi-faceted in order to remain useful, and second, that, when taken thus, it is *invaluably*
useful in attempts to identify and transform power structures, and address issues of racism, sexism, and social injustice.

To accept the many capabilities, meanings, and possibilities of latinidad is to accept an inclusiveness which can produce all sorts of new ideas, collaborations, additions, and changes in art, scholarship, popular culture, and personal worldviews. This inclusiveness requires individuals, whether reading/watching/listening or writing/performing/speaking, to consider not only perspectives that are different and/or contradictory, but also types of argument, instances of culture, and historical events, that he or she is not accustomed to. It allows vastly different texts, moments, people, and modes of expression to be seen side by side. In other words, the inclusiveness of latinidad pertains to both content and form.

As has been shown, looking through various moments of cultural expression through latinidad does not make them the same—nor even “two sides of the same coin”—any more than it makes two Latinos/as the same. What is does is legitimize comparisons and dialogue between them. It acknowledges that articulations from vastly different places, whether those are countries, art forms, or academic disciplines, have something to contribute to a discussion. This kind of legitamization leads to more collaboration, communication, and possibility for reconciliation improvement—it helps bridge gaps.

One gap that I am concerned with is that between Latino/a and mainstream theatre. As I said in my introduction, I do not believe that one can understand American theatre without taking into consideration the contributions of Latino/a artists. However,
while Latinos/as have carved an exciting and thriving place for a theatre of their own, the multicultural movement has brought mainstream audiences and theatre students only as far as tokenism. While exclusively Latino/a theatre is certainly a good thing, and while it never hurts white audiences to have to watch a Latino/a drama in the midst of their regular season, how much more progress can be made through more collaboration between Latino/a and non-Latino/a artists? How much more might audiences experience if they do not remain in their separate theatres but come together in the same space? As I have shown with Prodigal Kiss, there is much to be experienced and learned from theatrical pieces that perform latinidad, whether through representation, transculturation, or re-tropicalization.

Latinidad can also serve as a model for bridging the gap between theatre and other fine arts, and theatre and popular culture. So often, these genres are considered mutually exclusive, with no common vocabulary between them. Scholars and consumers may fight over the abilities and attributes of theatre versus television and film, assume that literature and popular music have no common audiences, or bemoan artists “selling out,” assuming that no artistic integrity or control can remain once that artist is endorsed and promoted by large institutions. But, through the lens of latinidad, we have seen many aspects of high-brow art and low-brow popular culture, both Latino/a and non-Latino/a, that have much to say to each other. This also goes for academic disciplines; this thesis alone is an attestation to how many different types of scholarship—from sociological to political to legal to theatrical to performative to literary to musical to cultural to historical—can be brought together under common questions. Latinidad does not absent
itself because of switches in genre or production; instead it changes and grows into new articulations and negotiations. Modes of inquiry like latinidad show that these gaps are unnecessary; it is quite possible to leap over them. If such gaps can be seen to close a little bit through latinidad, perhaps non-Latino/a scholars, artists, and consumers can take a lesson and realize that the genres themselves have a great deal more in common than originally thought.

Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Sternbach’s project in *Stages of Life*, to examine Latina theatre as a form that acknowledges and respects difference while finding parallel experience and a politics of affinity, inspires me. As they, and this thesis, have shown, Latinos/as and Latino/a scholars have excellent tools with which to pursue such a project. However, those tools can also be useful outside of theatre, and outside of Latino/a studies. Perhaps what I am advocating is a relatively universal application of La Frontera—the disturbing of borders. While this term and practice already flourishes, obviously in border cities like Juarez, and in academic disciplines like Latino/a studies, performance studies, and comparative studies, I should like to see it proliferated in academia even more. How many more heritages and contributions there are to recognize, sample from, and embrace in every field! How many more pieces of the past need to be acknowledged and rejected as progress is made in carving away at marginalization and silencing and power structures are reformed! Surely there are many borders that can be crossed, redrawn, and occasionally erased, such as that between art and criticism or theory and practice—which can apply to the humanities and sciences—and, perhaps most of all, the border between academic and non-academics.
Unlike the wealth of *isms* that have been come through artistic and political thought, latinidad will most definitely carry on happening whether there are academics to talk about it or not. As we have seen, latinidad and La Frontera can be articulated in the most sophisticated of discourses but also in the everyday shopping choices of teenagers, the voting choices of individuals, the events of a celebration, and in the emotions of relationships. The phenomenon of latinidad and the literally-translated quality of latinidad (latin-ness) has existed for centuries, continues to exist, and will keep on existing and changing. It is not a school of thought or artistic or political movement. But perhaps it could be one, or something like that. Because latinidad was not invented by the life of the mind, and because scholars will never be able to control it, it may serve incredibly well to provide academics and non-academics a tool with which to communicate with and affect each other. If academia functions on a premise that there is an actual world to refer to, perhaps a looking through a lens owned equally by the world and scholars may be one of the best ways to stay connected to it. For someone like me, who engages in scholarship and theory in order to find ways to address and affect people and institutions, latinidad has provided several new worlds of possibility for speaking, reading, listening, translating, understanding, acting, and reacting. I hope that this work has provided the reader with the means to understand and apply latinidad in these and other ways.
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Figure 2.1: Political cartoon from the *Philadelphia Saturday Evening Ledger*, 1923.
Figure 2.2: Political cartoon from the *Columbus Dispatch*, 1902.