

REWORKING LATINIDAD: PERFORMANCE ART AS A TOOL IN THE WORKS OF
FEMALE PERFORMANCE ARTISTS ALINA TROYANO, JOSEFINA BÁEZ, AND NAO
BUSTAMANTE

by

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(Under the Direction of Lesley Feracho)

ABSTRACT

In this study, I show that the artists Alina Troyano (aka Carmelita Tropicana), Josefina Báez, and Nao Bustamante engage in performances in which they provide alternatives to conceptions of Latinidad while using the stage to create new modes of existence that challenge dominant discourses that seek to define and limit them. I propose that the artists achieve these goals through the use of their bodies (i.e. bodily movements, dressing in drag, etc) and through the manipulation of language (word play, the use of music in place of verbal language, etc). In my work, I analyze performances and texts by the three artists, who are of Cuban, Dominican, and Mexican descent, respectively. I propose that their performance art serves to respond to stereotypes and is thus a tool used to rework definitions of Latinidad.

My study contributes to the field of U.S. Latino/a literature by linking literature and transnational feminism with the realm of performance art and considers the stage as a space of resistance against such transnational processes such as globalization and capitalist patriarchy. I argue that while both text and performance can be effective in reexamining and redefining the

power structures that operate in society, the performance aspect enhances the experience for the audience by allowing for direct communication and a live engagement between artist and spectator. In addition, although specifically focusing on three performance artists, this study has wide implications for postcolonial subjects in U.S. society.

INDEX WORDS: Báez, Josefina; blackness; Bustamante, Nao; *cubanidad*;
dominicanidad; Dominicanyork; Latinidad; lesbian studies;
mexicanidad; performance text; queer(ing); Tropicana, Carmelita;
Troyano, Alina; U.S. Latino

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Performance art changes the way you look at the world. Your perceptions change; an object is no longer what it seems. (Troyano 2000, p. 177)

In my study, I discuss the realm of performance art as an oppositional tool used against stereotypes reflected by dominant discourses on race, class, and gender as they relate to U.S. Latinas. The focus of my dissertation is on the works of three artists in particular: Alina Troyano (*Milk of Amnesia*, 1994), Josefina Báez (*Dominicanish: A Performance Text*, 2000), and Nao Bustamante (*America, the Beautiful*, 2002). The artists, who are of Cuban, Dominican, and Mexican descent, respectively, all respond to stereotypes by engaging in performances that serve a dual purpose: they critique the U.S. and Latin-American / Caribbean cultures that make up their identities, while at the same time creating new modes of existence that challenge the dominant discourses with which they dialogue.

In regard to the use of the term “Latina/o”, I dialogue with scholars such as Marta Carminero-Santangelo, who opts to use the term because, among other things, it “gives the tools for discussing how the various groups engage with dominant-culture [Anglo] conceptions of themselves, as well as with each other” (19). I therefore use “Latina/o” within a context that highlights the shared experiences of Cuban-Americans, Dominicans, Chicanos, etc., particularly as marginalized subjects in the U.S., and I focus on Carminero-Santangelo’s application of the term as denoting the possibility for social and political solidarity among these groups.

Like many minority groups in the U.S., Latinos encounter stereotypes as a result of monolithic cultural perceptions emerging from dominant discourses. Arlene Dávila describes the “repackaging” of Latinidad: the process of collapsing several different stereotypes about Latinos into a single category (2). In this regard, I use “Latinidad” to refer to the images created through this repackaging process, one that places Latino/as into monolithic categories, ignoring the fact that they span national, gender, class and racial boundaries. My work focuses on three performance artists who dialogue with Latinidad, as they use their performance art to challenge U.S. dominant discourses on race, class, gender, and sexuality. I show that Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante utilize performance art as a tool to challenge dominant discourses regarding what it means to be Cuban, Dominican, and Mexican-American in the U.S., respectively.

The artists dialogue with writers like Judith Ortiz Cofer as they firmly establish their social, cultural, and national identities. Cofer, in her writings, refers to the “myth of the Latin woman”, the idea that Latinas are perceived as either “whore”, “domestic”, or “criminal” (107). Cofer made it her goal to use her words and writing to change the negatively preconceived stereotypes of Latinas in the U.S. Alternatively, my work presents the discipline of performance art as a valuable tool to challenge hegemonic discourses. In my study, I will show the ways in which Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante . explore alternatives to Latinidad while also challenging the dominant discourses within their respective cultural nationalisms. In particular, they critique the constructed nature of *cubanidad*, *dominicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*, respectively.

In Troyano's work, *Milk of Amnesia*, for example, she presents a reworked definition of *cubanidad*. In defining this term, I use Gustavo Perez Firmat's conception of Cubanness as a commodity: "something that one sells or acquires, the kind of thing one sees [in media representations such as print ads]" (191). Cubans in the U.S. television media, for example, have been portrayed as having thick accents, smoking Cuban cigars, and as overtly expressing their ethnicity in loud, often exaggerated ways. Pérez Firmat provides the example of *I Love Lucy's* Ricky Ricardo as the media-produced image of the Cuban-American male: "what defines Lucy is her 'look' [blonde hair, white skin]; what defines Ricky is his 'accent' [a marker of ethnicity]" (27).

Troyano uses her performance to poke fun at the ways in which images such as these characterize U.S. notions of *cubanidad*. Her performance piece features her alter ego, Carmelita Tropicana, a Cuban-American living in the U.S. who suffers from amnesia and can only recall fragments of her experience of migration, such as being forced at school to drink white, homogenized milk in the U.S. I show later that this milk, which contrasts with the sweet, condensed milk of Cuba, represents the forced process of assimilation (linguistic, cultural, etc) that many Latino/a immigrants experience upon their arrival to the U.S. Throughout the performance, Carmelita receives help from Pingalito Betancourt (another character portrayed by Troyano), who represents the artist's critique of the constructed image of Cuban(-American) masculinity as he presents to Carmelita his version of Cuba in an effort to refresh her memory.

Báez's work, *Dominicanish*, presents a challenge to *dominicanidad*, which is defined by the elites in the Dominican Republic as a "White, Spanish, and Catholic" identity (Howard 2). In addition, she offers an alternative to *latinidad* by rejecting the term "Latina" altogether, asserting her identity as a Dominicanyork, and by embracing the multiple cultures (i.e. African-

American, Puerto Rican, etc) that make up her New York home. Her work also challenges the foundations of performance art. Presenting a performance text that is fragmented both structurally and thematically (i.e. there are no chapters, the artist often interrupts her own thoughts, etc), Báez's *Dominicanish* represents her fragmented world, which she has come to integrate and to embrace. The text describes various moments of Báez's life, from the difficult process of learning English, to her love of jazz music, to life in Washington Heights, the site of the largest Dominican community in New York, and where Baez claims 107th street as her home (as opposed to La Romana, Dominican Republic, where she was born). In addition to the text, I discuss Báez's performance of *Dominicanish* as well as her methodology of creation, known as Performance Autology.

The creative process is also an important aspect of Bustamante's performance art. Like Troyano and Báez, Bustamante challenges the race, class, and gender ideologies that have shaped her identity. As a Mexican-American artist who identifies herself specifically as Chicana, Bustamante uses her art to represent alternative ways of conceiving of *mexicanidad*. Her identity as a Chicana places her historically, socially, and politically with the ideologies of the feminist and Chicano movements of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. For her, the concept of *mexicanidad* entails both U.S. and Mexican cultural traditions. In Mexican culture, for example, *mexicanidad* is defined by such figures as the Virgin of Guadalupe, who represents a pure, self-sacrificing mother; the only role that justifies women in Mexican society, and a moral compass against which Mexican female sexuality and morality is measured (Gutierrez 36).

By performing as Maybelline, a beauty pageant contestant, Bustamante presents the product of masculine, heteronormative concepts of beauty and sexuality by showing them to be social constructs. Specifically, she dons a blonde wig, wears excessive makeup, and demands

the approval of her audience, thereby mocking such concepts as the “blonde bombshell” (an image seen in both Mexico and the U.S.), the beauty queen, and the emotionally needy female seeking male recognition and approval. Like Troyano, Bustamante colors most of her performances with humor, as a strategy to poke fun at dominant discourses that have defined Latinas’ subjectivities. As demonstrated, all three artists critique pre-existing notions of Latinidad by emphasizing its constructed nature. In the chapters devoted to Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante, I discuss how each artist affirms her identity, working from marginalized positions in U.S. society.

I find that each of the artists in my study engages in unique performances of gender, language, and sexuality which challenge monolithic perceptions of Latinidad. In the chapters that follow, I discuss specifically the dominant discourses of race, class, and gender, which are pertinent to each of their works. I analyze the artists individually, in the chronological order of when their works were produced. In particular, I focus on the textual versions of the first two artists, Troyano and Báez, which were later performed, and on the performance version of Bustamante’s *America, the Beautiful*, the only form in which it was created.

In the individual chapters devoted to each artist, I consider the important distinctions of text and performance. Namely, I emphasize the fact that performance art engages the movements of the performer and allows the artist more agency than if she were to rely solely on textual representations of her work. For these performance artists, then, the stage is a space of resistance, retelling, and reinvention, with performance art serving as a forum that allows for an opposition to the stereotypes operating in dominant society. In addition, their works challenge the reader / spectator to consider new notions of *cubanidad*, *dominicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*, respectively.

In the mass media market, Latinas are often seen as hot commodities that provide sex appeal, and any differences among them are completely ignored. On the other extreme, as Aparicio explains, Latinas are packaged through the medium of television with such representations as domestic (often uneducated) housemaids (245). Regardless of the stereotype, the issue remains the same: U.S. Latinas are often analyzed “under White eyes,” to use Frantz Fanon’s¹ expression, and are expected to conform to the expectations reflected in dominant discourses. I use the mass media as an example of how dominant discourses are represented and manifested, although this is not the only vessel through which such discourses work.

The video recordings of the performances of Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante reflect a look at Latinidad across racial, ethnic, gender lines. I consider the stage as a “performative space” for them, and will examine the ways in which they utilize this space to (re)define their identities. By “performative,” I use Jones’s and Heathfield’s definition as “the reiterative enactment, across time, of meaning through embodied gestures, language, and / or other modes of signification (12). The artists’ use of their bodies and their manipulation of language represent two strategies that they employ as they challenge U.S. dominant discourses in order to provide reworked definitions of their identities.

By the end of this study, I will have shown that the realm of performance art serves as an ideal platform that works to challenge the dominant yet limiting views of Latinas and other marginalized subjects that are seen in socio-historical, economic, and political discourses. Specifically, I will present the ways in which these three artists effectively use the realm of performance art to “talk back,” calling into question previously held beliefs about Latinidad

¹ See Frantz Fanon’s work, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove press, 1967.

while at the same time creating new modes of existence that both dance around and play upon the very notions of what defines identity.

My study is an important contribution to U.S. Latino/a literature because it links literature with the realm of performance art and considers the stage as a space of resistance to stereotypes that are presented by dominant discourses. Although specifically focusing on three performance artists, this study has wide implications for all non-White minorities in U.S. society, showing how an oppositional stance against dominant discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality allows one to reexamine the power structures that operate in society and to redefine one's identity in such an environment. I will show that one way in which such an oppositional stance takes place is via performance art.

My study is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I set up the theoretical framework of my study by presenting a brief history of U.S. Latino/a performance art. I examine the contributions of performers such as 1970s Cuban-American performer Ana Mendieta, who used her body to challenge dominant discourses and to deconstruct the meanings ascribed to the Latina body. I conclude the first chapter with a discussion of the performance art of such prominent figures as Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco, as well as other influential U.S. Latino/a performance artists whose works represent a deconstruction of meanings conveyed through U.S., Latin-American, or Caribbean dominant discourses in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four are each devoted to one artist. I will show how Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante, respectively, all explore the theme of a transnational border-home in their works. This border experience is different for each artist: Troyano is a Cuban-American lesbian artist, Báez a *domincanyork* performance artist, and Bustamante is a Chicana lesbian

artist. I focus on the ways in which each artist challenges the repackaging of Latinidad, using their performance art to rework the elements that make up their identities.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Troyano, a Cuban-American migrant who has made New York her home, and how *cubanidad* is constructed by Cuban (-American), heterosexual males, reflecting patriarchal views on what is “Cuban,” “American,” and “feminine”. Chapter 2 analyzes Troyano’s play *Milk of Amnesia* and the various ways in which the main characters Carmelita Tropicana and Pingalito Betancourt (performed by Troyano herself) rework traditional notions of *cubanidad*. Through Pingalito Betancourt, a male character, Troyano is able to express lesbian desire by disguising it as heterosexual. Specifically, she dresses in drag and confesses a love for the Cuban female body, thereby reworking *cubanidad* by revealing the constructed nature of male-female gender roles and sexual orientations. Throughout the performance, her manipulations of language (exaggerated, “Cuban” accents) and the body (gender role playing), while invoking humor and sarcasm, represent a critique of the perception of *cubanidad* that have been presented through “repackaged” media formats in the U.S..

In Troyano’s play, she also critiques U.S. – Cuban relations by presenting stories of forced assimilation. I discuss how the play’s title, *Milk of Amnesia* represents assimilation as a process of forced forgetting (that is, forgetting one’s Cuban past). By being forced to drink homogenized milk at her school in the U.S., as opposed to the sweeter milk of her familiar Cuban past, Carmelita loses her sense of individuality. The rest of the play chronicles her journey to Cuba as a form of therapy as Pingalito offers ways to “cure” Carmelita’s amnesia.

Troyano shares with Báez the experience of having migrated to the U.S.: Troyano’s migration was sparked by the beginning of the Castro regime in the 1960s, while Báez’s family migrated to the U.S. in reaction against the Balaguer regime in the 1970s. Their works reflect

the experiences of Cuban and Dominican migrants, respectively, as they work to establish their homes in the U.S. In Chapter 3, I explore the ways in which Báez responds to the stereotypes that derive from Dominican (-American) males both on the island and in her New York community, who expect her to conform to traditional notions of *dominicanidad*. In her performance, she uses her body to encapsulate and to challenge the experience of dislocation as she is forced from La Romana to New York. By creating Performance Autology, a methodology of creation that she defines as “the science of the self,” Báez critiques U.S. – Dominican relations and also redefines the notion of what it means to be Dominican York. Through Performance Autology, Báez combines spoken word, jazz music and *kuchipudi*, a form of Indian dance as she reworks the confines of performance art by expanding its boundaries.

In this same chapter, I discuss both the text and the performance of *Dominicanish*. The text begins with Báez’s meditation on the difficulties of learning English. In both her text and performance, she plays with, and in some cases subverts, language’s use and function. Much like Carmelita Tropicana, Báez’s attempts at assimilation present a struggle, which she articulates in her performance. Her audience watches as her mouth moves constantly: her body is bent out of shape as she attempts to grasp the mystery of learning a new language. Báez’s text itself is a performance, as it includes a flip-book animation presenting photographs of the artist performing *kuchipudi* movements that are set in motion when the pages of the book are flipped. The reader must therefore participate in this performance, flipping the pages in order to create the movements. This effect works to create a textual and a hybrid composition that accurately illustrates the perceived fragmentation in the lives of Dominican migrant communities as a result of social and geographical displacement.

In discussing Báez, I also explore the meanings of *dominicanidad* both on the island and in the U.S. While Troyano exhibits a cabaret-like style in her performance (employing such techniques as *choteo*, a parodic strategy to invoke humor), Báez's performance reflects a more introspective and spiritual approach to performance art as she provides an alternative methodology of creation which she uses to define this realm. Although employing different styles, both artists achieve the same goal in that they invite their audiences to examine him/herself in relation to the larger society. For her part, Báez reworks *dominicanidad* by challenging the concepts of spirituality, nationality, and the processes of creative productions. In Chapter 3, therefore, I discuss the ways in which Báez demonstrates the constructed nature of dominant discourses, and offers reworked definitions to assert her identity.

Chapter 4 analyzes Bustamante's reworked definitions of *mexicanidad* in her performance *America, the Beautiful*. Like Troyano and Báez, Bustamante makes her body a central aspect of her performance. By displacing (verbal) language and choosing to play musical recordings instead, she forces her audience to face the audio-visual imagery surrounding the (repackaged) female/feminine body as it performs on a transnational stage. While Troyano redefines notions of *cubanidad*, and Báez reworks *dominicanidad*, Bustamante challenges U.S. conceptions of *mexicanidad* as it relates to beauty, femininity, and love. Specifically, she exposes and denounces the blonde / *rubia* woman as icon in the context of "America", communicating to both U.S. (Marilyn Monroe) and Mexican cultures (La *rubia superior* was a blonde spokesmodel for Mexican "cerveza superior" beer brands).

In her performance, Bustamante uses her naked body to call into question U.S. standards of beauty, which are influenced by the dominant Anglo-American culture. The artist herself is not a thin woman, and thus her naked body on stage presents a contrast to the idealized,

curvaceous female body. The fact that she is a Chicana also contests the idealization that beauty is embodied by White females, a concept that is rooted in historical and cultural discourses that will be reviewed in Chapter 4. In addition, as a Chicana lesbian, Bustamante not only presents re-worked conceptions of beauty in her performance, but she also redefines the foundations of love. Chapter 4 is therefore devoted to the ways in which Bustamante deconstructs dominant discourses to show her audience that identity itself is a constructed concept, and that *mexicanidad* can be embodied by a full-figured, lesbian Chicana.

Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante all utilize language in their performances as a strategy to oppose dominant discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Troyano, through her character Carmelita Tropicana, uses a heavy accent as one of her many areas of critique as she highlights the stereotypes associated with Latinidad, and specifically *cubanidad*, incorporating humor into her performance that pokes fun at the ridiculousness of stereotypes. Báez uses language to connect the elements of her multicultural world as a Dominicanyork, creating a new mode of existence that she calls Dominicanish. For her part, Bustamante does not speak during her performance, but instead uses music to point to the constructed nature of such concepts as beauty, femininity, and love. In addition, all three artists use their bodies to respond to stereotypes as they perform their own reworked definitions of Latina subjectivity.

By the conclusion of this work, I will have shown how performance art is a tool that allows U.S. minority subjects who are often labeled “Latina/o,” to use the stage (and, really, any public forum) to call into question notions of Latinidad. As performance artists, Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante challenge their audiences to question prior-held beliefs about how and why stereotypes are created. They subvert the performer-spectator role by inviting the audience’s gaze, and playing upon this by staring, talking, and writing back.

Performance art allows the performer to change the script, and to act against the norm, to present an alternative version of reality that asserts an individual identity. These redefined identities challenge stereotypes created by hegemonic discourses and the perpetuations of these discourses as reflected in U.S., Latin American, and Caribbean relations. The works of Troyano, Báez and Bustamante all create new ways of conceptualizing what it means to be Cuban-, Dominican-, and Mexican-American, respectively. In the conclusion of my work, I will also discuss further considerations and future directions for the study of performance art, such as the use of Performance Autology to create new performance pieces that work to challenge dominant discourses and redefine identity.

CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF PERFORMANCES OF LATINIDAD

The Role of the Media in the Repackaging of Latinidad

This chapter explores the socially constructed concept of “Latinidad” and the stereotypes that have emerged from these conceptions. The media has traditionally portrayed Latinas in a negative light. As Judith Ortiz Cofer observes, “thousands of Latinas without the privilege of an education or the survival skills needed to ‘belong’ in mainstream society continue to “struggle against the misconceptions perpetuated by the myth of the Latina as whore, domestic, or criminal” (151). The myth of the Latina reveals that the very concept of Latinidad is a social construct. The media serves as a vessel to perpetrate this myth. As such, there are dangers that can result from its impact. As Nao Bustamante explains in an interview, society has come to acquire “learned behavior” by paying too much attention to the media:

I look at the area of learned behavior in cinema, and the idea that the screen and cinema has taken the place of oral culture. We once had oral culture to tell us how to live and social norms and behavior and it kind of moved to literature and became a sort of broader way to tell our story. And now cinema concentrates life into episodes and we in turn watch these and learn how to behave toward others (Baer “Art Related: Nao Bustamante”).

While I agree with Bustamante’s assertion that our actions are often influenced by what we see projected by the media; the extent of this influence, however, is debatable. There appears to be a vicious cycle: as we see, we do, but the media in turn portrays society’s behavior. The question

then becomes: how do we break this cycle? How do we create new patterns? This is what Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante do through their works. They redefine identity by showing its constructed nature, utilizing the realm of performance art to achieve this purpose.

Arlene Dávila likens the media of television and movies to the sale of Latinas as “hot commodities”. Her concept of the “repackaging” of *Latinidad* is exemplified by actress and singer Jennifer Lopez, who on the one hand was chosen to play the part of Selena, a Mexican-American (even though Lopez herself is Puerto Rican), but who also shares physical qualities with Selena with regard to her body: curvy bottoms, full lips, and dark hair. Dávila’s concept of repackaging runs parallel to an earlier discussion by Frances Aparicio, who described the label “U.S. Latinas” (often placed upon figures such as Lopez and Selena) as a social construction on the part of their audiences, the industry, and the content of their work (94). In addition, for Latinas/os, this same process of repackaging takes place online, as the same images on television are digitized and reproduced on the Internet to reach a larger, global audience.

The repackaging of *Latinidad* has implications for the bodies of Latinas. Elizabeth Grosz likens the body to a text:

[The body] is fictionalized and positioned within myths and belief systems that form a culture's social narratives and self-representations. [It] becomes a body shell capable of being overtaken by other's messages (119)

The body contains cultural messages written upon it, often reflecting dominant discourses and cultural norms. The gendered and racialized writing that underlie the repackaging process of *Latinidad* are thus written on the bodies of Latinas, as women of color. Cofer elaborates on this point as she describes in her story “The Myth of the Latin Woman” the confusion and mixed signals that often result when she dresses up for parties:

.....the boy who took me to my first formal dance leaned over to plant a sloppy overeager kiss painfully on my mouth, and when I didn't respond with sufficient passion said in a resentful tone: "I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early" (151).

The above quote hints at the sexual objectification of Latinas, based partly on their choice of clothing, but also on the fact of being Latina. The quote reveals the stereotypes that have emerged and that have become written on the bodies of Latinas. These cultural messages reflect U.S., Latin-American, and Caribbean relations. My work reveals how performance artists respond to those inscriptions, as each artist uses her body (i.e. bodily movements, dressing in drag, etc) and language (word plays, the use of music, etc) to contest the messages often perpetuated through such vessels as the U.S. media and other dominant discourses.

In an interview, Troyano asserts that the media has been used to perpetuate stereotypes and monolithic views of Latinas: "Notice the women in the *telenovelas*, the Latino soap operas: they are always defined by the men in their lives. Latinas are stereotypically linked with heterosexual romance" (Román 87). The media perpetuates many of the stereotypes, often inaccurate, but also models heterosexual relationships in order to reflect social norms. Since Carmelita Tropicana's work dialogues with Cuban, Cuban-American, and U.S. media creations, her critique of the media here has transnational implications.

Neither the media nor dominant discourses, however, are solely responsible for continuing the process of repackaging. Latinas themselves also take part in this process. In her interview, Troyano goes on to explain that monolithic views of Latinas and other minority groups are often perpetuated by the groups themselves: "We try to separate ourselves and put ourselves in little compartments. We don't even realize we are doing it, it's second nature. We

are forced by society to create an identity with very defined boundaries” (Román 85). The process of repackaging of Latinidad, as Troyano suggests, has become an internalized process, which can create problems for some. In some cases, Latinas have placed *themselves* in rigid categories and have perpetuated binaries that limit their agency as women. The images put forth by the media, coupled with the self-imposed labels created by Latinas, therefore represent two distinct vessels through which processes of repackaging have taken place.

We must also point out, however, the level of critical awareness within the community that has united Latinas as they work to challenge negative stereotypes. This same vessel known as the media, for example, has also been used to contest the repackaged images of Latinas and to offer an alternative notion of Latinidad. As Aparicio warns us: “to dismiss Latinidad as an exclusively hegemonic site is to dismiss the potential for continuing to explore [Latinos’] (post)colonial historical experiences and for finding affinities and similarities that may empower us rather than fragment us” (103). Aparicio justifies the grouping together of Jennifer Lopez and Selena under the umbrella term “Latina” because of their shared similar historical experiences as colonized subjects. Since their bodies have been exoticized, they have the shared experience of being products of repackaging. Lopez’s performance as Selena, a visual resurrection by a Puerto Rican of the slain Tex-Mex singer, is therefore one way of putting forth an alternative view of what it means to be “Latina” by showing her as a successful, chart-topping, international success. Suzanne Oboler further argues that “identifying oneself as Latino/a and participating in a Latino social movement is a political decision that can help Latino/a advocates express the strength of *la comunidad* with greater force (20). The media is therefore both a blessing and a curse for Latinos/as: the images put forth by the media may result in repackaging of Latinidad, but the media can also be used to present reworked definitions of what it means to be Latino/a.

Like the media, the realm of performance art can serve as a vessel to contest dominant discourses. Through their works, Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante translate their positions in society into positions of agency, using the stage as an oppositional space to challenge dominant discourses. I now turn to a discussion of performance art, which I propose as a viable tool to react to the practices such as those that I have described above.

Performance Art Defined

Situating Performance Art within Performance Studies

Between 2002 and 2011, a series produced by the Hemispheric Institute at NYU was created around the question, “What is Performance Studies?” The series aimed to provide a multifaceted approach to defining such a difficult concept. The definitions provided were based on the experiences and the scholarly productions of renowned figures in contemporary performance studies and practice. The scholars and professors (including Richard Schechner, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and Diana Taylor) as well as performance artists themselves (i.e. Guillermo Gomez-Peña and Tania Bruguera) seem to converge on certain points, while differing drastically from others. For example, while some define performance studies as a discipline or academic field, others see it more as a methodology or a theoretical “lens” (“Hemispheric Institute”). I take the position that performance studies is a body of knowledge that *incorporates* performance art as a tool to address critical questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

With regards to the body of knowledge known as performance studies, Professor Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, this area of study is “interdisciplinary,” “intergeneric,” and “intercultural” (“Hemispheric Institute”) It is difficult to define the field because it exists in relationship to a discipline that has always been definable: theater. But performance studies goes

beyond theater, engaging everyday life practices, ritual, play aspects, street performances, and other forms of expression.

Diana Taylor sees performance studies as intercultural because it encompasses the performances of marginalized groups (such as Latinas) and shows how they intersect or intervene in public spaces (“Hemispheric Institute”). Schechner also sees performance studies as intercultural in the sense that the field allows one to explore, as well as to exploit, the “misunderstandings” that often occurs between cultures, but this place of misunderstandings is also a place where new knowledge and outlooks can occur (“Hemispheric Institute”). Troyano, for example, capitalizes on the misunderstandings between U.S. and Cuban cultures by creating the persona of Carmelita Tropicana as a satiric response to U.S. and Cuban dominant discourses as they relate to perceptions of *cubanidad*. José Muñoz goes beyond an intercultural focus to consider performance studies on an international level, looking across national borders and ethnic boundaries to link, for example, writings produced by Cubans in Miami to the cultural productions of Cubans on the island (“Hemispheric Institute”). The field therefore considers not only multiple cultures (co)existing in a shared space (i.e. the U.S.), but it also considers the cultural productions of diasporic communities (ie., Cuban-Americans, Nuyoricans) that have emerged from a shared country of origin.

Performance studies engages multiple cultures, but it also engages multiple disciplines and genres, drawing from anthropology, sociology, theater studies, music, etc. As an area of study, it forces us to think about the borders that we place around disciplines, and it allows us to resist these borders at the same time, combining them or utilizing various disciplines at once. In her method of creation known as Performance Autology, Báez engages spirituality, music, and dance, among other disciplines.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett makes the distinction between “performance,” an organizing concept, and “performances,” objects of study (“Hemispheric Institute”). Although I agree with this analysis, performances as objects of study can also be seen from a different point of view. My concern is with the produced works of performance artists, which I see as not merely “objects of study” but as a response to stereotypes created by contrived notions of Latinidad. The works of Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante represent a counterpoint; a rejection of the monolithic “packages” (applying Dávila’s concept of repackaging) produced by dominant discourses, in place of reformulated productions that provide re-worked definitions of what it means to be Cuban-, Dominican-, and Mexican-American in the U.S. In the next section, I examine performance art as a methodology, a tool used to produce alternate expressions of Latina subjectivities.

Performance Art as a Methodology

Performance art can be seen as a lens through which to assess and document cultural practice and embodied behavior. Taylor defines it as a methodology that brings different areas into discussion, and offers an alternative way of thinking about knowledge (“Hemispheric Institute”). I would add that performance art brings to light the constructed nature of knowledge itself, calling into question the sources of knowledge that we rely upon in society, and the power structures that play a role in the production of such knowledge. My ideas are consistent with Jill Lane’s description of performance. Lane sees performance studies as a strategy to think about the construction of race in particular, as well as the process of racialization (“Hemispheric Institute”). She argues that performance studies has much to add to ongoing conversations about

critical race theory and allows us to discuss the specific contexts in which race is performed, practiced, negated, and confirmed (“Hemispheric Institute”).

I therefore view performance art as a lens through which we examine aspects of society, not only in terms of race, but also in terms of gender, class, and sexuality. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which performance art sheds light on U.S. notions of Latinidad and the ways in which concepts of race, class, gender, and sexuality can be reworked by “Latina” performance artists. The strategy by which this is achieved is by the use of both language and the body. Therefore, through the lens of performance art, it is possible to cast a light upon the aspects of society that one wishes to change, such as the repackaged image of Latinas in the media and in mainstream culture. In addition, as they manipulate language through word plays, cultural references, and the use of non-verbal communication (i.e. silence), Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante react to the images presented by dominant discourses by creating reworked images.

One of the pioneers in U.S. and Latin American performance art is Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who Jacqueline E. Bixler and Laurietz Seda identify as the ultimate “trans/actor”. According to the authors, to trans/act is to “transgress...within, across, and beyond the absolutist limits and definitions that attempt to control subjectivities” (17). It means to engage in “reinventing and redefining the art of living ‘in between’ (17). Trans/actors work to resist binaries and acts of commodification. Some of Gómez-Peña’s performance art pieces include “Border Brujo” (1988–89), “The Couple in the Cage” (1992–93), and the “Mapa/Corpo series” (2004–2008). His performances often involve audience participation, elaborate costuming and environments, interactive technologies and other collaborators such as Roberto Sifuentes and Coco Fusco.

Gómez-Peña makes a clear distinction between performance art and theater. Whereas theater productions have a beginning, middle, and end, Gómez-Peña points out that performance art has no such structure, which allows for the inclusion of multiple disciplines and genres, as discussed earlier. He also points out that on stage, performance artists rarely “represent” others, but rather, they allow their “multiplicity of selves” and voices to unfold and enact their frictions and contradictions in front of an audience (Gómez-Peña 1). To what end is this accomplished? For Gómez-Peña, performance art is: “a way to fight or talk back, to recapture my stolen civic self, and piece together my fragmented identity” (1) The multidisciplinary, multigeneric aspects of performance art provide a platform for performance artists to express their identities in a variety of ways.

Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera also sees performance art as a methodology, and uses this tool as an “agent of social change” (“Hemispheric Institute”). She sees performance as an element that “interacts” with life, but is not a mirror of reality. Instead, performance art can “build an alternative structure to live” (“Hemispheric Institute”). I propose that performance art as a methodology allows Latino/a artists to present their versions of reality, which often contradict and challenge the realities that have been constructed through dominant discourses with regard to Latino/a subjectivities. As an oppositional tool, performance art has developed into a forum to promote political and social changes in society. Although my focus is on the work of three performance artists in the late 1990s, in the next section I look at the realm of performance art over the past few decades, highlighting the major characteristics of the works produced in the U.S. and influenced by Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Development of Performance Art in the U.S.

Principle Characteristics

Performance art developed in the U.S. in the 1970s and was likened to cabaret performance, futurist evenings, and Dada exhibitions (Carlson 100). By the 1990s, more emphasis was placed on solo performers. By this time, the stage became a political forum to address the ills of society. In this period we began to see the use of performance art as an oppositional tool; a reaction against both political and social concerns. Performances of the '90s were "postmodern" in the sense that they "destabilize[d] norms" and "dissolve[d] certainties" (Carlson 142). To use Laura Gutierrez's phrase, these types of performances have the effect of "unsettling comforts" (19). The norms from which they deviated included those set forth by political performances of the 1960s and '70s, which provided political messages (positive or negative) and political representations (142). Consider the performances produced by Luis Valdéz's *Teatro Campesino*, to name just one example from this period.

In contrast, performances in the '90s, instead of demonstrating resistance to popular representations, challenge the processes of representation itself. These performances paid particular attention to the disadvantaged, excluded, and oppressed groups (i.e. gays and lesbians, racial and ethnic minorities, the elderly, poor, and the handicapped [163]). Performance artists like Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante think of their performances as a means of breaking the silence, and questioning the dominant structures of meanings and representation with regard to their identities. Why is performance art, as opposed to other forms of art, an ideal forum to express opposition? In addition, how does performance art differ from conventional elements of theater? It must be noted here that a discussion of the historical development of visual art and theater goes beyond the purpose and scope of my dissertation. Here, I wish only to show the

development of performance art in the late 90s and early 2000s, insofar as this discipline has diverged from both the visual and dramatic arts.

As a hybrid form, performance art not only borrows from the fields of visual art, theater, and video art (among others), but also from dance and music (Arrizón 27). The styles represented through performance art indicate both its autonomy from the dramatic text as well as its development of various anti-theatrical forms, which include public art and public performance (Taylor and Villegas 11). These forms destabilize traditional notions about “culture” and “art” (11) by showing that they can be performed. The idea that aspects of one’s culture can be performed is of particular interest to our present study.

Judith Butler (179) proposes the idea that identity is performative in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990). Karen Christian expands upon this idea in her work *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction*, in which she focuses on the performative aspects of identity (the “practices of everyday life”) that continuously transform culture. Although Butler’s focus had been on gender and feminist theory, Christian applies the theories to the domains of racial and ethnic identity as well. She likens performance to drag, explaining that “Narrative performances of gender and ethnicity are repeated to such an excess that writing itself becomes a medium for the production of a drag spectacle” (17). She draws upon the ideas of Flavio Risech, who uses the metaphor of cross-dressing to describe the experiences of second-generation Cuban Americans:

We...have at our disposal a wide array of identity “garments”, the specific cultural, political and social attributes that we have acquired by virtue of having lived in the distinct communities of Cuba, exile Miami, and other U.S. cities....Each time we cross these boundaries, then, we must.... “cross-dress,”

making coded decisions as to how to present ourselves, about what part of our identities to wear proudly or keep closeted (Risech 57-58).

Drag is therefore a metaphor for one's cultural identity, according to Risech and Christian.

When Troyano plays the role of Pingalito Betancourt in *Milk of Amnesia*, she "performs" Cuban-American masculinity, wearing the "garments" of a macho, thick-accented, male *revolucionario*.

I later show that the character of Pingalito represents a critique of both Cuban and U.S.

conceptions of *cubanidad*. Troyano puts on the "garments" of what she considers to be the "excesses" (to use Christian's wording) of Cuban-American culture; stereotypes that have become so overly played in various aspects of society that they have become like wardrobe pieces that can be easily slipped on and off, according to one's specific purposes at that moment.

With regard to the drag metaphor, Christian cautions that such an analogy need not imply that identity is detached from political or material issues. Instead, her analogy highlights the fact that like drag, performance has the capacity to parody rigidly defined identity categories (150). Although Christian analyzes novels in her work, and the ways in which the protagonists "wear" their identities, the same concepts also have relevance in the area of performance art.

In addition to providing a forum for the performance of identity, performance art as a methodology has also been utilized to express unpopular beliefs and to oppose the perspectives of the "majority:" read as White, Anglo males. As Gómez-Peña explains:

[Performance artists] are what others aren't, say what others don't, and occupy cultural spaces that are often overlooked or dismissed. Because of this, our multiple communities are constituted by aesthetic, political, ethnic, and gender rejects (2).

Gómez-Peña places performance artists apart from “others” in society. Historically, such a process of Other-ing has taken place by those in positions of authority. Here, however, Gómez-Peña subverts the process, voluntarily placing himself apart from the majority, who he refers to as the “others”. To be sure, he describes the group with which he associates as a group of “rejects”; the historically marginalized subjects in society. Gómez’s process of Other-ing, then, shows a shift in power, as he assumes a position of authority and the right to relegate members of society to the category of “others”. It implies that the “rejects” are the ones who now have agency and can assert their position in society, no longer as marginalized subjects. Such a repositioning allows for one to question dominant discourses, and to challenge preconceived notions established by those of the majority. It provides a forum and a sense of agency for one to “say what others don’t”, and to question authority. As Gómez-Peña further explains:

Yes. I am at odds with authority; whether it is political, religious, sexual, racial, or aesthetic, and I am constantly questioning imposed structures and dogmatic behavior wherever I find it. [Performance artists] crave the challenge of dismantling abusive authority (1).

In considering the ideas of Gómez-Peña, I therefore propose that as a tool, performance art can be used to question authority, to challenge dominant discourses which have taken shape in the U.S. and that have been influenced by U.S.-Latin American and U.S. – Caribbean relations. Artists like Gómez-Peña and Bruguera have sought to promote social change in their works, encouraging their audiences to think in alternative ways. However, the overall reception of a performance piece rests on the reactions of the audience. What role(s) does the audience play in the realm of performance art?

The Role of the Audience

One of the key elements of performance art is that the audience is just as much a part of the performance as the performer. By revealing to the audience images and perspectives that contrast with the norms of society, the performance artists produce an oppositional stance as they show their own versions of reality. Performance art therefore allows performer-audience interactions in a way that visual art and theater are unable to.

One innovation that represents a move away from theater and towards performance art is the technique developed by Bertolt Brecht in the 1920s and '30s, most commonly known as Brechtian techniques. Brecht invented the "Alienation Effect," which is a technique that "estranges" the audience and forces them to question the social realities of the situations being presented in the play (Eagleton 635). Rather than feel a deep connection to the characters, Brecht believed that an emotional distance should be maintained. It is only when this happens that the audience can effectively critique and evaluate the struggle between the characters and understand the social realities of the narrative (635). The performance artists whose works I analyze all establish a distance with their audience, offering them different perspectives and challenging them to reevaluate dominant discourses and the roles that they play in perpetuating preconceived notions presented by the dominant culture.

This distance is further established by breaking the Brechtian "Fourth Wall," an imaginary wall separating the audience from the action on the stage (636). With this technique, Brecht wanted the characters on stage to directly address and acknowledge the audience. For example, Troyano, as Carmelita Tropicana, employs this technique in *Milk of Amnesia*, as she dialogues with her audience and asks them questions to test their knowledge of her native Cuba. Bustamante also employs this technique when she looks directly at her audience in *America, the*

Beautiful, demanding applause from them during her performance as Maybelline. The Brechtian techniques redefine the relationship between audience and performer, as the audience members take on a more active role than in traditional theater. When watching the performances of Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante, the audience is confronted with images that contradict and often challenge previous definitions of *cubanidad*, *dominicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*, respectively.

Gomez- Peña's relationship with his audience is a further indication of the use and effectiveness of Brechtian techniques: "once the performance is over and people walk away, our hope is that a process of reflection gets triggered in their perplexed psyches. The objective is not to 'like' or even 'understand' performance art; but to create a sediment in the audience's psyche" (Gomez-Peña 4). By getting the audience to reconsider the ways in which knowledge is obtained, the ways in which Latinas in the U.S. are repackaged through such vessels as the media, and the ways in which social constructions in general are created through dominant discourses, performance artists present a reworking of previously conceived notions, which function to redefine what it means to be Latina/o in the U.S.

Troyano's audience plays an active role during her performances as well. Carmelita Tropicana explains in her interview with Román, "I like theater that makes an audience work to piece things together, that adds an element of surprise. I like it when you're never quite sure" (89). The audience participates as they analyze, re-think, and reflect upon the acts of the performer on stage. This has important implications for the purposes of our present study. If the audience is able to interact with the performer and become an active participant, then the overall performance hinges upon the performer-audience relationship. In addition, Báez views performance art as a constant dialogue with her audience, where she can create new conversations that challenge hegemonic discourses:

Además de ser una acción personal, es un constante diálogo con otros. Y a mi modo de ver, el performance es un acto político porque lo veo como una acción producida desde la marginalidad de mi propia vida, desde la lucha por la sobrevivencia personal. (González – Conty, Torrado, and Narváez “Entrevista”)

Like Gómez-Peña, Báez acknowledges her marginalized position in society. However, rather than overtly rebelling against authority, as Gómez-Peña seeks to accomplish, Báez instead seeks to engage her audience in new conversations. Her words, both on stage and in the text of *Dominicanish*, offer new ways to look at theater, spirituality, and the very concept of *dominicanidad*.

The stage for Báez, as well as for Troyano and Bustamante, represents a transnational space, where dialogues and critiques of the U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean take place. The realm of performance art can therefore be viewed as a tool used by Latino/as to respond to manifestations of dominant discourses such as stereotypes regarding Latinidad in the U.S. Gomez-Peña exemplifies through his work that performance art is where identity can be reinvented, and where borders can be crossed (Bixler & Seda 170). The performance space is thus a “transgressive” space (229), where difference becomes the new norm. On stage, as Bixler and Seda explain, “...contradiction, ambiguity, and paradox are not only tolerated but encouraged”. The performance art that has been produced by Latinos in the U.S. often questions the authority of dominant discourses operating in these three areas. I now take a look at some of the most important Latina performance artists that have emerged in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s: Ana Mendieta, performers from the WOW Café theater collective, and Coco Fusco, whose works can be seen as a direct link to the techniques adapted later by Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante.

Latina Performance Artists in the '70s , '80s and '90s

Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), a Cuban-born artist who lived in exile in the United States, was one of the most provocative and complex personalities of the 1970s' art world. She used exile as a discursive position from which to disrupt dominant categories, beginning with her "Silueta Series" in the 1970s. Mendieta was one of the first artists to combine the genres of land art, body art, and performance art in what she called "earth-body" sculptures (Jacob 3). She often used her naked body to create "the female silhouette", which I interpret as the female, "Latina" (I imply repackaged) body, which lacks a voice and is therefore merely a silhouette. Often covering her naked body in grass, Mendieta used nature as both her canvas and her medium to explore and connect with the Earth (3). Through these works, which cross the boundaries of performance, film and photography, she explored her relationship with place as well as a larger relationship with mother Earth or the "Great Goddess" figure (Blocker 47-48). Mendieta's use of her body represents female agency as she covers it with grass, concealing any efforts by males to read and interpret the signifiers that are often attributed to "Latina" bodies.

Mary Jane Jacob suggests in her book *Ana Mendieta: The "Silueta" Series (1973-1980)* that much of Mendieta's work was influenced by her interest in the religion *santería*, as well as a connection to Cuba (Jacob 4). Mendieta's first use of blood to make art dates from 1972, when she performed *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)*, for which she stood naked in front of a white wall holding a freshly decapitated chicken by its feet as its blood splattered her naked body. Instead of gazing at her naked "Latina" body, the audience is distracted by the scene of death taking place before their eyes as they watch an innocent animal's violent death. Juxtaposing an otherwise exotic image with one that is shocking and horrific, Mendieta deconstructs the signifiers

associated with her naked body, and constructs meanings of her own, associating exoticism with death and destruction.

Such images like these leave a lasting, often disturbing, impression on the audience, who must decipher the social and political messages of the artist. Therefore, I argue that the performance art of Mendieta can be seen as a lens through which the artist viewed, critiqued, and reacted to the social climate of the 1970s and '80s, which was marked by various feminist movements (i.e. Second Wave Feminism) and calls for social equality. The use of her body as a canvas upon which to paint her personal struggles, as well as the social injustices of the time, helps to connect Mendieta to the artists of the '90s such as Bustamante, who also uses her body to contest dominant discourses regarding the exoticism of Latina bodies.

The 1980s was marked by women of color who began to critique feminist movements that promoted a middle-class, heterosexual, White agenda. Such works as Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) initiated such confrontations among women. The social and political environment of the 1980s also sparked the formation of the WOW (Women's One World) Café theater group in New York, a women's collective in New York's East Village, which promotes the empowerment of women through the performing arts. Historically, WOW has been a majority lesbian women's space, although it is not exclusively lesbian and welcomes women of all races, classes, nationalities, and sexual orientations. Featured performers in the 1980s included the Split Britches Company, consisting of Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin. Troyano also attributes her success as *Carmelita Tropicana* to her initial performances at the famous WOW Café.

This theater represents a space for female artists to have a voice and to tell their sides of history. It is a space in which multiple marginalized voices interact and engage in important

discussions. The performances produced through the WOW Café are confrontational, controversial, and present a challenge to dominant discourses regarding race, class, and gender. Before Troyano's *Milk of Amnesia*, there were performance pieces produced by the Split Britches Company, whose name derives from a style of pants worn by women in the fields. The name also connotes the idea of women taking on a traditionally masculine role, "wearing the pants" and asserting their power and agency.

In the performance piece *Upward Mobility Homes* (1986), for example, three actresses in a theater company are camping out under the Brooklyn Bridge, homeless (Case 23). There, one woman peddles her old clothes, another sells instant coffee over the phone, and all three fantasize, argue and rehearse their show. The performance follows a day in the life of these actresses as they prepare for their theater production (23). The piece highlights the struggles of women to make a living, but the fact that they do this on their own, without the help of men, shows the strength of these women to "wear the pants" and to forge their own futures against the backdrop of a difficult economy. The structure of the performance deviates from traditional theater, with its overlapping monologues, songs and play-within-a-play sequence. In addition, the definition of family is reworked in this performance because the women form a family, not through relationships with men, but through female solidarity and a sense of security (economic and emotional) in their friendships and their work as actresses. While homeless in a socioeconomic sense, the actresses of Split Britches define their homes within a performative space in this piece. This space is one of resistance, of questioning, and of casting an "oppositional gaze" (hooks 122) in a patriarchal society. Both on and off stage, performance artists act out their lives; they perform their identities, forcing audiences to reconsider definitions of sexuality, class, and notions of belonging.

The audience takes on a more active role by the 1990s, with performances like that of Coco Fusco in “The Couple in the Cage”, a collaborative piece with Guillermo Gomez-Peña. The two artists decided to put the viewer back into the frame of discovery, acting like two caged “undiscovered Amerindians” from an imaginary island called Guatinau. As such, the artists initiated their “Guatinau World Tour” as a satirical response to the celebrations of the Quincentennial. For the next year, the highly controversial performance traveled around the world—from Plaza Colon in Madrid to the Australian Museum of Natural Science in Sydney, from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History to London's Covent Gardens, to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Fusco and Gomez-Peña chose countries deeply implicated in the extermination or abuse of aboriginal peoples (Fusco 393). While their intent was to create a satirical commentary on the notion of discovery, they soon realized that many of their viewers believed that what they were seeing was real, and thought that the artists were real savages: “Sadly, over 40% of our audiences believe the exhibit is real yet do nothing about it” (Jones and Heathfield 322).

As the performance continues, the audience members themselves become part of the performance as they must interpret meanings for themselves. Diana Taylor describes the performance’s critique of colonialism, as the artists satirize the ways in which history and culture are packaged, sold, and consumed within hegemonic structures (164). At one point during the performance, Fusco and Gomez-Peña juxtapose stereotypes of the savage Other with 20th century symbols of modern technology. As Fusco describes:

We performed our ‘traditional tasks,’ which ranged from sewing voodoo dolls and lifting weights to watching television and working on a laptop computer. A donation box in front of the cage indicated that, for a small fee [one dollar], I

would dance [rap music], Guillermo would tell authentic Amerindian stories [in a nonsensical language], and we would pose for Polaroids with visitors (Fusco 39).

The images used in the performance represent a critique of the stereotypes associated with Fusco's Black racial identity in both Cuba (i.e. voodoo dolls) and the U.S. (rap music), although the meanings of being "Black" have very different connotations in both spaces (i.e., "Black" can denote a power structure in the U.S. which relegates Whites in socioeconomic positions of power and superiority). I propose that Fusco, along with Gomez-Peña use their bodies as a canvas in a similar fashion as Mendieta: they seek to challenge and critique the scripts that have been written on their bodies by dominant discourses on race, class, and gender. Like Mendieta, their critiques occur on a global scale, taking into account the process of Other-ing that have taken place around the world.

The audience for Gomez-Peña and Fusco is confronted with images that challenge those presented by hegemonic discourses: the subjects do not speak; are they savages? How is a "savage" really defined? Must the subjects engage in barbaric behavior in order to be classified as such? The fact that Fusco and Gomez-Peña do not speak, as Taylor points out, strips the performance of anything that can be mistaken for a "personal" or "individual" trait, in the very same way that colonialism has deprived its captives of individuality (164). I also add that the lack of individuality in the performance, coupled with the invitations for the audience to play a part in the performance, fall in line with the Brechtian technique of deconstructing the "Fourth Wall", allowing the line between spectator and performer to be erased. Fusco also acknowledges the role of the audience in the overall effectiveness of the performance:

[The focus of the performance was] less on what we did than on how people interacted with us and interpreted our actions...audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection....[C]aught off guard, their beliefs are more likely to rise to the surface (40).

The audience must choose either to accept the alternative images presented on stage, or to reject them. Regardless of the choice, even by refusing to “play along” (i.e. laughing at the satire, or getting the joke and the intent behind the performance), they have in fact already acted (they have stopped to think about the image being projected in front of them, which is the objective of the performers). "The Couple in the Cage", while meant to invoke humor in the audience, at the same time leaves the audience open to create their own interpretations of how they view the couple in the cage. The performance also compels the audience to stare at the couple, and perhaps later reflecting on the morality of treating human beings as exotic curiosities. The realm of performance art is therefore a useful tool that can be used to respond to the ways in which social constructions and dominant discourses take shape not only in the U.S., but also on a transnational scale.

The performance art of Ana Mendieta, Split Britches, and Coco Fusco all engage conversations that critique hegemonic structures in the U.S. Mendieta and Fusco present a critique of U.S. conceptions of “Latina” (specifically Cuban) female bodies. Mendieta, a lighter-skinned Cubana, uses her naked body to recondition the meanings associated with *Latinidad*, juxtaposing startling images with blood in order to connect Cuban practices of *santería* with transnational (U.S. and Cuban) conceptions of an “exotic” female body. Fusco, who is darker-skinned, uses her body to critique the notions of what it means to be “Black” in a transnational context. She juxtaposes stereotypical images of Blackness while at the same time challenging the

notions of the savage Other along with her caged partner, Mexican-American performer Gomez-Peña. Split Britches has also made an important contribution to performance art with their productions of feminist responses to male patriarchal discourses, using the WOW Café theater as a performative space to call their home.

As Arrizón explains, “Performance art is a feminist vehicle for liberating the inner self from the ‘patriarchal text’” (95). By this, she means that performances on stage allow women to free themselves from oppressive discourses that limit their sense of agency. I have argued that performance is an oppositional tool; a method for responding to stereotypes which have transnational implications and affect each artist on different levels. Artists like Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante also use a performative space as a means of enacting the world(s) of resistance. The artists, in turn, seek power by rejecting and subverting existing structures of power, such as those that influence the representations of Latinidad which are reflected in the media. This is achieved by employing two techniques: 1) the manipulation of language, and 2) the employment of the body. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of each of these techniques.

Performance Art in the late 1990s: Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante

Given that identity can be performed, often to the extreme as if it were a “drag show”, it also follows that language, too, can be performed. Calafell explains that performance involves the moving “in” and “out” of identities and speech patterns, depending on which space one is in (1). The performance of Carmelita Tropicana and Pingalito Betancourt by Troyano represent this movement in and out of identities. In addition, the performance of language, in the textual form as well as on stage, becomes even more powerful when combined with the employment of the body.

Myra Mendible situates the Latina body at the center of her analysis, exploring its constitutive role in the production, contestation, and consumption of Latinidad in the U.S. (3) Her anthology engages Latinidad as a fluid set of cultural boundaries that are consistently reinforced, challenged, or negotiated by and through Latina bodies (4). The Latina body is an exoticized product, a “package” (to apply Dávila’s term) created through dominant discourses that views the Latina as a hot commodity. As Dávila explains, the generic Latina in U.S.-based ads must be both aspirational (beautiful, educated, accomplished) and representative (that is, not too light or too dark). Interestingly, this translates into a Latin look that privileges whiteness and its prevailing beauty myths.

Indeed, the standard of beauty in the U.S. involves White skin, long, blonde hair, and a thin figure (Mendible 14). Consider the looks of singers Jennifer Lopez and Shakira, who in the past have all donned blonde hair when appearing on television and in magazines. This trend in appearance reflects not only popular U.S. fashions, but also implies that bloneness (and by extension, whiteness) has become associated with beauty in the U.S. In the Spanish-speaking industry as well, as Dávila points out, Spanish language TV networks emphasize whiteness as the norm, as television programs often cast actors and actresses who are light-skinned and who could pass for White (43).

As a result, manifestations of this norm have taken place in the media in two ways. On the one hand, the idea of Whiteness as beauty has resulted in a repackaged image of Latinidad as the curvaceous figures of Selena and Jennifer Lopez, for example, have become symbols of the “exoticism” of Latinas because they deviate from the White norm. Nao Bustamante critiques this phenomenon of exoticism in her performance *America, the Beautiful*. Donning a blonde

wig, and wearing excessive makeup, Bustamante critiques whiteness as a marker of beauty, as well as the beauty rituals that many women undergo in order to be beautiful.

On the other hand, however, Latinas are said to be reclaiming a “curvaceous Latin body” (2). Aparicio speaks of Latinas’ curvy bottoms, full lips, and dark hair as being symbols of ethnic pride, a revolutionary act with respect to Anglo beauty ideals (98). Josefina Lopez’s successful play, *Real Women Have Curves*, builds on this implicit relationship between celebrations of the fuller (presumably “real”) Latina body and an affirmative Latina self-hood. Lopez’s text reclaims and redefines the Latina body from its “fat”, “undesirable”, and “marginal” status, thus rescuing this body from its abject state and transforming it to a body that matters (Mendible 5). As such, Mendible argues that there is no real “Latina body”. It is instead a convenient fiction – a historically contingent, mass-produced combination of myth, desire, location, marketing, and political expedience (1). By presenting the Latina body as a myth, Mendible deconstructs the “repackaged” images operating in society, and she also frees the Latina from aspiring to such images. If there is no ideal body image to which a Latina must aspire, she is therefore lifted of the burden to reach an ideal weight, to have a certain “look” (consider Clara Rodriguez’s *Latin Looks*, 1997), and her body is instead self-defined; she is beautiful because *she* says so. Mendible’s aim is to affirm the role of individual agency in the constitution and decoding of Latinas’ corporeality, using the writings in her anthology as a way to “talk back” to the dominant media that render Latinos/as visible and knowable (5). In her work *America, the Beautiful*, Bustamante on the one hand deconstructs Whiteness as the norm for beauty, but on the other hand, she reclaims her own beauty by performing her piece with her naked, corpulent body on display. Her intent is to rework the ideals of beauty that have been

adapted in both U.S. and Mexican cultures, calling forth an alternative mode of existence, a form of beauty that is self-defined rather than imposed upon her by the dominant culture.

As Carlson explains, in the 1990s, performance art was not only a forum for expressing social and political concerns, but it also became a study of individual identity; a space where identity can be reinvented, and where borders can be crossed” (164). The performance art of Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante reflect both of these aspects of performance art. Their works highlight late 20th and early 21st century concerns with U.S. - Latin American and Caribbean relations. As performance artists, Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante reestablish their border homes as a transnational space that engages multiple cultures. Collectively, their works also help us move beyond stereotypes of Latinas such as that of the “hot commodity”. These performance artists all challenge the dominant discourses that influence their societies in a number of ways. What they all have in common, however, is that they utilize language and their bodies to redefine their identities and to present to their audiences alternative ways of thinking about *cubanidad*, *dominicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*, respectively.

In the next three chapters, I discuss the ways in which performance art, along with the artist-audience relationship, is utilized by each performer as a tool to challenge hegemonic discourses. I will show how Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante not only critique stereotypes, but also invite their audiences to do the same. All three performance artists use their art as a tool to break down the very binaries that have influenced their lives, and they reconstruct notions of race, class, and gender as it relates to *cubanidad*, *dominicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*, respectively. My analysis begins in the next chapter with a discussion of Troyano’s work, *Milk of Amnesia*.

CHAPTER 3: NO ES FÁCIL - REWORKING *CUBANIDAD* IN ALINA TROYANO'S
MILK OF AMNESIA

“Performance art...changes your perception of things. Objects are not the same as they once were.” -- Alina Troyano

As the opening quote indicates, performance art can be used to change the audience's perception of reality. In the previous chapter, I discussed the development of performance art and the significant contributions of artists like Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Ana Mendieta, and Coco Fusco. In this chapter, I will explore the many ways in which Alina Troyano uses her performance art to critique the dominant discourses that have emerged regarding both Cuban and U.S. conceptions of *cubanidad*. I will show how the character of Carmelita Tropicana represents the constructed nature of Troyano's identity, and the ways in which this character, along with Troyano's other creations, reworks definitions of what it means to be Cuban in the United States.

Troyano was born in Havana, Cuba. Her family left Cuba in the 1960s, shortly after the Cuban Revolution, when Troyano was seven (Roman 90). The family moved to New York, and Troyano was enrolled in grammar school. She attended the Catholic School, Mary Queen of Martyrs, and later Circle in the Square to study acting (Garland 46). The artist has received fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Cuban Arts Foundation, as well as an award for outstanding artistic achievement at Performance Space 122 in New York City. She describes her work in the following way:

My work is about identity, finding a home. It tells of the exilic experience, the clash of values and culture and how one negotiates that landscape. It comes from a queer perspective, though not overtly so at times (Morowitz 165).

Troyano first began to perform in the 1980s at the WOW (Women's One World) Café in New York City, which was founded by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver in 1980. Their policy was to produce any work written or directed by a woman, or that presented a woman's sensibility. However, they made no deliberate attempt to appeal exclusively to lesbians. "You didn't have to be a lesbian to get into the shows," explains Shaw, "but most of the people who came were" (Solomon 94). In its early days, the WOW kept afloat by selling food and memberships. Today, it continues to attract female performance artists looking for an ideal forum to showcase their works.

Troyano, drawn to the WOW because of its sense of humor, went on stage for an emcee who did not show up one night and, as she proclaims, never came off: "I went to WOW looking for girls and found something more long-lasting: theatre" (Roman 85). The place offered women who were not represented in existing theater to create their own works, whether it was art, poetry, workshops, or stand-up comedy. Her work, *Milk of Amnesia*, was a commissioned work and was first performed at New York City's Performance Space 122 in the Fall of 1994 under her sister Ela Troyano's direction. It has toured nationally and internationally, with the last presentation at Yale World Performance Project in 2007. The work is both text and performance. The text version includes stage directions that provide a clear picture of the performance of the piece on stage, as Troyano embodies the main characters Alina the writer, Carmelita Tropicana, and Pingalito Betancourt. As I analyze the work, I draw largely upon the

text version and use the stage directions included in the text to discuss the performance of this piece. I also utilize a 1994 digitalized video of Troyano's performance.

Milk of Amnesia is described as “written and performed by Carmelita Tropicana” (Troyano 94). In addition, Carmelita is said to be playing the role of Pingalito Betancourt. For purposes of my analysis, however, I will treat the performance as a work by Troyano, who embodies three main characters: “The Writer” (whom I synonymously refer to as Alina), Carmelita, and Pingalito. In addition, the artist incorporates animals in her work, playing the roles of a horse and a pig. In my study, I treat each of these characters as separate entities, but who all represent (and critique) a unique aspect of Troyano's multifaceted identity. Carmelita, for example, embodies a repackaged image of Latina sexuality (i.e. she is thin and curvaceous), but her lesbian identity subverts this image so that she does not conform completely to U.S.-Cuban ideals of *cubanidad*.

Troyano plays with the constructed nature of *cubanidad* in her performance piece *Milk of Amnesia*. The title itself suggests that Cubans in the United States have suffered / are suffering from amnesia, forgetting their homeland and the political struggles of the people who still reside on the island. For some Cubans, however, this act of forgetting is intentional. Many anti-Castro political exiles wish to forget about the Revolution and the communist politics that emerged after 1959, choosing instead to remember the island before Castro's rule (i.e., its booming sugar economy, its famed Tropicana nightclub, etc) and vowing never to return to the island again until “the ferry from Key West to Cuba starts operating again” (Behar 667). For others, however, this amnesia is a result of forced assimilation. The “milk” in the title represents White (Anglo) acts of domination and processes that serve to erase any traces of Cuban ethnicity.

In presenting these and other critiques of U.S.-Cuban dominant discourses in her performance, Troyano engages in what José Muñoz calls “disidentification”, which is defined as a process of recognizing the oppressive nature of discourses for the very purpose of critiquing them (“White” 83). It is worth noting, for example, the name given to one of Troyano’s main characters: “Carmelita Tropicana”. The first part of the name alludes to the performances of the 1940s by Portuguese-born, Brazilian Hollywood actress Carmen Miranda, who was famous for her fruit hat and whose persona Carmelita appropriates in her own performances. Shari Roberts suggests that Miranda was “the allowable cultural Other for wartime Hollywood, playing the dark-haired comic and, therefore, unthreatening foil to all the gilded wartime female musical stars” (4). Miranda represented the constructed nature of Latinidad and thus contrasted with the “norms” represented by Anglo-American Hollywood actresses (i.e., blonde hair) at the time (i.e. Betty Grable). She was a “spectacle of ethnicity”, whose “tutti-frutti hat” symbolized Latin American imported products and the image of the “Banana Republic” of Central America (4). By appropriating the name and adding the suffix “-ita” (whose meaning, in addition to denoting a diminutive, also denotes affection in the Spanish language), Carmelita continues Miranda’s parody of U.S., Latin American, and Caribbean perceptions of Latinidad as they pertain to race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The second part of Carmelita’s name comes from “America’s most popular orange juice”, which, like the banana, symbolized global capitalism by way of fruit products from Latin America as well as other areas of the world (Román 90). It is also the name of Havana’s legendary nightclub which opened in 1939 and was world renowned for its famous showgirls. Carmelita’s name therefore engages both U.S. and Cuban cultures, while at the same time speaking to the phenomenon of global capitalization and exoticism in both locations (the

Tropicana being a very popular site for U.S. tourism in the early 20th century– a playground for the rich and famous). Furthermore, the name Tropicana is reminiscent of Ricky Ricardo’s fictional nightclub where he performed as a singer. The juxtaposition of Ricky and Carmelita therefore helps to showcase the performance of U.S. *cubanidad* through the media of both television and performance art, respectively. Troyano successfully utilizes the realm of performance art, and particularly her character of Carmelita Tropicana, to highlight and critique unique aspects of her Cuban-American identity.

Early in the performance of *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano, using “the writer's voice,” explains how she came to be a performance artist, and specifically how she came to ‘be’ Carmelita Tropicana: “I couldn't stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, and tell jokes. But she could” (Troyano 98). Carmelita can do what Troyano is afraid to do – perform, but also publicly claim her identity as a Cuban American lesbian artist. In addition to Carmelita Tropicana, another character in *Milk of Amnesia* is Pingalito Betancourt. Pingalito represents an embodied Latino stereotype, and more specifically, the ideal “Cuban man”: among other things, a thick accented, cigar-smoking, macho figure of masculinity. Through Carmelita and Pingalito, Troyano speaks candidly about sex and confronts narrow-minded heterosexist fears of sexual encounters outside of what is deemed “the norm.” Troyano uses Pingalito in her performance to critique the machismo prevalent in many Latino cultures, as well as to manifest and critique the objectification of women.

In the performance of *Milk of Amnesia*, Carmelita becomes Troyano’s link to the past, to memory and to a recuperated *cubanidad*. This is signaled in the reconfiguration of Pingalito’s object of desire (the Tropicana showgirls) as Latina lesbian-desiring, Carmelita Tropicana (Yarbro-Bejarano 207). The performance piece is based on Troyano’s trip to Cuba in 1993,

when she was asked to participate in a dialogue between Cuban and Cuban American artists (Roman 90). The result is a performance of identity that calls into question heterosexuality as the norm, as well as provides reworked conceptualizations of what it means to be Cuban-American.

In the performance, Carmelita has lost her memory and, by extension, the connection to her homeland. Pingalito attempts to help her regain this connection, telling her that she is from Cuba. From her hospital bed, Carmelita takes this news and resolves that “Maybe there is only one way to find out. To go back to the place I was born in. My homeland” (Troyano 100). Sugg argues that Carmelita’s trip to Cuba therefore produces two stories: one about how she is cured of her amnesia and another about contemporary transnational migrations and diasporic histories. She describes *Milk of Amnesia* as Carmelita’s “loss of a simultaneously lived and imaginary connection to Cuba” (466). With these and other stories, Troyano, through her characters, not only questions the hegemonic discourses of both Cuba and the U.S., but also constructs an alternative mode of existence to assert her Latina lesbian subjectivity. Troyano wishes to show us that not only does Cuban (-American) history ignore homosexuals and women, but also that exilic memory, as Caballero points out has completely erased any anti-normative behavior that might have existed in Cuba (131).

In analyzing Troyano’s work, I consider different perspectives that have shaped Troyano’s identity: that of Cuban-American history, feminist studies, and queer theory. Consider, for example, the writer’s description of Carmelita: “She was a fruit and wasn't afraid to admit it. She was the past I'd left behind. She was Cuba. Mi Cuba querida, el son montuno...” (Troyano 98-99). If interpreted from the lens of Cuban-American history, Carmelita represents “the past” that had been left behind, or rather, the ethnic and national identity that had been disciplined out of Troyano in the United States, in the name of assimilation. In addition,

Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach point out that the mango's political connotations allude to the multinational corporations that export Central American and Caribbean fruit to northern industrialized nations (108). As an example, the United Fruit Company was a U.S. corporation formed in 1899 that had a deep and long-lasting impact on the economic and political development of several Latin American countries.

Read from a feminist perspective, Carmelita is “the fruit”, the nut, who dares to go against dominant discourses that insist that she must be a nice girl, submissive in a male-dominated society, and who must assimilate to the dominant (Anglo) culture of the United States. From the lens of queer studies, this quote points to Carmelita's lesbian identity as a “fruit” (~queer). But, what type of fruit? In her performance, the character Alina describes Cubans as mangos: “juicy, real sweet, but messy” (Troyano 98). Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach explain that the mango resembles the guayaba, whose “messiness” and “sweetness” is often a metaphor for lesbian sexuality in the Caribbean, since “making love with a woman is like eating a guava” (108). Therefore, Troyano's character Carmelita, as seen by this example, represents Troyano's nationalist, feminist, and queer ideologies as the artist confronts racism, patriarchy, and homophobia, respectively.

By considering the perspectives of Cuban-American history, feminist studies, and queer theory, I present Troyano's work as an important reworking of Cuban-American subjectivity, as the artist embodies multiple characters in order to present to her audiences the multiple elements that make up her identity. In the next section of this chapter, I provide an overview of *Milk of Amnesia*.

Milk of Amnesia: Retelling Cuban-American History from the Perspective of Troyano's

Main Characters

Through her performance art, Troyano capitalizes on the misunderstandings between U.S. and Cuban cultures, creating the persona of Carmelita Tropicana as a satiric response to U.S. and Cuban dominant discourses as they relate to perceptions of *cubanidad*. The desire both to identify with and critique traditional notions of *cubanidad* in this work has been theorized by Muñoz as “disidentification”, defined as “a performative mode of tactical recognition that various [minority] subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology (“White” 83). Troyano, through her characters, engages in the process of disidentifying with U.S. and Cuban(-American) cultures by subverting them. In this section, I will show how Troyano, through her characters, employ two techniques that work to challenge hegemonic discourses: the manipulation of language, and the use of the body.

The stage of *Milk of Amnesia* is divided into two parts: The writer's space, which is very dimly lit, and the performer's space, framed by a white cube in the center of the stage and containing a painted white linoleum floor. The two areas of the stage are in stark contrast with one another, so much so that Garland observes that the whiteness of the performance space “disturbs,” or stands out to the audience (46). Troyano describes the white area as the public space. Furthermore, this setup symbolizes the dominant view of “whiteness as norm,” and reminds the reader/ audience of the context within which her characters exist.

During her performance, Troyano communicates directly with her audience, thereby breaking the Brechtian Fourth Wall, as described previously. In her strategic use of language, she employs humor to further engage her reader / audience, incorporating the genres of camp (exaggerated performance) and *choteo* (poking fun) in her work. As the artist explains, “We

Cubans like to poke fun during tough times. I try to wield my humor like a fine samurai machete” (qtd in Morowitz 165). The character of Pingalito is an example of Troyano’s critical campy *choteo* as she depicts the loud, hyper-heterosexual Cuban(-American) male. Another example occurs when Carmelita pokes fun at the current economic situation of Cuba with a joke about food:

Did you hear the one about the eggs and the fried steak? The eggs yell at the steak, "The Cubans are coming, the Cubans are coming. Aren't you afraid they'll come get you?" The steak says, "No way, these Cubans don't know what a steak looks like." (Troyano 105)

Although evoking humor, the above quote hints at the shortage of food during Cuba’s Special Period which began in 1991; a time of economic crisis that was, actually, no laughing matter. Troyano, through her characters of Alina, Carmelita, and Pingalito, highlights the Cuban immigrant experience and critiques the efforts by both Anglo and Cuban cultures to suppress any differences that strayed from the White, masculine, heterosexual norm. As a result, each of Troyano’s characters embodies unique definitions of *cubanidad* that have been reworked through Troyano’s feminist lesbian agenda. The first of these characters is the writer, Alina.

Critiquing Forced Assimilation Through the Character Alina

As Troyano explains in an interview, the character of Alina is mainly absent onstage:

The only time you actually see Alina is when I do the slide show which, of course, is dimly lit. At this point, she's speaking live. But even here the issue is

complicated. The slides are projected on a wall, half of which is painted white and forms part of the cube (Roman 91).

The effect on the audience is therefore twofold. On the one hand, the audience hears a female voice as she tells her story in the opening scene. However, they cannot see her, and thus cannot ascribe meaning to the female's body (Tropicana, "Carmelita"). Here, Troyano intentionally removes her body, a Latina body repackaged through filters such as the media, from the present discussion. When she does appear onstage, it is in conjunction with a series of slides that are being projected, showing her native homeland (Tropicana). Troyano's manipulations of her body, (the intentional absence thereof) along with the slide show that follows, re-directs the focus away from the female's body and toward the messages that are being conveyed by the storyteller.

As part of this story, Alina shares with her reader / audience a dream that she once has:

Me and my cousin were fugitives running away from the police. We had to escape.... it started to get hot. Stifling hot. And as it happens in dreams, one minute my cousin was my cousin and the next she was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The heat was making her melt.....I was crying: Don't melt, Pat. Please don't melt. I woke up in a sweat. (Troyano 95)

Alina fleeing from the police in her nightmare echoes her waking-life desire to escape policing of her behavior (Garland 56). Her identification with Pat unites her in resistance to a forced "American" identity. In addition, she must contend with a forced heterosexual orientation that is the presumed norm in both U.S. and Cuban societies. Pat melting in the dream mirrors Alina's feelings of erasure; either she will disappear if she assumes a fixed identity as "American", or her Cubanness- which she associates with family and herself—will evaporate (56). By repeating

her dream in waking form to her reader / audience, Alina calls into question the process of assimilation in the U.S. The illogical expectations stifle her sense of self-discovery and paralyze her as she hides in a sewer with her cousin (56).

Another instance of forced assimilation can be seen in Alina's retelling of her school days:

I never drank my milk. I always threw it out.....Except this time.....The nun came over. Looked at me and the milk. Her beady eyes screamed: You didn't drink your milk, Grade A pasteurized, homogenized, you Cuban refugee....After that day I changed..... 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 (Troyano 95).

The above passage indicates that the milk's meaning is historically determined by exile, and thus contains different meanings in different spatial and temporal contexts. Rather than that which nourishes, U. S. milk comes to symbolize a brainwashing potion. Troyano depicts this milk as a cultural weapon deployed to normativize her identity while living in the U.S. (Garland 54). That is, the milk represents the dominant (Anglo) culture and its attempts to erase any cultural differences through processes of assimilation. Her distaste for this milk therefore reflects her resistance to assimilation and to the experience of exile in general. As an example of this, I am reminded of English-only movements and other attempts made in U.S. history to stamp out linguistic differences in an effort to make English the dominant language in the U.S. Furthermore, the milk's whiteness brings forth issues of race and ethnicity in both Cuba and the

U.S. (as a way of normativizing its construction). The drinking of milk furthermore represents the attempts to erase her identity as a Latina, Cuban-American, feminist lesbian, as she is forced to replace elements from her own culture with that of the dominant U.S. culture.

Troyano plays with language throughout her performance, a technique that serves to critique U.S. and Cuban dominant discourses. The title of the performance piece hints at the function of the U.S. milk, producing “amnesia” in Cuban migrants. However, the title is also a play on the actual medicine, milk of *magnesia*. As Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach point out, “by evoking milk of magnesia, the dreaded childhood laxative used to purge the system, [Alina] addresses her real issue: the locked up, constipated, exilic memory that begs for release” (104). This medicine is also used to cure heartburn. By evoking this milk, therefore, Alina also addresses the heartache due to exile, as well as her subsequent position as a marginalized “Cuban refugee” in the U.S.

The marginalized position of young, Cuban girls can be seen when Alina travels to Cuba. During her trip back, she meets a young girl who looks to be preparing for a night on the town:

A girl about 14 asks me for my pinta labios. I part with my Revlon #44 "Love that Red" lipstick.I [later] take a ride to my hotel....lobby. And who do I see coming in, Pinta Labios, Revlon #44 looking good with a man. What is she doing with that man and my lipstick? She looks down when she sees me. I'm pissed, but with a swig of beer reconsider: maybe the lipstick got her a steak dinner (Troyano 102)....

This passage points to the objectification of women in Cuban society. It shows that women, even girls as young as 14, use makeup to attract men. The fact that the girl asks Alina, a complete stranger, for lipstick gives the assumption that *all* women must carry this bait with

them at all times. Although Alina does have what the girl wants, her lipstick is not to attract men, but instead women. Her identity as a lesbian with lipstick in her hand therefore subverts the image of lesbians as butch. Furthermore, Alina's musing that "maybe the lipstick got her a steak dinner" speaks to the economic Special Period of the time, as the girl uses her lipstick not only to attract men, but to attract men with money who could then give her food. In exchange for food, however, the girl must provide sex for the man. The fact that she "looks down" when she sees Alina at the hotel implies that the girl is ashamed of this transaction, but must do what she can in order to survive during the Special Period.

The character of Alina, through her absent body on stage and her description of forced assimilation during Cuba's Special Period, highlights the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. by revealing the brainwashing influence that Anglos have had as a dominant culture. Because of this effect, Alina and Carmelita struggle to put together the fragmented pieces of their identity. Interestingly, when Alina visits Cuba, she learns that her former home is now a construction company. This discovery represents a metaphor for her new home in the U.S. -- there, too, she must work to collect the pieces and construct an identity that engages both her U.S. and Cuban cultures. Carmelita, in turn, has lost her memory and must work to recover the past, like so many others who belong to Cuba's "1.5 generation²." Carmelita "can do what [Alina] is afraid to do," but the link that holds these two women together is Pingalito, who attempts to unlock Carmelita's memory and who ultimately shows her that a trip to the homeland is necessary for her memory recovery to take place. The next section examines the ways in which Pingalito serves as a tour guide for both Carmelita and the reader / audience.

² This term refers to people who immigrated to another country before adolescence, and contrasts with the first generation (those who immigrated as adults) and the second generation (those who were born in the host country).

Revealing the Constructed Nature of Cubanidad Through the Male Character Pingalito

Betancourt

In portraying Pingalito, Troyano dresses up as a male character, essentially becoming a “drag king”. Koenig suggests that drag kings calls into question the conventions of maleness, thus making a spectacle of the position which has been constructed as “transparent” (150). This is precisely Troyano’s purpose: she uses performance art to put masculinity on display so that deconstruction can take place. Pingalito, as a parodic figure of a hyper-(hetero-) sexual, Cuban (American) male (with his thick accent, cigar, and displays of machismo), represents the epitome of gender performativity.

In her theory of gender performance, Butler provokes “gender trouble” by “denaturalizing” the categories of gender and of the “natural” itself (186). She suggests how “gender trouble” is culturally stirred up through “subversive bodily acts” that exhibit the artificiality of gender. In the case of Pingalito, Troyano’s character ultimately shows that the categories of “male” and “female” are simply constructs. The artist shows that through her performance art, she is capable of taking on the role of men, and she “can be [a] better [man] than men” (Volcano and Halberstam 120). By performing/becoming this dominant sex, the woman can control him—which is to say transform him, desire him, and weaken his power over her (Rosenfeld 214). Drag kings therefore re-appropriate the power of women by taking on masculine roles and placing them on female bodies.³

Pingalito’s name signifies a Cuban slang term for “penis” – in the diminutive. Troyano’s portrayal of Pingalito is described by Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach as a transgression of “the national patriarchal model of masculinity, a model that reveals the

³ For a further discussion on drag king culture, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 1998; Donna Troka et.al., *The Drag King Anthology*, 2003; Leslie Feinberg, *Drag King Dreams*, 2006; or Diane Torr, *Sex, Drag, and Male Roles – Investigating Gender as Performance*, 2010.

transformative power of transnational feminism” (106). The fact that this “model of masculinity,” completely exaggerated by Troyano to the point of parody, takes part in the telling of history represents a critique of the very notion of male *cubanidad*. Pingalito’s last name, “Betancourt,” alludes to the famous Cuban singer, Justo Betancourt, whose salsa music shows both Cuban and Puerto Rican influence. One of Betancourt’s songs in the 1990s was aimed specifically at feminists of the time: “Con su fiebre feminista / Logró que yo me cansara / Yo no nací para eso...no va, no va. / ...No quiero nada contigo / Ya déjame en paz, mujer.” (Betancourt “Mujer”) This anti-feminist sentiment corresponds with the image of the hyper-masculine Cuban(-American) male that Pingalito embodies. The singer’s connection to Puerto Rico also engages the larger Caribbean community and provides a transnational identity for the Cuban-American character who takes on the last name.

Troyano further constructs a transnational Cuban identity in Pingalito through his thick “Cuban” accent, as well as through the music that identifies him bi-nationally. For example, he makes his entrance to the tune “Patricia,” a popular “swing” by Dámaso Pérez Prado that was part of the U.S. mambo craze. As Pérez Firmat points out, “the mambo’s sound emerged only in contact with North American music....[it] has always been Cuban American” (80). Although we have said that Pingalito represents “the Cuban man”, we must now ask ourselves, whose representation of the Cuban man is he? Is he a representation of U.S. conceptions of *cubanidad*? Is he Cuba’s answer to what it means to be a “real man”? Garland offers her view: “Pingalito seems to be a conglomeration of projections masquerading as a single egotistic figure” (65). As a “conglomeration,” Pingalito not only represents the Cuban man, but also a Cuban man that has become Americanized. In addition, with the name Betancourt, he further represents a reworked definition of *cubanidad* that embraces the larger Caribbean community.

Thus, chomping on his cigar and wearing a *guayabera* (a white shirt typically worn by Cuban men), Pingalito introduces himself as a former bus driver from Havana who adores Carmelita. Pingalito is the one to visit her in the hospital after the accident that caused her to lose her memory, which we find out happened while she was “chocolate-pudding wrestling” (Troyano 100). Pingalito is also wearing black pants, white shoes, a hat, and glasses which are held together at the bridge with tape. This wardrobe references the economic hardships and scarcities of the Special Period in Cuba, showing that one can do much with very little.

Although Pingalito attempts to cure Carmelita's amnesia and begins as a kind of commentator and “Cuban” guide for the reader / audience, Troyano’s performance hinges on challenging the constructed notions of gender, nationality, and heterosexuality. The masculine Pingalito attempts to help the feeble Carmelita to regain her memory as she lies in a hospital bed. However, his attempts fail. As Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach explain: “When [Pingalito] offers to show Carmelita ‘the facts about Cuba’, his cultural mapping and reading of the island fail to consider her exile, her exilic memory, and her sexuality (106). Thus, the male persona is unable to successfully “rescue” the female in distress, mainly because he overlooks several aspects of Carmelita’s identity.

As a first strategy, Pingalito attempts to reenact a specific memory for Carmelita: “Her grandfather, who smoked a cigar, would take her for a drive in his Chevrolet....So I decide to stimulate this memory. By blowing smoke in her face....when a doctor comes in and says I gotta go.” (Troyano 95) This exercise does not help Carmelita, and she ends up throwing up. The cigar, a phallic symbol in its own right, is a staple of Cuban masculinity. Pingalito, the knowledgeable source that he is, informs the reader / audience that “The Cuban man....is like a fine Havana cigar..the one you gotta have...Because he is the one that truly, truly satisfies”

(Troyano 96). In essence, the Cuban man is a stimulant that is needed to satisfy a person's sexual needs. However, Carmelita's failure to connect with this symbol of masculinity points to her lesbian identity, as Pingalito's stimulation of Carmelita's senses (literally and figuratively) fails to stimulate any memory recollection in her brain (Solórzano-Thompson 86). This failure also represents Carmelita's rejection of a male's position of authority in her process of memory recovery, particularly since the doctor who later comes in reportedly cannot cure her amnesia either.

Due to this failure by both men, the Cuban culture continues to remain lost to Carmelita, an experience similar to the forced forgetting that Alina experiences in the opening scenes. We have seen that while Alina's body digests the new culture in the drinking of homogenized milk, it simultaneously begins to cast out, or expel, the former culture. Similarly, Carmelita's action of throwing up in the doctor's office shows how she quite literally expels any potential for memory or identification with the former culture.

Pingalito's next strategy is to present images of Cuba, highlighting the island as replete with beautiful women. Representing women as national symbols, Pingalito proudly declares:

Oye me mano. Esas coristas de Tropicana. With the big breasts, thick legs. In Cuba we call girls carros and we mean your big American cars. Your Cadillac, no Toyota or Honda. Like the dancer, Tongolele.....you could put a tray of daiquiris on Tongolele's behind and she could walk across the floor without spilling a single drop. (Troyano 96).

While his intention is to help Carmelita recover her Cuban identity, Pingalito extols the natural beauty of the island by essentially objectifying women. The famous Tropicana girls, like American cars, are seen as commodities. The Cuban woman, with her "big breasts" and "thick

legs”, is parallel to a brand new car with a nice body; “the one you gotta have”. The passage also speaks to Troyano’s lesbian agenda in that with each one of Pingalito’s sexual references (i.e. Tongolele’s behind), Troyano is able to express her own attraction to the female body.

As Cespedes further explains:

The focus on Tongolele’s buttocks is important, because it exemplifies Cuba’s slippery racial signifiers, where the black / mulatta body comes to serve as an icon for hypersexuality. This association is a powerful one in a nation in which women’s sexuality is linked to the image of the buttocks, and the quintessential buttocks are Tongolele’s (151).

This black / mulatta body is quite visible as symbol of Cuban beauty. Yet, she is invisible on a larger scale, as Pingalito hints to the racism of Cuba: “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” (96). As Yarbrow-Bejarano points out, “Pingalito’s sexism distances him from Carmelita, whereas his critique of the racism of the middle-class exile community aligns him with her” (150). Indeed, Pingalito is not afraid to critique Cuban dominant discourses as they omit references to an African heritage, and he proudly lays claim to his own ancestry: “When they ask me: ‘Pingalito, and where is your grandmother?’-I say mulata y a mucha honra. Dark and proud” (96). His affirmation of “Dark and proud” suggests that Pingalito has been influenced by Black power movements in the U.S. (Solórzano-Thompson 87). He is “dark and proud” in the U.S., because here, he can join with his fellow African diasporic subjects to celebrate the fact that “Black is beautiful”. The name Betancourt is further linked to an identification with African heritage, given that the singer Justo Betancourt is nicknamed “El Mulato.” Unable to recover her memory with Pingalito’s help, Carmelita resolves to embark on her own journey to rediscover

her past. In the next section, I discuss the character of Carmelita as she embarks on a trip back to the island.

The Role of Memory in Reworking Cubanidad Through Carmelita Tropicana

Carmelita begins her performance by directly addressing her audience: “The doctors they tell me my name is Carmelita. I’ve had a terrible accident. I hurt my head when I was chocolate pudding wrestling. I don’t remember a thing” (Troyano 100). In the same way that Alina’s physical presence had been absent, we hear only *about* Carmelita up until the second half of the performance. The first issue that she addresses is her lack of memory. As Muñoz explains:

Anyone who is familiar with Cuban exile communities knows that Cubans live in memory. Furthermore, that memory has a strange spatiality for the Cuban exile who inhabits North American territory but, nonetheless, has powerful associations, identifications, and affiliations with the island. (“No es Fácil” 76)

To lose this memory is to lose a sense of one’s identity. For Carmelita, it is necessary to return to the very land that she left behind years ago, in order to retrace her steps, to find clues to who she is. Her trip to the homeland is not uncommon, as many Cubans make trips back home, but mainly to visit family. Going back to Cuba for anything but a family visit marks the traveling Cuban as one who is sympathetic to the revolution (Muñoz “No es fácil” 80). Carmelita’s return, however, is a search for the lost referent of what Muñoz describes as her “exilic memory” (“No es fácil” 80).

In an effort to recover this memory, Troyano through Carmelita plays with assumptions about *cubanidad* throughout her performance on stage. For example, Carmelita modifies her speech patterns, sometimes enacting a thick “Cuban” accent, while at other times dropping it in

order to address her audience in the flatter tones of Anglo-American speech (Tropicana, “Carmelita”). Such a manipulation of language serves to reveal the constructed nature of speech and other aspects of Carmelita’s identity. The employment of a thick accent further perpetuates the stereotype of Latinos / Cuban(-American)s as poor English speakers (Perez Firmat 157). The manipulation of language is significant in that it shows that language, much like other aspects of identity, can be reworked so as not to perpetuate preconceived notions as they relate to the definition of *cubanidad*.

Another aspect of *cubanidad* that is questioned is the idea of hetero-normativity. The beautiful Carmelita, who would otherwise be mistaken for a Tropicana girl (an object of Pingalito’s desire), is actually a lesbian. At one point during her performance, Carmelita wears a hat made of helium balloons: “This is linked to my libido (pointing to a highly inflated balloon). When I think of Soraya, my nurse, giving me a sponge bath or rubbing Keri lotion on my chest it (balloon pops) pops uncontrollably” (Troyano 100).

In embodying a Latina stereotype as “sexy”, while also claiming a lesbian identity, Carmelita challenges the “repackaged” image of Latinas in the U.S. as (hetero)sexual bombshell as well as the lesbian stereotype as butch. The same can be said as Carmelita travels to Cuba and presents *cubanidad* from a lesbian feminist perspective.

On stage, Carmelita is on her way to Cuba and models her multilayered hat, claiming, “Soy una tienda ambulante ... I’m a walking Cuban department store. Tampons and pearls, toilet paper, stationary supplies. What a delight” (Troyano 102). In her performance of this line, she again makes direct contact with her audience, choosing not to use the microphone that is available to her, and instead engaging in casual conversation with her spectators (Tropicana, “Carmelita”). As Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach point out, “the hat is a way to provide

relatives in Cuba with scarce and often luxury items...a black-market transaction” (109). Since Carmelita travels during the Special Period in Cuba, her hat represents a crossroads between the U.S. and Cuba, as goods from the U.S. are made readily available to those who may not otherwise have a means to obtain them. This interaction has socio-political implications as well: by creating a “black-market transaction,” Carmelita promotes capitalism and provides Cubans with an alternative to buying goods, independent of Cuba’s current economic system.

Some of the items for sale, however, are subjects of parody. For example, Carmelita chooses to hang tampons from her hat in a humorous display of female sexuality. The hat furthermore represents a Cuban lesbian feminist conceptualization of Carmen Miranda’s “tutti-frutti” headpiece. Miranda, who herself represents a parody of Latinidad, wore her headpiece as a way to parody and to critique the imported products of Central America and its “banana republics.⁴” (Roberts 6). In contrast, Carmelita *is* the “fruit’ wearing the hat; she embodies *cubanidad* precisely because of her challenges to it. That is, she reworks the traditional image by successfully challenging U.S.-Cuban dominant discourses with regard to *cubanidad*, and gives agency to both women and migratory subjects of Cuban diasporas. The experiences of many of these subjects involve multiple trips to and from Cuba. For Carmelita, the journey is an attempt to recover her lost memory.

While in Cuba, she takes a ride with a taxi driver, who says that “when there is no gasoline and the buses are not running, he fuels his body with water with sugar. Water with sugar. The great Cuban energizer. Agua con azúcar and then he can walk for miles” (Troyano 102). The reference to sugar, on the one hand, speaks to Cuba’s former recognition as one of the highest producers of sugar (which unfortunately came at the expense of Cuba’s slave labor).

⁴ A “banana republic” refers to a politically unstable country, mainly in Central America, whose economy is largely dependent on the export of a single product (i.e. bananas).

Cubans in the 1990s, however, faced a very different and difficult (“no fácil”) reality, as there were severe shortages of such essential products as food, water, and gasoline for cars. Secondly, the mentioning of “water with sugar” implies a quick mixture that is easy to make, very affordable, and accessible to Cubans amidst the economic crisis. Lastly, the need for sugar to enhance the water’s flavor can be read as Troyano’s subtle suggestion that “sweetness”, like the sweet *guayaba* (metaphor for lesbians, as I noted earlier) is an added “flavor” that enhances her complex identity.

This identity becomes easier to understand as Carmelita ultimately recovers her memory. She experiences what she calls a CUMAA, A Collective Unconscious Memory Appropriation Attack. The first CUMAA transports Carmelita into the subjectivity of a conquistador’s horse. The horse, a conquered subject himself, proceeds to narrate the story of the island’s first encounter with European colonization. Troyano’s personification of animals provides agency for voiceless positions. Furthermore, by giving Arriero the limelight, Troyano takes the focus away from the presence of a female body, as she does with Alina’s noted absence from the stage, in order to provide a re-telling of history that highlights the emotional impact of Spanish conquest (Tropicana, “Carmelita”).

The next CUMAA occurs when she bites into a pork sandwich and is visited by Cochinito, a young pig living in a Havana apartment during the Special Period. Cochinito is weaned from his mother too early and finds his new home isolating and stifling, where his owners are at odds with him. Eventually, he is taken to a butcher and killed. The stories of the horse and the pig are interconnected as they tell an alternative history, a history that is often omitted from the historical accounts of the Spanish Conquest, for example. The horse tells of the slaughter of innocent Native American populations, a slaughter as brutal as the killing of a pig in

a desperate time of Cuba's economic period. The CUMAAs therefore signal the collective memory that resists official, hegemonic channels of Cuban(-American) history.

The stories represent the interconnectedness of both collective memory and personal memory as Carmelita realizes, for example, that Cochinito and she had crossed paths before. A description of blue tiles in the pig's story is revealed to be part of the same ones at the clinic where she had her tonsils removed as a child:

My vocal chords, my tonsils. The pig and I, we had our operations at the same clinic. The clinic with blue tiles. I remember. We are all connected, not through AT&T, E-mail, Internet, or the information super- highway, but through memory, history, herstory, horsetory (Troyano 108).

The killing of the pig renders him voiceless, like the removal of Carmelita's tonsils, or the erasure of her lesbian identity from monolithic perceptions of *cubanidad*. Not only are the stories themselves connected, but Carmelita's overall message for her reader/ audience reveals that "We are all connected". This political stance allows Carmelita to become the architect in the construction of her own home, regardless of where she is located geographically and in direct relation to where she is located politically and sexually (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach 112).

Ultimately, Carmelita finds comfort in knowing that both Cuba and the U.S. make up very unique but important aspects of her identity: "I REMEMBER / QUE SOY DE ALLA /QUE SOY DE AQUI /UN PIE EN NEW YORK (A FOOT IN NEW YORK) /UN PIE EN LA HABANA (A FOOT IN HAVANA)" (Troyano 108-109). Although neither place acknowledges her lesbian identity, Carmelita, as architect, can take the pieces of her fragmented sense of self in order to construct a new home for herself as a Cuban-American. She uses her art

as a weapon, her machine gun, to craft a new mode of existence and to provide a reworked, feminist, queer image of *cubanidad*.

By the end of her performance, Carmelita concludes: “My journey is complete. My amnesia is gone. After so many years in America, I can drink two kinds of milk. The sweet condensed milk of Cuba and the pasteurized homo kind from America” (Troyano 109-110). As Carmelita implies, this “homo kind” of milk highlights her lesbian identity, which was (and still is) denied and closeted in Cuba and the U.S. (Caballero 2). While Carmelita finds what she is looking for, namely, her sense of identity, Garland points out that Carmelita’s status as a Cuban-American will always privilege her and set her apart from her fellow Cubans on the island: “her vision misses the poverty and hunger in Cuba, which she witnesses upon her return. It also misses the multi-layered process of identification” (56). The memory that she desperately seeks will never be quite the same as the memory held by those who actually live on the island. On some level, the writer Alina is aware of this fact: “No es fácil. It’s not easy to have clear vision. In seven days I can only get sound bites. Cuba is a land of contradictions” (Troyano 109). Garland’s assessment, while true in part, does not acknowledge the accomplishments that Carmelita has made with regard to reworking the definitions of *cubanidad*. By “drinking two kinds of milk”, Carmelita shows how she reconciles multiple aspects of her Cuban and U.S. cultural identity. As we have seen, her identity is composed of several elements, and the performance of *Milk of Amnesia* can therefore be analyzed through various lenses. In the final part of this chapter, I analyze Troyano’s life and work from the perspectives of Cuban-American history, feminist studies, and queer theory.

Considering Milk of Amnesia within the Context of Cuban-American History

During the early 1960s, seven-year-old Alina Troyano moved from her native Cuba to the United States. Her father, whom Troyano has called a revolutionary, fled with his family after Fidel Castro's revolution overthrew dictator Fulgencio Batista. She is a member of what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the "1.5 generation"; a generation whose exile is lived through their parents' memories and "modified by American mass culture" (181). The younger generation, like their parents, express nostalgia (for roots and identity), but they also show more ambivalence, a desire for reconciliation, and a need to put pieces together. As Pérez Firmat puts it:

Soy un ajiaco de contradicciones / I have mixed feelings about everything. /
 Name your tema, I'll hedge; / Name your cerca, I'll straddle it / Like a cubano./
 Cuban-American mí / I sing therefore I am, sí (181).

As a "one-and-a-half" herself, Carmelita straddles many borders. With her memory lost, she desires to reestablish a connection to her Cuban culture and heritage, resolving to travel to the island in order to find the missing pieces to her puzzling identity.

Carmelita's trip comes amidst a history of Cuban migrations both to and from the U.S. Many of the Cubans who came to the US during the Mariel boatlift of 1980 were mistakenly labeled as criminals, since Castro made it a point to send his "politically undesirable" citizens as well as those that were creating social problems on the island" (Cafferty 44). The "politically undesirable," according to Castro, were the old, the sick, homosexuals, drug addicts and criminals. The established Cuban community in Miami turned a cold shoulder to these recent arrivals, marginalizing them because of their different social status, racial make-up and sexual preference. Even in Cuba, where the Revolution aimed for equality, homosexuals were openly

persecuted and imprisoned in jails or in concentration-type camps (see Reinaldo Arenas' *Before Night Falls*, 1993). Castro felt there was no place for homosexuals in his Revolution and saw them as political dissidents.

Troyano's return to Cuba in 1993, therefore, would not have been welcomed by Castro and his supporters. In addition, the timing of Troyano's performance piece, 1994, mirrors the dangerous crossing in a raft from Cuba to Florida by the *Balseros*, albeit in reverse form. *Milk of Amnesia* further reminds us of Cuba's "Special Period," an extended period of economic crisis that began in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. When confronting the complexities of life, Cubans, both on and off the island, often use the phrase "No es fácil" (Céspedes 148). In *Milk of Amnesia*, Troyano uses "No es fácil" to capture the dilemmas presented by Cuba's multitude of difficulties (social, political, economic, etc) particularly during the Special Period of the 1990s: "I tell my driver Francisco I want to see, touch, feel, hear, taste Cuba. All my orifices are open. Francisco says: 'No es fácil'. It's not easy. I have come during the Special Period" (102). In addition, for Troyano, "no es fácil" to be a Cuban in the U.S., to be a Cuban-American in Cuba, and "no es fácil" to be a lesbian in either of these spaces.

Contributing to this difficulty is what Aparicio describes as a process of tropicalization of Cubans in the U.S. To tropicalize, according to Aparicio, is "to trope; to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values" (8). Cubans and other Latinos in the U.S., she argues, are visible only as stereotypes (101). These stereotypes regarding Latinidad are distributed among official discourses represented through texts, history, literature, and the media. Cuban-American authors, however, have responded to this process of tropicalization by engaging in "subjectification," which Aparicio defines as an act that "resist(s), oppose(s), rewrite(s), and subvert(s) stereotypes" (101). For examples of this, we need only

consider the works of authors such as Cristina García (*Dreaming in Cuban*, 1992), Pérez Firmat (*Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, 1994), or Achy Obejas, whose 1996 work, *Memory Mambo*, dialogues well with Troyano's production in its depiction of the struggles of a Cuban-American lesbian protagonist to remember her past.

Obejas' protagonist, Juani Casas, is driven by her need to find out "what really happened" (14) in her family's past, to see through the tricks that memory has played. It is framed principally by her inability to distinguish between her memories and her family's. However, where Juani questions memory, Carmelita struggles to restore her memory, both personal and collective, in order to wield them in a struggle against the coerced forgetfulness of immigrant assimilation. As Sugg suggests, "it is only through an experience of 'place' that [Carmelita] is able to repair the damage done by her personal and cultural amnesia" (463).

Lastly, in *Life on the Hyphen*, Pérez-Firmat stresses that "Cuban-American culture is a balancing act" (5). Therefore, the discipline of performance art represents a site where Troyano performs this "balancing act," the "memory mambo," as she explores the conflicting elements of her history. While her character Carmelita Tropicana embodies many familiar and, sometimes, stereotypical aspects of *cubanidad* to Cubans, Cuban-Americans, and US citizens (in name, accent, and costume), she is a lesbian who openly desires women (Caballero 130). She must therefore "balance" this and other aspects of her complex identity in each of these environments. In addition, the character Alina, by writing her story and showing the remnants of what was once her home through the use of slideshow images, exposes not only the Cuban government's control over private property, but also the attempts to silence voices like her own. Her feminist agenda is thus revealed as she presents her own version of history, as discussed earlier. In the next section, I analyze Troyano's work from the perspective of feminist studies.

The Role of Feminism in the Creation of Milk of Amnesia

The first and second waves of feminism have long considered the socio-political position of women as Other (that is, women as other-than-men). Koenig argues that because of this position in society, women are therefore watched more carefully than men (150). Furthermore, if women possess differences that stray from the “norm” of White, bourgeois, Anglo/ Euro-American, their bodies are further marked and “spectacularize[d]” (150). Troyano, however, asserts her feminism by explaining that she possesses “lipstick in one hand, and a machine gun in the other” (Roman 90). She is well aware of the representations of *cubanidad* that exist and result in stereotyped images, but she uses her art as her “machine gun” to fight back against attempts to objectify her and to render her as a “repackaged” (to use Dávila’s term) Latina bombshell. She exemplifies agency as she presents her own version of what it means to be Cuban-American.

Milk of Amnesia thus presents a feminist truth-telling. As O’Farrell and Vallone describe, the work is “A self-representation of a woman’s lived experience connected to larger discourses of history, politics, and culture, [and is] a crucial contribution to the on-going project of feminist critique and change” (111). The fact that a woman’s lived experience takes center stage in this work denotes an important power shift, as the female perspective and voice takes precedence over a man’s telling of history. When Troyano originally performed her piece, the venue that she chose represented a space for female subjectivity to be promoted and celebrated.

Troyano began her stage career in 1983 with stand-up comedy at the 11th Street WOW Café in New York City, which would aid her in her later development as an artist. During this time, art reflected social changes, such as the presidential election of Ronald Reagan, the anti-feminist counterattacks by conservative groups (or, as it was often termed, “post-feminism”) and

a move in the art market toward an endorsement of “neo-expressionism, a macho reaction to the pluralism generated by ’70s feminism, which had threatened the white male stronghold in the visual arts” (Hammond 51). Solomon has identified a few common themes and esthetics of the WOW productions: “Feminism and lesbianism appear in the shows not as issues but as givens.... An attention to detail....a feminine esthetic because its details are often forgotten or stepped over in male-dominated works” (100). In this environment, Troyano’s *Milk of Amnesia* was produced.

As a feminist production, *Milk of Amnesia* highlights a feminist critique of male-dominated discourses and theatrical productions, offering instead a woman’s perspective of history and culture. Performing in such spaces as the WOW Café, Troyano was successfully able to express her feminist agenda. However, in addition to providing a feminist critique, *Milk of Amnesia* also addresses issues relevant to lesbian, gay, and transgender studies. Such issues would be ignored if we were to read the piece from strictly a feminist perspective. The WOW Café and the other New York venues of which Troyano was a part, offered exciting alternatives to a more serious and staid feminist culture (Dolan 119). Women performing as men, the depiction of same-sex desire; the parody of male power, and an openness to experimenting with sex roles and sexuality all comprise the works produced in Troyano’s social circles, and provide another perspective for discussing her performance of *Milk of Amnesia*: that of queer studies.

Milk of Amnesia as a Queering of Cuban-American History

Lesbians in the United States first organized in the mid-1950s when Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon founded the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). Their decision was spurred in part by their disillusionment with male-dominated gay organizations, such as the Mattachine Society (Zimmerman 1). By 1970, the early women’s liberation movements had heightened gender

awareness. At the same time, however, the interests of minority women became largely ignored, as White, upper-class feminists began to promote only those agendas that served their personal interests. This resulted in the development of such movements as Third World Feminism, Latina Feminism, and Lesbian Feminism in the 1980s and 1990s.

In addition to this sense of exclusion by feminist groups, the climate of the 70s was unfavorable towards lesbians and the homosexual community in general. As Zimmerman explains, "I came out into a world in which homosexuality was at best a disease and at worst a sin or crime" (41). At the time, the terms "queer" and "dyke" were derogatory terms that were commonly understood to mean "strange," "odd," "unusual," "abnormal," or "sick," with the word "queer" being routinely applied to lesbians and gay men as a term of abuse (Halperin 1). With the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, this negative perception of homosexuals and transgendered subjects became even more prevalent. During this same time, however, many LGBT groups and individuals responded to this epidemic by organizing campaigns to promote efforts in AIDS education, prevention, research, patient support, and community outreach, as well as to demand government support for these programs. In the academic world, more emphasis was placed on Lesbian Studies in an effort to advance and to promote education that was centered on LGBT groups (Zimmerman 42).

Also during the late 1980s, the word "queer" began to be used in a gay-affirmative sense by activists, street kids, and members of the art world in New York (Halperin 1). By the 1990s, "queer" had been re-appropriated by the gay and lesbian community as a term of empowerment. This reworked definition was further promoted by professor / activist Teresa de Lauretis, who coined the phrase "queer theory" to serve as the title of a conference that she held in February of 1990 at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Queer Theory rejects the idea of fixed sexual

identities, thus questioning the assumption that lesbianism (or any other identity) can be the basis for defining any particular body of knowledge (Zimmerman 9). In place of 'lesbian' or 'gay,' queer theorists posit a fluid notion of 'queer,' which may specify lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered and inter-sexed individuals, or may signify any and all marginality (Zimmerman 9). From this point on, queer studies has slowly begun to be recognized and accepted as a field of study, addressing the important theme of sexual orientation that was largely ignored by feminist studies.

The 1990s was therefore a turning point for lesbians, gays, and transgendered subjects. As Escudero-Álías mentions, "Not only television stations, but also newspapers and fashion magazines in western countries celebrated the "Gay Nineties" (265). Those years saw the publication of crucial texts that reshaped the theoretical landscape: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Epistemology of the Closet*, 1990), Gloria Anzaldúa (*Making Face, Making Soul / Haciendo carcas*, 1990), Linda Alcoff (*Feminist Epistemologies*, 1993), and Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*, 1999), to name a few.

Emerging in this environment, Troyano's performance problematized the relationship between performer and audience by bouncing the lesbian gaze back onto the spectator (Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach 102-103). By reversing gender roles, cross-dressing, and deconstructing the "beautiful señorita" stereotype, she deconstructs dominant gender constructions and invites the audience to conceive of a new lesbian subjectivity (103). Dolan denotes this strategy as the act of "queering", that is, the use of "numerous strategies, all of which carry the charge of [highlighting] multiplicity, openness, contradiction, contention, [and] the slipperiness of sexual practice..." (5). To be queer, then, is not about who you are, but what

you do. Through her work, Troyano “queers” U.S.-Cuban history and culture, not only by introducing several “queer” characters, but also by retelling history from a queer perspective.

Consider one of the many musings of Carmelita as she wanders in her native Havana:

Let's see, what did I learn today? Ochun is the goddess of the sea. No, that's Yemaya. Ochun is like the Caridad del Cobre and if you want to get the love of your life you have to leave honey under your bed for five days. You get the love you want and the cucarachas you don't. And the slang word for dyke is bombera, firefighter. So maybe if I yell, "Fire," "Fuego," would all the dykes come out now? (Troyano 107).

This passage points not only to the history of religious and spiritual syncretism in Cuban culture, namely *santería*, but also to the invisibility of lesbians within the nation's history and spiritual practices. Carmelita recognizes the homophobia of Cuba as a place where she cannot “see” any lesbians, and a place that would not necessarily welcome her identification of lesbian with Cuba (O'Farrell and Vallone 122). As a feminist, however, she denounces the absence (yelling “Fire,” “Fuego”). This is an example of identifying oppressive discourses as a means to respond to and subvert these discourses. The above passage therefore presents a queer look at Cuban history and culture.

Carmelita therefore completely transgresses one's initial estimation of her and what she represents (Caballero 130). Her last name, as discussed earlier, reminds us of the “Tropicana girls”; the objects (literally and figuratively) of heterosexual desire at the famous Cuban nightclub. However, this image becomes queered when we become aware that this Tropicana is a lesbian. She is also extremely feminine, disturbing the stereotype of the lesbian as a man-hating butch who dresses more or less like a man. In contrast to this image, Carmelita loves being a

woman, and proudly desires women in the process, thus asserting a queer identity for the heterosexual public (Caballero 130).

Troyano's performance art is a tool, her "machine gun" to completely dismantle U.S. and Cuban conceptions of what it means to be a Cuban-American and also assert her feminist lesbian agenda. Her work *Milk of Amnesia* reveals, among other things, the constructed nature of both gender and sexuality. The beautiful Latina "bombshell" is actually a lesbian. The macho, hyper-masculine Cuban male is actually a female in drag who, as it turns out, has virtually no knowledge of the Cuban island (being a one-and-a-halfer from Miami). As she challenges the dominant discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality that have shaped U.S and Cuban notions of *cubanidad*, the artist also engages in the struggles that she shares with Latino subgroups. Specifically, she highlights the struggles of migrant subjects to establish a sense of home in the U.S. -the *de aquí / de allá* experience, as well as the sense of fragmentation felt by many U.S. Latinos/as they work to reconcile the elements of their multicultural identities. Finally, Troyano's use of language and her body, through both her human and animal impersonations, validates the realm of performance art as a viable tool to critique U.S.-Caribbean relations and the discourses that emerge from them. In the next chapter, I will discuss Josefina Báez, who like Troyano, uses her art to critique U.S.-Caribbean relations as she documents her experiences as a Dominican migrant in the U.S.

CHAPTER 4: REWORKING *DOMINICANIDAD* IN JOSEFINA BÁEZ'S*DOMINICANISH*

Ni aquí ni allá

Here I am chewing English

and spitting Spanish (Báez 48-49).

Troyano's *Milk of Amnesia* represents a Cuban-American, feminist lesbian reworking of *cubanidad*. Báez, in turn, provides an alternative conceptualization of both performance art and the definition of *dominicanidad*. In her life and works, she engages both U.S. (*aquí* = "here") and Dominican (*allá* = "there") discourses of race, class, and gender. In addition, her alternative to theater is embodied by her methodology of creation known as Performance Autology, which she defines as the "science of the self." Báez challenges traditional notions of *dominicanidad* that have attempted to promote, among other things, a racial identity that is "not-black." The term has been used by white elites in the Dominican Republic to indicate an identity that is white, Spanish, and Catholic (Howard 2). Likewise, in the U.S., it is constructed vis a vis the dominant Anglo culture and implies an identity that is black/ Non-white, non-American, and non-English-speaking. (Torres-Saillant, "Inventing the Race" 125). This chapter will explore the many ways in which Báez celebrates her diversity and performs her identity in *Dominicanish*, both on stage and on the page. Given that the literature on Báez has been scarce, I rely largely on the scholarly contributions of Lorgia García-Peña, Emilia María Durán-Almarza, and Danny

Méndez, as well as on personal interviews by Báez, to show how she uses her performance art to assert her identity as a Dominicanyork.

In claiming this identity, Báez joins with other Dominican-born New York writers who have re-appropriated this term, such as the scholar Silvio Torres-Saillant. In his work *El retorno de las yolas: ensayos sobre diáspora, democracia, y dominicanidad* (1999), Torres-Saillant explains that the connotations of the term originally implied an inferior class, racial, and economic status of Dominican immigrants in the U.S. who arrived after the 1960s following the assassination of Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in 1961 (29). For Dominicans still living on the island, the term Dominicanyork implied that Dominicans living in New York (or, by extension, the U.S.) were responsible for infecting the Dominican Republic with materialism, perverse sexuality, crime, and drug use upon their return home (Hoffnung-Garskof, *Tale* 7). Therefore, those who were labeled Dominicanyorks served as scapegoats to project all of the negative elements of society against which middle-class Dominicans on the island defined themselves. In re-appropriating the term, however, writers like Báez and Torres-Saillant associate Dominicanyork with a subgroup of former outcasts, composed of black Dominican immigrants in the U.S., whose upward social mobility has given them the economic allowance to counteract insults originating from the homeland (Méndez 156). Throughout this chapter, I will show other ways in which Báez reworks her identity and the very notion of *dominicanidad*.

A self-proclaimed “dancerwriteractressyogateaching-artistwoman,” Báez was born in 1960 in La Romana, a sugar cane producing town with a large African diasporic identity in the Dominican Republic. Her text reflects a twenty-first century transnational awareness, which has been shaped by civil rights struggles in the U.S., globalization, and the massive post-Trujillo Dominican migration which created a very prominent Dominican community in New York

(Mendez 2). Báez is a part of this post-Trujillo migration, as she immigrated with her family to the U.S. in 1972, when she was 12 years old. Like Troyano, who left her homeland in opposition to the Castro regime, Báez also left her country due to political unrest, in this case, due to the government under Joaquín Balaguer (1906-2002). Balaguer was one of the leaders of the Partido Reformista Social Cristiano, and also one of the most elected presidents in the history of the Dominican Republic, having served seven terms in office (1966-1978). The fact that Balaguer finds a place in Báez's text is an indication of his haunting presence in the collective memory of Dominicans in New York, many of whom had personal experience of his rule (Méndez 160).

While growing up in New York, Báez developed a love for artistic expression, such as theater, but she also enjoyed the art of learning and of creating. After completing her education at a public high school in New York City, Báez began to study classical dance for eight years at the American Dance School, modern and jazz dance for four years at the New York Dance Troupe, and Oriental and Indian dance under recognized masters in New Delhi and New York. In addition, she took theater classes for seven years at the Buendía Theater School in Cuba under the direction of Flora Lauten until the 1990s, when she began to explore the biomechanics of technical theater (Durán-Almarza, *Performeras* 57). She even participated in yoga, the visual arts, Chinese calligraphy, and other arts, all of which she now incorporates into her performances (57). Because of her multiple sources of learning, Báez has successfully fused these elements and incorporated them into the creation of her performance art. She shares her process of creation through teaching and through hosting spiritual retreats.

Báez describes her performance text *Dominicanish* as “my own story about migration in a very personal tone –creating a language and laughing at myself” (“Performance”). She spent almost ten years (1990-1999) creating the written version of her text, and in November 1999,

the work premiered at the Dance Theatre Workshop in New York City under the direction of Claudio Mir. It is a story that documents the experiences of Dominicans migrating to the U.S., as they struggle to come to terms with their dislocated sense of identity in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and language. The text is told from Báez's perspective, but the work has no definite structure (i.e. it lacks chapter titles), and thus each page is independent of the previous or following page, allowing the reader to read the text in any order that he / she chooses. In my analysis, I will focus on the following in order to show the multiple elements that make up Báez's identity: 1) Her engagement with both U.S. and Dominican politics as she expresses anti-Balaguer sentiments from the vantage point of her New York home, 2) her acknowledgment of alternative forms of healing, 3) the creation of her own language, Dominicanish, as she critiques the process of learning English through formal means, and 4) her embracing of her African heritage as she celebrates her multicultural identity. I will show how these ideas support my reading of Báez's text and performance as a reworking of both the conventions of theater as well as the definitions of *dominicanidad*.

When presented on stage, *Dominicanish* is presented as a solo performance that includes three elements: musical lyrics (i.e., Billie Holiday, the Isley Brothers), literary elements (prose, poetry, etc.), and the physical (*kuchipudi*, an Indian style of dance). Báez's objective is always to perform the piece in a non-linear fashion, as the work is set out to explore non-linearity. This is important because it means that she can then go beyond the conventions of performance and other artistic expressions, and not be limited to them. During each performance, she changes the order of the text so that each performance of *Dominicanish* is different. Such an arrangement is necessary to ensure "a freshness, other possible layers and relationships" (Ramírez and Casiano

175). The structure of both the text and performance mirrors Báez's identity: an amalgam of elements that represent the multicultural world in which she lives.

But what exactly does *Dominicanish* mean? As a premise of my thesis, I note that Báez, along with Troyano and Bustamante, manipulates language in her performance art as a means of critiquing dominant discourses while at the same time creating new modes of existence. Therefore, Báez's title, *Dominicanish*, plays upon the meanings of the English suffix "-ish," while simultaneously redefining the very notion of what it means to be Dominican. Durán-Almarza offers the following interpretations of the suffix "-ish": "adjectives resulting from adding -ish to nouns indicate the origin or language of the community denoted by the noun, as in the case with English or Spanish....it is also interesting to note that....being Dominicanish implies being...almost Dominican but not quite" ("Ciguapas," 120). The implication here is that Dominicans living in the U.S. (Dominicanyorks in particular) are "kind of" Dominican, but not entirely..."not quite." They are missing something. This interpretation reflects an important aspect of an ongoing debate about identity on the island vs. diasporic identity. While some scholars argue that Dominican identity (i.e. racial, ethnic, and the like) is firmly established and maintained in both locations (Hoffnung-Garskof, *Nueba Yol*, 2002; Howard, 2001), others believe that the experience of migration, or residing outside of the homeland, changes one's perception of identity (Itzigsohn et al 2005; Duany 2008). This concept can be applied to different Latino groups as well, as Troyano and Bustamante also address U.S.-Latin American notions of *cubanidad* and *mexicanidad*, respectively.

Unlike Durán-Almarza, I do not see Báez's degree of *dominicanidad* (if such a thing can even be measured) as being any less than that of someone who was born and still lives in the Dominican Republic. I instead believe that this concept is highly subjective and contingent upon

who sets the definition. Báez herself agrees as she states in an interview with Dominican reporter Yan Carlos Mejía:

Sigo siendo la misma (en la República Dominicana)...¿Qué es Dominicano? Yo, porque soy muy negra, y me hago el pelo así, ¿es Dominicano? ¿Quién dijo?

(Interview)

Báez takes issue with the definition of *dominicanidad* and with who gets to define it. She rejects the notion that *dominicanidad* can be established due to one's race, language, etc. believing instead that "cada dominicano define su *dominicanidad*, a su manera. (Every Dominican defines their Dominicaness in their own way)" ("Interview by Yan Carlos Mejía"). It is a personal definition, one that varies with each individual. Báez therefore chooses to define her Dominicaness with a new word creation, "Dominicanish." Nonetheless, the pressure to assimilate to the dominant U.S. culture still remains, and it is a struggle faced by many immigrants. *Dominicanish*, as both text and performance, therefore, represents Báez's response to this pressure as she challenges dominant discourses of race, class, and gender in the U.S.

As the research of Itzigsohn and Duany demonstrates, the identity of a Dominicanyork is different from that of a Dominican living on the island in terms of racial perception and other cultural and linguistic influences that result from living away from the homeland and being in contact with other racial and ethnic groups. In fact, I see the experience of migration as allowing Dominicanyorks to add *to* their Dominican heritage; they do not *erase* any elements from that heritage. Therefore, I read Báez's title *Dominicanish* as signifying that she is "not quite just Dominican." However, Báez's title is only one of the myriad of ways in which she challenges dominant discourses of both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic, as I will discuss in the sections that follow.

When asked the question of who exactly is Josefina Báez, the artist responds, “yo soy un espíritu,.... soy una mujer,..... soy negra,.... soy de clase trabajadora, y... soy una inmigrante” (Durán-Almarza, *Performeras* 122). It is interesting to note the order in which she defines herself, seeing herself as a “Spirit” first and foremost, and listing “immigrant” as the last classification. Báez’s listing suggests that her spirituality takes precedence over any other aspect of her life. The other categories that she mentions, “black,” “working class,” and “woman,” have all been historically relegated to marginalized positions in U.S. society, since they stray from the norm of the white, upper class, Anglo male. By embracing these terms, Báez therefore deconstructs the socio-political meaning of the category Other, stripping away its implication as denoting a position of inferiority.

In addition, as early as the 1990s, immigration reform became one of the most hotly debated topics in the U.S. media. The term “immigrant” has since come to be an emotionally-charged term in the U.S., with many people being unable (or unwilling) to divorce this concept from the equally charged word “illegal.” When Báez says that she is an immigrant, she automatically places herself into a marginalized position in a society that views white, Anglo culture as dominant and any deviations as Other. However, Báez’s positioning is intentional. In both her text and her stage performance of *Dominicanish*, Báez challenges the established norms and the notion of *dominicanidad*, or, Dominicaness, as its meaning varies in both locations. She critiques U.S.-Dominican relations and bravely asserts her identity as a Dominicanyork. In addition, Báez reworks the boundaries of performance art by incorporating spirituality into her practice and by redefining the very process of creation. Based upon these parameters, I analyze the text and performance of *Dominicanish* through two different lenses: first, from the perspective of performance art, and later through the lens of racial and ethnic studies. The next

section therefore offers a brief discussion of the two perspectives that make up my theoretical framework.

A Look at *Dominicanish* Through the Lens of Performance Art

As I discussed previously, Guillermo Gómez-Peña is considered one of the most influential figures in the development of U.S. Latino performance art. Through his work, he exemplifies the idea that performance art is where identity can be reinvented, and where borders can be crossed. It is the site where difference becomes the new norm. From this perspective, I view Báez's work as contributing to an assertion and celebration of difference through the medium of performance. Báez, like Gómez-Peña, reinvents her identity by combining multiple elements from her surroundings to form a new creation. This creation, 'Dominicanish', is a product of the multiple spiritual, cultural, linguistic, and artistic elements that intertwine to make up her identity.

Báez's work can be compared to that of artists previously discussed, such as Alina Troyano and Coco Fusco. Earlier, I explored the many ways in which Troyano uses performance art to assert her homosexuality, feminist ideology, and ethnic identity. For example, I demonstrated how Troyano's character Pingalito Betancourt represented one of the ways in which she uses her body, dressed in drag, to perform and reveal the constructed nature of gender and sexuality. Báez, in turn, uses her body in her performances to communicate to her audience, and invites them to question and challenge the socially constructed concept of *dominicanidad*.

In order for such an analysis to take place among the audience, a wall must be broken down - one that separates them from the action on the stage. This wall, as I previously

discussed, is referred to as the Brechtian “Fourth Wall.” It is an imaginary space that keeps the audience at a distance from the performers on stage. I discussed the distancing effect as a technique that breaks down the Fourth Wall. As part of the distancing effect, the performers engage the audience by acknowledging and speaking to them directly. In turn, the audience becomes a critical observer of the performance, no longer being able to watch passively. Instead, they must view the performance as a critical object of study in which they take an active part, thinking critically about the production taking place before their eyes.

The stage for Báez, as well as for Troyano and Bustamante, therefore represents a transnational space of critical analysis, where dialogues and critiques of the U.S., Latin America, and the Caribbean take place. As Laura Gutierrez notes, the transnational stage extends the notion of citizenship for Latinos/as beyond the U.S. imaginary in an intra-ethnic one that crosses national boundaries (49). This stage is thus metaphorical, and represents a space for contesting dominant discourses on a pan-ethnic level. Furthermore, the stage represents Báez’s home: “home is where theater is” (Báez 37). Whether located inside an auditorium or outside on a balcony, Báez’s stage represents a place for her to perform her identity within the confines of a space in which difference is celebrated and not marginalized.

Because of the multiple communities and disciplines with which she engages, Báez has perfected the art of combining and fusing elements, as can be seen in her work *Dominicanish*. She refers to this work as a “performance text,” because she wrote it with the intent to later perform the work. In fact, everything that Báez writes is with the intent to later perform the written texts. As Báez explains, “cuando escribo, lo hago para ponerlo en mi cuerpo sin definirlo como teatro, poesía o prosa. O sea que escribo sin pensar en el género (*“Pterodáctilo”*). She does not categorize her work, which gives her the flexibility to perform without boundaries. At

the same time, she contests the very notion of categorizations that may be imposed on her, as they can have powerful effects. She instead stresses the fluidity of form, which complements her process of uniting the multiple elements that make up her identity.

Báez has created a methodology around this philosophy that she calls Performance Autology, which she describes in the following way:

...an approach to the creative process from the autobiography of the doer, where the physical and spiritual realms are researched and nurtured...creating from the self, performing the self; an alertness with/of the self, a self-unit of the community. (“Daswani”)

Performance Autology is Báez’s alternative to theater and spirituality. It draws from multiple disciplines and practices instead of existing as a monolithic entity. This methodology promotes a reworked conception of *dominicanidad* because it is not based on Catholicism as does the elitist definition of a “white, Spanish and Catholic” identity, nor does it rely upon a single institution (one religion, one theoretical foundation, etc.) to produce knowledge. It is multidisciplinary, combining spiritual, cultural, and artistic practices from around the world. Through her performance, Báez presents the multiple cultures that make up her identity as a Dominican in New York. She connects with Cuban and Puerto Rican cultures and embraces her African heritage as well. The development of these multicultural connections also reveals the constructed meanings of blackness in both the Dominican Republic and the U.S. In the next section, I discuss the ethnic and racial discourses that shape Báez’s text and performance, and I compare *dominicanidad* on the island to its meaning in the U.S., particularly with regard to race and ethnicity.

Dominicanish Through the Lens of Racial and Ethnic Studies

Dominicanidad on the Island: Unravelling a Complex Discourse on Race and Ethnicity

With regard to the cultural production of Dominicans in transnational settings, Danny Méndez advises that one must consider the role of creolization, which describes, among other things, the experience of cultural hybridity as a marker of national and social development in the Dominican Republic (4). His study concerns the ways in which the diasporic “subject-in-the-making” acknowledges the intricacies of cultural, racial, and ethnic multiplicities that have historically defined the Dominican Republic in transferring and transmuting these factors into the diaspora in the United States and Puerto Rico (6). To explore this concept further, in this section I consider the definition of *dominicanidad* and trace the development of its meaning both on the island and in the U.S.

The concept of *dominicanidad* has been used in past discussions to refer to views promoted by white, European foreigners who, bringing their own notions of blackness, decided how Dominicans should racialize themselves (for a further reading, see Howard, 2001; Torres-Saillant, 2009; Durán-Almarza, 2012). Since the white elites in the Dominican Republic have held positions of authority in Dominican society, the concept of *dominicanidad* has therefore been historically constructed as denoting white culture, Spanish heritage, and Catholicism, and historically contrasted with an image of Haiti as one of blackness, voodoo, and African ancestry. For example, in Balaguer's 1983 book, *La Isla al Revés (The Upside Down Island)*, which interestingly became a national best seller, he helps to perpetuate the myth of the white Dominican by ignoring the fact that there were a considerable number of blacks and mulattoes in the country before 1795. Here, he seemingly equates the uncontrollable growth of the black population to that of non-human “species”:

. . . the negro, abandoned to his instincts, and without the restraint on reproduction that a relatively high level of living imposes on all countries, multiplies himself with a speed similar to that of vegetable species (36).

Balaguer's bigotry is not only limited to Haitians, but includes all members of the black race. Furthermore, as Howard explains, Dominican white elitist national discourse associates dark skin with blackness, which is itself linked to voodoo, African ancestry, and an inferior social class (4). Based on this construction, blacks are therefore considered to be racially and culturally inferior beings who are barbaric and undesirable (4). In much the same way as Pingalito Betancourt jokingly proclaims that “three-fourths of all Cubans are white... and a lot of these... have a very dark suntan,” to be “black” in the Dominican Republic (if one accepts the ideologies placed forth by people like Balaguer) would imply being non-Dominican.

This construction reveals a highly problematic discourse, because it further creates a discursive divide between Haitians and Dominicans. Furthermore, Torres-Saillant warns that scholars must “avoid the pitfalls of investigating Dominican attitudes about race exclusively through the utterances of the ruling class” (“Tribulations” 129). The author points out that the anti-Haitianism that is commonly highlighted in Black Studies discourses on Dominicans has created a misrepresentation of how Dominicans actually think. As he puts it: “Anti-Haitianism, a Western creation with the United States playing a leading role, belongs to the whole world that emerged from the colonial transaction. Dominicans play a rather minor role in it” (“Divisible” 464).

Instead of depicting anti-Haitianism as the only marker of Dominicans’ relationship to race, the author instead presents a more nuanced understanding of race in the Dominican Republic by showing how it is characterized by openness and flexibility. For example, by

discussing what he calls a “deracialized consciousness” among Blacks and mulattos on the island, the author describes the historical process whereby the concept of race came to be defined by social, temporary, and contingent variables instead of by biological features and traits (“Tribulations” 136). Furthermore, the author notes moments in Dominican history that challenge the anti-Haitianism and Negrophobia promoted by the elites, such as the primacy of Santo Domingo as inaugural site of the African presence in the Americas, the unity among Haitians and Dominican revolutionaries in the 1830s and 1860s as they shared in the struggle against tyrannical regimes, the presence of Haitian Creole in Afro-Dominican Spanish, the existence of a Dominican voodoo, as well as the fame enjoyed by Dominicans of African descent in the fields of sports and popular music (“Divisible” 462; “Tribulations” 132).

In his challenge to *dominicanidad* as defined by Dominican elites, Torres-Saillant emphasizes the proud assertion of blackness among Dominicans in the diaspora, particularly in the U.S. as they work in solidarity with other African diasporic communities against racism and the promotion of the dominant Anglo-American culture. Upon their return to the homeland, the Dominican migrants have transformed the island over time, as can be seen in the hairstyles, dress, popular music, and other cultural expressions associated with African Americans (143). For her part, Josefina Báez has demonstrated through her work and her methodology of creation that her identity as a Dominican performance artist goes beyond her connections to the island itself. In the next section, I will show how Báez’s connections in the U.S. have helped her to further redefine *dominicanidad* as she works to fuse the elements of her multicultural world.

Dominicanidad in the United States

In the United States, *dominicanidad* is constructed vis-à-vis the dominant Anglo culture.

As Torres-Saillant explains:

In their foundational statements, the early ruling elites imagined the United States as a white, European-descended, monolingual nation, leaving outside the contours of Americanness those segments of the population that diverged from the imagined profile (“Inventing the Race” 125).

The concept of *dominicanidad* in the United States therefore implies a marginalized position in society; to be Dominican implies being non-American and specifically non-Anglo. Various waves of Dominican immigrants (ie. 1930s after the rise of Trujillo, 1965 after Trujillo’s death, 1980-1990s following economic hardships), arrived in the United States and have encountered this process of marginalization.

The influence of the U.S. in Dominican life was made evident both on and off of the island. Dominicans who came to the U.S. prior to 1960 were made up of political exiles and expatriates who opposed the Trujillo regime (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 109). With the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, however, a civil war ensued and culminated in 1965 with a U.S. military invasion of the island (112). As a result of this invasion, the Dominican Republic was being “flooded” by U.S. advisers, investors, and products (Hoffnung-Garskof, *Tale* 83). Pepsi Cola, Colgate, and General Electric (to name a few products) became second nature to Dominican consumers. By the 1970s, the Dominican Republic was marked by calls for the defense of national culture, for Dominican traditions, and for an end to the regime of Balaguer, who ruled for three non-consecutive terms (1960-1962, 1966-1978, and 1986-1996).

Balaguer was accused of conspiring with the U.S. to promote the influx of U.S. products

and, ultimately, U.S. influence in Dominican culture. Many who opposed his regime left the island, only to come to the U.S., the country that they blamed for its contribution to the problems on the island. Báez, as I indicated earlier, is a part of this wave of migrant families who viewed the U.S. as the “belly of the beast,” but also as a country whose economic and political autonomy afforded them more opportunities for economic advancement than they had available to them on the island (Hoffnung-Garskof, *Tale* 120).

As a result of various waves of Dominican migration, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, the city of New York has become the second largest city with a Dominican population after Santo Domingo (Durán-Almarza, “Ciguapas,” 140). Sagás and Molina further report that in 2000, 53.2 % of all Dominicans in the U.S. lived in New York (38). Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof explains that during the first half of the 20th century, the existence of an exile colony in New York numbering in the thousands exerted a pull northward to that city, as friends and relatives wanted to be reunited with exiles (*Tale* 73). As a result, a variety of Caribbean cultures have developed in the city, resulting in the “creolization” of New York, to use Méndez’s term (that is, a cultural, racial, and ethnic mixing).

Although she embraces the multiple cultures that make up her New York home, Báez also refers to the city as the “Crooked City” (42). Méndez points out the various interpretations of the term “crooked.” On the one hand, the term implies “the reverse of straight” (Méndez 146). While “straight” could be viewed in reference to moral character (that is, crookedness is equated with the reverse of an upright or honest character) it also suggests heterosexuality, and thus crookedness could be seen as a reference to homosexuality. I concur with Méndez’s observations, and view Báez’s use of the term “crooked” as an intentional act meant to embody all of the above meanings. Her Crooked City, where a hybridity of cultures and marginalized

subjects coexist, represents a deviation from established norms. Here, one locates the city's nonconformists and the outsiders: those who stray from the racial, ethnic, class, and sexual norms of society. Furthermore, a reference to New York's gay, lesbian, and transgender communities by one interpretation of the term "crooked" helps to establish a connection between Báez's work and the works of lesbian artists Troyano and Bustamante. All three artists recognize their marginalized positions in their respective societies, and use their works to reconstruct this space as one of agency, reinvention, and re-appropriation.

As a part of this process of re-appropriation, Báez reconsiders her identity as a Dominican in New York and re-appropriates the term to denote not an infection, but an enrichment of her Dominican culture (7). By doing so, she joins with other scholars (Pessar, 1995; Flores, 2008; Hoffnung-Garskof, 2008) who have also reworked the label Dominican in New York to denote a term of pride, similar to the terms *Nuyorican* and *Chicano* which have been utilized by several members of the Puerto Rican and Mexican-American communities, respectively. An important difference, however, lies in the socio-political contexts in which each of these terms was originally produced. Such a process of re-appropriation seems necessary for marginalized communities in the U.S., as members work to reconstruct the elements of their multicultural identities. Later in this chapter I will show the ways in which Báez draws upon the multiple cultures of her New York home in her process of reworking the definition of *dominicanidad*.

In her work, Báez embraces her African heritage, thereby rejecting the elitist notion that *dominicanidad* entails a denial of such ancestry. In effect, she proclaims that "Black is my color," thus complicating the white-black spectrum that has existed for centuries in the U.S. In the Dominican Republic (as well as in the Caribbean and Latin America); race is as much an achieved status as it is an ascribed one. In the U.S., by contrast, race is largely an ascribed

status, and is considered a pre-existing, “fixed” reality (Candelario 26). To be “black” in the United States, one only had to possess one drop of African blood in his/her ancestry (as per the “One-Drop” rule of the early 20th century). While a more thorough discussion on race in the U.S. is critical in order to fully understand the race relations that currently exist, such a discussion goes beyond the scope of my dissertation [For further reading on the subject, see Pessar, 1995; Howard, 2001; Candelario, 2007]. Regardless of their particular manner of racial self-representation, Dominicans come into a U.S. society that knows only black and white. Therefore, in addition to being “non-American,” *dominicanidad* in the U.S. also implies being “non-white,” and because of the racial binary (in which Latinidad has been racialized into non-whiteness), the category to which many dark-skinned Dominicans are ascribed is that of being “black.”

As a result of this social positioning, many Dominicans have learned that by assimilating (i.e. learning English), they may have a better chance at succeeding economically and socially in the U.S. (Ricourt 118). Other scholars (Lipsitz, 1995; Pessar, 1995; Candelario, 2007) have noted that for light-skinned Dominicans, claiming a “white” identity allows them access to more of the economic resources that the dominant Anglo society enjoys. Nearly 50% of all US Hispanics who answered the 2000 census chose to call themselves ‘white,’ thus declining to classify themselves in a manner that would distinguish them from the dominant majority (Torres-Saillant, “Inventing the Race” 140).

On the other hand, Torres-Saillant makes the following observation:

Ironically, in the diaspora we find Dominicans demonstrating a greater propensity to classify themselves as Black than any other Latino subgroup and largely we owe to them the growth of Afro-Latin@s in the United States population in the

census in 2000, a fact that remains overlooked by commentators insisting on the self-hatred of Afro-Dominicans (“Divisible Blackness” 461).

In addition to describing the ways in which Dominicans navigate the racial binary, it is also important to highlight various moments of alliance building and solidarity among racial ethnic minorities in the United States.

In U.S. history, racialized collectivities turned the affirmation of their otherness with respect to the marginalizing center of power into a tool to challenge their exclusion. Paradoxically, they asserted their racial difference to combat racism. Out of that effort of self-differentiation in time came the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent classification of the US population into five distinct lines of descent, namely whites, blacks, Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanics, a taxonomy that David Hollinger has called ‘the ethnoracial pentagon’ (197). In the case of Dominicans specifically, several scholars (Pessar, 1995; Ricourt 2002) have documented the political empowerment and the socio-economic resources gained from the organizations created in communities such as Washington Heights, also known as Quisqueya Heights, in reference to the indigenous name for the Dominican Republic.

In her work, Báez also reacts to her marginalized position in society by celebrating her differences and by challenging the definitions of *dominicanidad* that have been constructed in the U.S. and in the Dominican Republic. With a reworked definition, Báez highlights and embraces her differences as well as challenges dominant discourses in both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. She asserts her race, class, and gender identities based upon the multicultural connections that she has established while living in New York. In the sections that follow, I will show how Báez employs her body (such as through *kuchipudi* dance) and manipulates language (i.e. word plays, cross-cultural references) to express her multifaceted

identity as a Dominicanyork. I begin with a discussion of *Dominicanish* as Báez's alternative to theater, showing how she uses her text and performance to provide a non-linear presentation of her work. In addition, I discuss the ways in which she reworks the meaning of *dominicanidad* through her Performance Autology, her critique of U.S. assimilation, and through her assertion of blackness and multiculturalism.

Dominicanish as Báez's Alternative to Theater

Báez's text is a product of her Performance Autology, and in the Introduction of the work, Claudio Mir describes the performance piece as "our alternative to theater" (Báez 11). This piece includes the elements of Báez's creative methodology put to work on stage as she uses her body and language, both verbally and non-verbally (i.e. *kuchipudi* dance, video clips, code-switching), to communicate and engage with her audience. The work reflects Báez's mind, body, and spirit in such a way that the text cannot be divorced from the performance. On the one hand, the text is performed physically, allowing Báez to bring it to life on stage. The artist, along with Troyano and other performance artists discussed previously (i.e. Ana Mendieta, Guillermo Gomez-Peña, and Fusco) uses her body to challenge and critique the scripts that have been written on it by dominant discourses on race, gender, and sexuality. Her body and use of language are thus embedded within this physical performance: her body *is* a language. In her work, Debra Walker King explains that the bodies of women of color tell stories (whether true or not) and thus have come to define the women externally (vii). Báez uses the stage to tell her version of reality, using her body to communicate a language that challenges dominant discourses both on and off the island; a language she calls Dominicanish.

In addition to her performance on stage, Báez also employs a textual performance with *Dominicanish*. That is, the text *itself* performs, due to its non-linear style and the use of vertical spacing, line breaks, font size, capitalization, and bolding. This structure varies from Troyano's script in *Milk of Amnesia*, which reads more like a play with its stage directions and character lines. In addition, the reader of *Dominicanish* discovers Báez's movements when the pages are turned, as a series of drawings depict her performing *kuchipudi* dance motions on each of the pages. The reader must therefore participate in the performance that takes place on the pages of the text.

Just as in the textual performance, the audience/ reader must take part in the physical performance of *Dominicanish*. García-Peña notes that Báez employs the Brechtian alienation effect in her physical performance, keeping the audience detached from the performance so that they can see the production in critical ways rather than watching passively as Báez "puts on a show" for them (41). As García-Peña further explains: "Báez's work has often been criticized by more traditional performers and theater critics as not being 'real theater'....[because] the use of bilingualism and diverse cultural references makes Báez's work less appealing to a commercial public (41). García-Peña implies here that traditional theater is monolingual (i.e. English, in the U.S., Spanish in the Dominican Republic), and therefore promotes and conforms ethnically and culturally to the audience. Usually, these pieces do not make cross-cultural references that some audience members would understand but others would not. Since Báez's Performance Autology breaks these traditions, her work has not been regarded by the mainstream as being "real theater". For this reason, Báez has become a self-made publisher, which allows her the freedom to create her texts and performances on her own terms.

Báez's work also presents an alternative to theater in the sense that it is based on spiritual foundations and does not involve a script. Instead, the text is non-linear, and the performance is multidimensional (incorporating jazz, *kuchipudi* dance, and spoken word). Through her creativity, Báez asserts not only her art, but her version of reality. Her work reflects her life, and her performance of *Dominicanish* reflects her performance of a reworked definition of what it means to be a Dominicanyork.

Báez asserts her unique identity in this space and presents to her audience / reader her social, economic, and cultural realities both on stage and in her text. Using the stage, which represents her transnational home, Báez establishes a connection between the Dominican Republic and New York by referencing, for example, the 1971 historical moment in which Dominicanyorks stayed abreast of the political affairs of their homeland. Consider the following lines from *Dominicanish*: “Balaguer leave us the fuck alone leave us alone / man leave Me alone /Dominican cake any occasion march to take back our streets / March against police brutality celebrando / Abril translations” (23). The words themselves are a critique of both Balaguer and U.S. influence in the Dominican Republic. Báez references Dominican history particularly after 1965, when U.S. imperialism began to operate in the Dominican Republic. In 1971, several Dominican women in New York dressed up as guerilla fighters and marched along Broadway to commemorate the anniversary of an April 1965 uprising in Santo Domingo against the regime (Hoffnung-Garskof, *Tale* 120). The phrase “march to take back our streets” and the mentioning of “Abril (April)” therefore refer to Dominican political dissidents both in Santo Domingo (1965) and in New York (1971). To “celebrate” April, then (“celebrando Abril), Báez presents a significant moment in Dominican history to her audience / reader.

In the physical performance of these words, Báez engages in *kuchipudi* dance, a classical dance of southeast India. To incorporate an Indian dance in her performance, Báez presents a challenge to dominant discourses with regard to national identity, since *kuchipudi* is neither a part of Dominican nor New York cultural traditions. In defending the use of *kuchipudi* in her works, Báez proclaims in her interview with Mejía: “¿Es [*kuchipudi* un baile] dominicano? Sí, cuando pasa por un cuerpo que nació en la República Dominicana.” Báez shows us that she establishes what it means to be Dominican. She challenges traditional Dominican culture, offering her audience alternative ways to perceive *dominicanidad*. She sets her own definitions in life, and since her work reflects her life, her performance of *Dominicanish* also shows us that she establishes what her theater is.

Through digital video, I was able to watch Báez’s presentation of the lines referenced previously during a performance in Santo Domingo (2010). The performance involved a series of video clips playing in the background which depicted political unrest in the Dominican Republic (Lockward, “Dias Habiles”). This represents another way in which Báez uses non-verbal language to present her version of the history of the Dominican Republic. By getting the audience to focus on the marginalized parts of Dominican society (children, protest marches, protesters getting arrested) she offers an alternative view of the Dominican Republic that contrasts with the view of the Caribbean in general as a tropical, exotic place. Báez alludes to this false imagery in an interview, when she says: “...yo no conozco la República Dominicana de resorts y todo este rollo de las postalitas. Yo no la conozco, ni me interesa tampoco (Durán-Almarza, *Performeras* 129). Unlike Pingalito, Báez is not interested in being a tour guide, showing the “beautiful” parts of her island. Instead, she wants to reveal her truth, and to display the Dominican Republic as she sees it. She therefore uses video clips to show the audience her

reality, so that they may question the image of the Dominican Republic that is often portrayed on postcards and acknowledge instead the problems on the island, as Báez herself does.

The use of video clips mirrors Troyano's character, Alina the Writer, as she uses slides to present images of her homeland. While both sets of images depict what was once home for the artists, Báez's images are much more negative in nature; the political violence in the Dominican Republic contrasts greatly with the pictures showing Troyano's beautiful house in Cuba. The irony, however, rests in the fact that Troyano's beautiful home is now a construction site; her pictures therefore represent a place and site of memories that have since been dismantled and overtaken as a result of governmental interests. From this socio-historical perspective, both presentations can be viewed as political, highlighting women's voices in the telling of historical accounts.

In this telling of history, Báez code-switches between English and Spanish, which adds to the multiple forms of diversity found in both her text and performance. By switching back and forth between languages, Báez runs the risk of losing the audience's focus on her message. However, as I will later show, Báez's use of language is intentional in that it causes the monolingual audience / reader to feel the same emotions that she felt when she initially arrived in the U.S. as an immigrant. This intentional use of code-switching, particularly in the text version of *Dominicanish*, echoes the use by other U.S. Latino/a writers in order to achieve similar goals with their readers (from Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa, to Nuyorican poet Miguel Piñero, to name a few). In that sense, the reader takes a part in the physical performance of *Dominicanish*. Not only does Báez's performance present an "alternative to theater," but her created school of thought known as Performance Autology offers audiences / readers an alternative to spirituality. In the sections that follow, I discuss the ways in which Báez uses her

body and language to rework the traditional meanings of *dominicanidad* both on the island and in the United States.

Dominicanidad as Non-Catholic: Báez's Alternative to Spirituality Through Performance

Autology

Báez breaks away from elitist conceptions of *dominicanidad* in the sense that she does not purport a certain religion. Like Troyano, who mentions *santería* and lesbianism in her work as topics that deviate from Catholicism, Báez emphasizes an alternative form of spirituality in her process of creation and by means of the works that she produces. Her Performance Autology deviates from both religion and spirituality by drawing from many disciplines and cultures: yoga, meditation, *kuchipudi*, Tibetan rituals, etc. It is in stark contrast to the conventions of organized religions, such as Catholicism, the dominant religion in the Dominican Republic. Rather than focusing on Biblical teachings, for example, the focus is instead on the self, and on the creative process.

It is difficult to describe the major tenets of Performance Autology, as everyone takes from it a different part of the process that is meaningful to them. Performance Autology has no limits; it is borderless in the sense that it has reached a global audience, but also in the sense that there are no artistic boundaries in the theatrical productions that it promotes and creates. As Báez puts it, “If I define my work, I will limit myself” (Báez, “Reading”). Performance Autology emphasizes the incorporation of the mind, body, and spirit in everything that one does. In keeping with this spiritual component of her workshop, Báez begins her sessions with a guided meditation set to jazz music. The purpose of the meditation is to allow the mind and the body to be the main focus. The fact that this spiritual exercise is set to jazz music, however,

points to Báez's break with traditional Catholicism, since jazz music is considered to be secular, not spiritual.

During the meditation, Báez instructs her class to engage in specific bodily movements. Her intent is to offer an alternative to spirituality and prayer that does not involve actual words. Instead, in *Performance Autology*, the body replaces verbal language and is instead its own language. An example of this is what Báez calls "physical paragraphs," which are movements of the body that denote meaning. Báez teaches that the body can be used to create sentences, physical paragraphs, and stories ("Performance"). The meanings of these elements are embedded in the way a person walks, moves his / her hands, dances, and the like.

In this sense, the employment of the Hindu dance *kuchipudi* in Báez's performances, in addition to being a component of her "alternative to theater," also represents an alternative form of spirituality. Báez turns neither to Dominican nor U.S. cultures to obtain this source of spirituality. However, since Báez's performances of *kuchipudi* are often set to jazz music, not Hindu music, we see that she does not totally embrace any one practice. Instead, she combines the different elements of various spiritual practices to create something new: an alternative form of spirituality.

Another example of how the body is used to convey language involves a meditative action known as *touchka*, a physical prayer gesture in which the hands must be placed against the center of the chest (right hand over left) because, as Báez explained, "The very center of your heart is where life begins" ("Performance"). However, *touchka* does not entail actual prayer, which is another way in which Báez deviates from traditional religion. By incorporating *touchka* into her *Performance Autology*, she deconstructs U.S. and Dominican discourses regarding religion, showing us that a spiritual connection can be obtained without the use of any words.

This implies that prayer, rehearsed spiritual verses (such as Hail Marys), and hymns are not required in order for one to experience a spiritual connection with God (or another divine being).

Báez's alternative to spirituality not only involves communicating with the body but also healing the body. In her text, she shows that one does not need to turn to traditional medicine; one can find healing through natural means: "Sabran mucho su inglés pero en el "medican center" / no saben cuando uno tiene un entuerto; si un muchacho / está anortao. Y mucho menos saben la cura. No saben de ensalmos" (63). Here, the critique is aimed at Dominican migrants who have assimilated into U.S. culture. The process of assimilation has been described by Coelho as taking place in four stages: 1) arrival and first impressions, 2) culture shock, 3) adaptation, and 4) assimilation (26). With assimilation comes acculturation, adapting to the customs of the host country. Báez's critique therefore reflects the later part of this spectrum, a process that entails relying on medicine prescribed by doctors in hospitals and other medical centers. In the above quote, she critiques those who believe that they have mastered the English language (but fall short, hence "medican centers"), and who have relied solely upon medicine for healing. Traditional medicine fails them, however, in areas such as after-birth pains ("un entuerto") or ailments caused by exposure to northern winds, as implied by the use of a term used in the Dominican Republic ("está anorta[d]o"). They don't know that these pains can be cured by "ensalmos" (the application of natural medicine, often practiced by *curanderos*). "Ensalms" represent a non-traditional form of healing, but as Báez implies, it is just as effective.

Through her Performance Autology, Báez further promotes alternatives to medicine through the use of the Bach flower "rescue" remedies⁵, which are dilutions of flower material

⁵ For a detailed study of the Bach remedies, see Julian Barnard's *Bach Flower Remedies: Form and Function* (2004).

created by Edward Bach in the 1930s, and which are intended to remedy emotional and spiritual conditions (i.e., stress, depression, anger, unforgiveness) (“Performance”). By incorporating the Bach remedies in her method of creation, Báez presents a challenge to traditional medicine, and by extension, to pharmaceutical companies. Her “science of the self” therefore offers a challenge to official discourses by presenting alternative ways of thinking. She shows that there are non-traditional routes to create art and to express oneself spiritually. These non-traditional elements have been reworked by Báez, forming an eclectic system and methodology of creation that is rooted in a variety of beliefs and traditions. In addition to challenging the conventions of art and spirituality, Báez challenges the ways in which knowledge is obtained. Specifically, she critiques the process of learning English in the U.S. and challenges the idea that assimilation through formal means (i.e. learning English in school) is necessary to achieve success in the U.S. In the next section, I discuss Báez’s reworked definition of *dominicanidad* as a concept that promotes a resistance to assimilation to the dominant Anglo-American culture, and her alternative language, Dominicanish, as an aspect of this concept.

Dominicanidad as Resistance to Assimilation

In *Dominicanish*, Báez describes learning English as a Second Language, but she implies that her real teachers were not in the classroom, but instead could be found in the African-American culture within which she was immersed: “SAT scores doubled but in no university catalog / I found my teachers: The Isley Brothers” referring to an R&B musical group that was famous in the 1960s and ‘70s (34). By listening to their music and referring to them as her “teachers,” Báez implies that her English was acquired not by formal learning, but instead by immersing herself in the culture of the language. In addition, she does not identify with the

dominant (white, Anglo American) culture, but instead establishes a connection with African-American cultures. Her references to jazz and blues throughout the text also help make this point. The connections that she establishes with African-American cultures reflect Torres-Saillant's observations with regard to the existence of Dominican- and African-American alliances ("Tribulations" 16). Furthermore, Báez's reference to the Isley Brothers highlights the multiple cultures that make up her identity and thus shape her life and experiences.

Báez shows through her work that theater, spirituality, and now language, is *lived*, and not learned. One has to *experience* knowledge, in order to comprehend it fully. It is only when one makes the subject personal and relevant to his/ her life that one begins to master the subject. Furthermore, the idea of living one's language is also shared by such writers as Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa, for example, says about her Chicano language: "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity... so if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language.... I am my language" (81). So too, then, has Báez mastered the English language in the sense that she has made it her own; she *performs* her language: "I own language...I love breaking the grammar of English" ("Reading"). In deconstructing the English language, Báez breaks the rules of grammar, playing with the elements of speech (i.e. pronunciation, syntax, etc) and creating her own language. She then uses this language as a tool throughout her textual and physical performance of *Dominicanish*. Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes compares Báez's linguistic, performative experimentation to the word plays and language games of performers like Gómez-Peña (19). For example, through his work, *Border Brujo*, Gómez-Peña presents a collage of exaggerated stereotypes as he dresses up into 15 different characters, with different accents and speech registers (i.e., the "Cantinflas-Like Voice," the "Redneck Voice," etc), while journeying across the U.S.-Mexico border. Both Báez and Gómez-Peña therefore use their works to

deconstruct the English language, pointing to its linguistic variations, and presenting a challenge to the process of institutional learning.

Báez further presents a challenge to formal learning when she describes her process of learning English in the classroom. The difficulty of learning a new language is not just told to her reader / audience, it is also performed: “Every sin’ is....comfortable comfortable comfortable/ ING very very very good / Di Ar er ir / A as in Michael / M as in apple....(21). Here, Báez shows how the pronunciation of English is formally acquired through repetition, as teachers give verbal praise for correct pronunciation by saying “very very good.” Báez implies here that learning “very good” English is not always a very good experience for the Dominican migrant, who risks being transformed by the language: “yo no voy a poner la boca así como un guante (I’m not going to put my mouth like that, like a glove)” (22). The line “A as in Michael / M as in apple” refers to Báez learning in one language, but thinking in another: Michael is *un angel* (an angel) in the Christian religion, and the M for apple refers to the Spanish word for apple that begins with M: *manzana*.

The word play in the above lines gives an interesting cross-cultural reference since Báez is taught in English (the order should be: “A as in apple, M as in Michael”), but she processes the knowledge in Spanish: “Here I am chewing English / and spitting Spanish” (49). This goes back to her previous implication that language cannot be learned by formal means. A language must be lived in order to be fully processed. It is for this reason that the Isley Brothers have become Báez’s ESL teachers. She comes to have confidence in her English speaking abilities, as indicated by the line: “Now I don’t care how my mouth look I like what I’m saying” (28). When she is able to enjoy the music of jazz and blues, she becomes comfortable with the sounds of the language and with the physical movements of her mouth that are required to produce them. In

addition, she embraces the African-American culture that is embedded in the music's language, as opposed to being forced to learn the "standard" rules of English often associated with white dominant culture. She doesn't care how her mouth looks, because the sounds begin to flow freely when she is able to learn them through the music of her African-American "teachers."

In her physical performance of the above lines, Báez exaggerates the movements of her mouth to show her audience what it is like to learn English as a second language. Her intent is to draw attention to the awkwardness of the formalized process of language learning. She also places emphasis on the experience of the individual, an aspect that is often missing in formal learning (see Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 2005). Báez emphasizes that teachers are merely "co-creators" and that it is the *learner* who must also help to create the overall educational experience.

Furthermore, Báez exposes the pressures to assimilate that are often placed upon immigrants who arrive in the U.S. by using her body to emphasize the challenges of learning English. Like Troyano, who was forced to drink homogenized milk as part of this process, Báez views assimilation as a painful experience. Not only does assimilation often result in cultural amnesia, as Troyano's work showed, but it is also a laborious process of twisting the mouth, and knowing when to place the correct stress on syllables: "Every sin' is....comfortable [KŌMF-tər-bəl]..... comfortable [kəmfərt - Ā-bəl].... comfortable [kəmfərt- TÄ-ble] (Casamerica, "Performance"). Upon performing these lines on the steps of the Palacio de Linares in Madrid, Spain (2012), Báez is positioned on a balcony, looking down at her audience. This stance denotes a position of power, as political figures have often stood on balconies to make speeches to the public, such as the famous Argentine First Lady Eva Perón (1919-1952). Báez even jokingly makes a reference to the film based on Peron's life by singing a line from *Evita*: "Don't

cry for me, Romana,” changing the last word from ‘Argentina’ to ‘Romana’ to denote her own place of birth in the Dominican Republic (Casamerica, “Performance”). Her lines from *Dominicanish* are furthermore set to salsa music (mixed with techno merengue), and she dances to the rhythm of this music. Unlike her performance in the Dominican Republic, however, she does not dance *kuchipudi* during her performance in Madrid. She is also outside as opposed to being inside, and on a formal stage. This setup adds to the overall message of the artist, as she both promotes and demonstrates alternative forms of expression; her performance is flexible and varies with her audience.

Perched on the balcony, therefore, Báez assumes an authoritative position and uses it to reconstruct history for her audience. She performs for them the experiences of the Dominican migrant with regard to learning English in the U.S. This first-hand account represents the perspective of the marginalized. It challenges the assumption that learning English is an easy process that can be achieved by constant repetition: “Repeat after me / repeat after them / Repeat after them / repeat after me” (33). Báez wants her audience to “repeat” her actions; that is, to challenge the institutionalized nature of learning. On a larger scale, she also invites her audience to think critically about the information that is given to them not only through her performance, but also in their everyday lives: in school, on the news, on the Internet, etc. By looking at the dominant discourses that have been perpetuated by mainstream media and other institutions, Báez challenges her audience to then “repeat” her example by obtaining knowledge by non-traditional means; discovering one’s own truth. However, it does not necessarily mean arriving at the same truths as Báez, for she reminds us that “My truth is not your truth.”

As part of her truth, Báez concludes that she does not wish to fully assimilate to the dominant culture by learning English perfectly: “Gosh to pronounce one little phrase one must /

Become another person with the mouth all / twisted yo no voy a poner la boca así como/ un guante” (22). In her crooked city, Báez now has a crooked face, as she twists her mouth to practice English. This process of learning, then, entails a gradual transformation into another person, as Báez’s experience of learning English is accompanied by a reworked definition of the concept of *dominicanidad*. However, she does not give in to the pressures to assimilate; a pressure that many other Dominican immigrants have faced. In addition, the use of code-switching in Báez’s work shows that one can be Dominicanyork without being tied to only one language. By speaking Dominicanish, she presents *dominicanidad* as embodying multiple forms of expression, as opposed to a monolithic (Spanish) concept or a by-product of (forced) assimilation through learning English.

Furthermore, La Fountain-Stokes points out how Báez plays with language, as she takes the literal translation of English words in order to convey the depth of meaning that is lost when one translates literally, without any regard to the culture that is embedded in the language. One example can be seen in the line: “discos del alma con afro” (Báez 26). Here, Báez is referring to soul music, a style of music that is characteristic of African-American culture. However, as La Fountain-Stokes explains, the way in which Báez translates “soul” (using the word “alma”), achieves a denaturalization of the term, yielding an image of records that contain a soul (metaphysical entity) with an afro (a large head of curly / nappy hair); an image that thus differs greatly from the intended English meaning (16). By presenting language in this playful and often humorous way, Báez further challenges the process of learning English through formal means by critiquing the process of language acquisition and stressing the important role that culture plays in learning a language. In addition to challenging the conventions of theater, spirituality, and the process of learning, Báez also asserts her identity as a Dominicanyork by

embracing the multicultural aspects of her life. In the next section, I discuss Báez's reworked definition of *dominicanidad* that entails the embracing of her African heritage.

Dominicanidad as Not Just Dominican: Báez's Embracing of Multiple Cultures

Through her work, Báez embraces her African heritage and in doing so, dialogues with such artists as Coco Fusco, who addresses the socially constructed concept of blackness in her collaboration with Gómez-Peña in "The Couple in the Cage." Fusco, a Cuban-American who is dark-skinned, uses her body to critique the notions of what it means to be "black" in a transnational context. As previously discussed, Fusco juxtaposes stereotypical images of blackness during her performance in the cage by presenting voodoo dolls, (which is associated with African cultures) and dancing to rap music (which is associated with African-American culture). I discussed how the voodoo religion is also seen, by Dominican elites, as characteristic of Haitian culture in the Dominican Republic, and thus represents the antithesis of *dominicanidad* in the eyes of the Dominican elites.

Like Fusco, Báez engages multiple African diasporic communities (African-American, Afro-Cuban, for example) by incorporating jazz and salsa music, respectively. She reworks *dominicanidad* by incorporating Puerto Rican cultures as well, and by reinventing a traditional Dominican drink known as *morisoñando*. Using the technique of language manipulation in order to redefine her identity, Báez incorporates colloquialisms and slang from other cultures into her writings in order to show that for her, *dominicanidad* consists of embracing other African diasporic communities as well as the other cultures that make up her New York home. In the following passage, for example, she shows that she is not only connected to Dominican culture in New York but also to both Puerto Rican and African-American cultures: "Me chulié en el hall

/ metí mano en el rufo / Craqueo chicle como Shameka Brown / Hablo como Boricua / y me peino como Morena” [43]. The first line uses a colloquial verb “chuliarse” (to kiss passionately), a word commonly used in the Dominican Republic (Rodriguez 73). Báez code-switches from Spanish to Spanglish in this excerpt (“el hall,” “el rufo,” “craqueo”), showing her ability to combine both Spanish and English languages effectively. The second line uses the phrase “meter mano” (literally, to insert the hand), which is an expression that is used by Puerto Ricans (as well as other Spanish-speaking subgroups) to refer to sexual intercourse (74). The use of this colloquialism not only indicates Báez’s connection to Nuyorican culture, but also her familiarity with the nuances of this culture (i.e. use of slang). She further establishes her connection to Nuyorican culture by asserting: “Hablo como Boricua.” However, she also identifies with African-American culture: “Shameka Brown” being a name characteristic of an African-American, and “morena” being a term commonly used by Spanish-speakers in the U.S. to describe African-Americans (although the significance of the term also varies by country and may denote, for example, dark skin or dark hair). By embracing these cultures, Báez re-appropriates the space of the marginalized, asserting it as a space for an alternative positioning. She thus creates a contact zone and environment for multicultural unity. As García-Peña explains, Báez “is no longer the marginal, for she represents the contact zones between all other voices. She is not weak for she has the power to ‘pull the emergency cord’” (39).

The act of pulling an emergency cord, which Báez mentions in her text, is in reference to the subways of New York. When it is pulled, it causes the train to stop suddenly. However, the emergency cord is only meant for specific emergencies, and therefore should only be pulled if someone gets caught between the train’s closing doors, for example. Báez’s pull of the cord is precisely for this reason: she is caught between cultures. However, this position does not cause

distress for her; she does not pull the cord for that reason. Instead, she wants to force the audience to “stop” and observe how she navigates the multiple cultures within which she is immersed.

Just as Troyano is “Dark and proud” (Troyano 96), so too does Báez proudly embrace her African heritage. By describing herself as a “black woman,” Báez breaks with the definition of *dominicanidad* as defined on the island by Dominican elites, because “to claim one’s Dominican and black identities represents a contradiction, as well as a challenge to Dominican national identity” (García-Peña 33). Claiming a Dominican and black identity also represents a contradiction within the context of the U.S., since race and ethnicity often operate on a black-white spectrum. As I have discussed, African-Americans and Dominicans are both classified as “black” in the U.S., but speaking Spanish has been a strategy used to assert one’s Dominican identity (Torres-Saillant, “Inventing the Race” 140). Thus, to be black *and* to speak Spanish pose as a challenge to U.S. dominant discourses with regard to race and national identity.

In *Dominicanish*, Báez further hints at this concept when she states that “baseball has been very very very good to me” (26). La Fountain-Stokes views this line as a reminder of dominant concepts of Latinos in the U.S. as baseball players / athletes and of the “factory,” “plantation” or “greenhouse” notion of the Dominican Republic as a site where raw “talent” can be signed and developed by professional teams for very low costs (16). The lines also refer to the character Chico Escuela, a fictional Dominican baseball player who was portrayed by actor Garrett Morris on the U.S. television program *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s (“Deis”). Morris, who is an African-American, was well known for delivering the line: “Baseball been berry berry good to me!” using a very thick, “Dominican” accent, no matter what the interviewer’s questions were. La Fountain-Stokes suggests that Chico’s last name, “Escuela,”

serves to mock or make fun of the character's apparent lack of "schooling" (17). The character effectively evoked humor in the *SNL* audience, becoming one of the show's most memorable characters.

In addition to embodying a stereotype of a Dominican who does not speak English, Chico Escuela reveals the U.S.'s construction of race and ethnicity: the idea that an African-American could play a Dominican character since they are both seen as "black" in the U.S. (Torres-Saillant, "Inventing the Race" 140). The fact that baseball has been "good" to Chico implies that as long as he is making money, Chico is happy with being perceived as a subject of humor, and thus perpetuates the U.S.'s exploitation of Dominican baseball players, just as Morris perpetuates the "repackaging" of blackness as a homogenized entity: it is all for the sake of the game. This process of homogenization, like Troyano's milk of amnesia, has important ramifications. Báez repeats Chico's line, not only to evoke humor, but also, and more importantly, to call into question the nuances that are reflected in the character's portrayal. By critiquing U.S.-Dominican relations and exposing the exploitation that they often entail, Báez highlights the constructed nature of *dominicanidad*. In questioning its definition, she is also able to rework its meaning by connecting her Dominican culture to other cultures that make up her New York home.

In addition to connecting with the African-American community, Báez embraces other African diasporic communities as well. In the following quote, Báez uses word plays to reference Afro-Cuban singer Celia Cruz and Dominican singer Johnny Pacheco: "Pacheco flauta Pacheco su nuevo tumbao / el maestro el artista Tremendo Cache/ compartido en cruz/ Juntos de nuevo como al detalle Tres de Café y / dos de azúcar" (42). The term *tumbao* is a word play in that on the one hand, it refers to the basic rhythm played on the bass in Afro-Cuban music, and

on the other, it refers to the sexiness or ‘swing’ of black women as in the song by Celia Cruz, “La negra tiene tumbao.” The phrases “Tremendo Cache” and “Tres de Café y dos de azúcar” refer to two songs made famous by Johnny Pacheco. Furthermore, the mentioning of “azúcar” (sugar) also brings to mind Cruz’s famous shout of “¡Azúcar!” at the beginning of each of her performances.

Such cultural references indicate the ways in which Báez plays with language in her textual performance of *Dominicanish*, as the reader draws connections to the words and reads between the lines. Since not every reader will be able to interpret the cultural references, the text’s performance is contingent upon the personal experiences of the reader, allowing him/ her to be the “co-creators” of the overall textual performance. Regardless of the experiences and cultural background of the reader, however, Báez’s work allows everyone to see the social, political, historical, and linguistic connections that she establishes between the Dominican Republic and the United States.

Báez identifies her home as the United States, further establishing the point that *dominicanidad* is not just about maintaining a connection to the island but also establishing firm connections in the U.S. These connections are often embedded within one another, as can be seen when Báez returns to the island for a visit: “I went back there on vacation / There is La Romana/ Here is 107th street ok / ...Full fridge full of morisoñando con minute maid/ To die dreaming as a maid in a minute” (31). The reference to “morisoñando con minute maid” implies that in the U.S., Báez remains connected to Dominican culture, drinking a traditional Dominican drink of *morisoñando*. Her preparation of the drink symbolizes her ties to both U.S. and Dominican cultures, since she makes this drink with orange juice of an American brand, Minute Maid. Likewise, Troyano uses the brand name Tropicana to achieve the same purpose. In

addition to this connection, Báez's fridge is "full" of *morisoñando*, which implies that in the U.S., the economic situation is better and people are able to provide food for their families on a more consistent basis than if they lived in the Dominican Republic or in Cuba, where life is not so easy; *no es fácil*.

Indeed, while life is seemingly "very very very good" in the U.S., some Dominicans are being exploited not only in the area of baseball, but also in the domestic arena. This can be seen in the last line with the word play on "minute maid," denoting not only a brand of orange juice but also indicating a domestic role. Báez implies that in the U.S., the "American Dream" is difficult to obtain for some Dominican women, who must often resort to "dying" (physically and emotionally) by serving as a maid all of her life. Therefore, just as baseball players are traded off, a trade must also take place for some Dominican immigrants, who often must give up their dreams and, sadly, their dignity, in exchange for a "full fridge" of *morisoñando*.

Furthermore, *mori[r]soñando* literally means "to die dreaming," the implication being that in the U.S., one dies in pursuit of the American Dream. Such a reference connects Báez once again to Nuyorican culture, and in particular to the Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri. In his poem, "Puerto Rican Obituary," Pietri equates pursuing the American Dream to a cultural death for the Nuyorican: "Juan / Miguel / Milagros / Olga / Manuel....All died yesterday...Dreaming...Proud to belong to a community of gringos who want them lynched (1973). The critique is therefore of Nuyoricans who, in pursuing this dream, become sell outs to their own culture, in a sense, working to assimilate to the dominant culture instead of promoting socio-economic empowerment within their own communities. Miguel Piñero shared this same sentiment in his poem "Seekin' the Cause," proclaiming that Nuyoricans essentially "die" (spiritually, culturally) when they fail to realize that the principal agenda, or cause, that must be pursued in life is the

assertion and promotion of Nuyorican culture: “he died seekin’ a Cause / ...he died & / never found his Cause / because you see / he never knew that he was the / Cause” (1975). So, too, does a Dominican migrant “die dreaming” if he/she conforms to traditional notions of *dominicanidad* to achieve socio-economic success, rather than wake up to the reality that the term is merely a social construction; subject to change and reinvention. Báez therefore uses her performance art to wake up her reader and audience to the reality of dominant discourses of race, class, and gender. She shows how the elitist construction of *dominicanidad*, along with the racist ideologies of the U.S., not only threaten to erase her African heritage, but they also place her into monolithic categories that limit her abilities to express herself as a female performance artist. She responds by using her performance art to rebuild the multicultural elements that make up her world, reclaiming her identity as a Dominicanyork writer, performer, and teacher while reworking the very definition of *dominicanidad*.

Conclusion

Báez’s work, *Dominicanish*, represents a space in which her identity is negotiated and reconstructed as she documents the Dominican migrant experience. As I have shown, the text of *Dominicanish* shows Báez’s eclectic style of creation, and the performance piece highlights the spirituality that foregrounds her Performance Autology. Through the use of her body and language, Báez has formed a new creation, ‘Dominicanish’, wherein her body *is* a language in its own right. Through Performance Autology, *kuchipudi* dance, and the manipulation of language, Báez challenges the realms of theater, spirituality, and the process of learning. Her life is embedded in her work, and this is revealed throughout *Dominicanish* with Báez’s cultural references and use of word plays to show a reworked definition of *dominicanidad*.

Like other Dominican writers (i.e., Blas Jiménez, Nelly Rosario, Junot Díaz), Báez rejects the essentialist notions of “white, Spanish, and Catholic” as being markers of *dominicanidad*. She also denounces the painful process of assimilation to the dominant Anglo culture, which characterizes many immigrant experiences and often entails exploitation. Instead, Báez shifts the focus away from the “center,” or the norm, and highlights the margins of society. Such a shift helps to deconstruct the very notions of “margin-center,” as Báez’s perspective becomes the “new” norm. This shift in focus also represents an oppositional stance, as Báez forces her audience / reader to “stop” to look at an alternative perspective of the world that contrasts with the official histories of both the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. Báez reveals the problems of the Dominican Republic, in contrast to the exotic images often seen on brochures. In addition, she critiques U.S.-Dominican relations, using cultural references such as Chico Escuela to sarcastically denounce the exploitation of Dominican baseball players, as well as calling into question the process of learning English in the U.S. In creating an alternative mode of existence, Báez reworks *dominicanidad* by embracing her African heritage, connecting not only to the music of black Dominican figures such as Fausto Rey and Johnny Pacheco, but also to that of African-Americans and Afro-Cubans.

Dominicanish, therefore, is not only an expression of Báez’s reconstructed identity, but it is also her own language, her tool to assert her identity as a Dominican in New York. Her home is where theater is, and the stage for her is a space of opposition that takes place on a transnational level, where discourses on the Dominican Republic and New York intersect. On stage and on the page, then, Báez’s performance art teaches us all to explore our own lives, to question the knowledge that we obtain, so that we may become “co-creators” in the experiences of life.

Lastly, by questioning sources of knowledge, both Báez and Troyano reveal the constructed natures of *dominicanidad* and *cubanidad*, respectively. The connections that these artists maintain with their homelands help to further document the experiences of female transmigrant subjects in the U.S. as they work to redefine their identities in the transnational space that is New York. This space is a testament to the cultural diversity embodied by Troyano and Báez. While Troyano uses her art as her weapon to redefine *cubanidad* in such enclaves as the WOW café, Báez asserts her *dominicanidad* on the streets of Washington Heights, where she calls home. Both New Yorkers utilize the realm of performance art as a means to challenge, critique, and reconstruct aspects of their cultures. In the next chapter, I discuss Nao Bustamante, a U.S.-born Chicana who, like Troyano and Báez, uses her performance art to create a reworked definition of what it means to be Latina in the United States. Specifically, I discuss Bustamante's performance of *mexicanidad* as seen in her work *America, the Beautiful*.

CHAPTER 5: A REWORKING OF BEAUTY, FEMININITY, AND LOVE IN NAO
BUSTAMANTE'S *AMERICA, THE BEAUTIFUL*

I want my work to create small rips and tears in the framework of meaning, of reality.

[To]...create fissures, not necessarily conversations” -- Nao Bustamante

Like Troyano and Báez, Nao Bustamante offers an alternative to *latinidad*, while challenging hegemonic discourses that shape her identity as a Chicana. In the U.S., the image of Chicanas, much like that of Cuban-American or Dominican females, assumes that they are submissive, speak little English, and “make great domestics,” as Judith Ortiz Cofer describes in her story “The Myth of the Latin Woman” (*The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, 2012). Furthermore, due to current debates in the U.S. regarding immigration reform, many people associate *mexicanidad* with possessing an “illegal” status in the U.S., as Mexicans represent the largest U.S. Latino immigrant group as of 2010. Lastly, *mexicanidad* in both locations assumes a heterosexual orientation.

In opposing these conceptions, Bustamante’s reconstructions of *mexicanidad* consist of a lesbian identity as well as a challenge to Mexican (-American) conceptions of femininity that are often viewed as submissive and complacent (Snook 262). This chapter explores Bustamante’s reworked definition of *mexicanidad* within the context of the U.S., resulting in a performance of identity that is highly subjective. For her, it is embodied by a full-figured, lesbian, Chicana feminist. In her work, *America, the Beautiful* (2002), she makes her body the central focus of

the performance, displacing verbal language in order to push her audiences to face the visual imagery surrounding the repackaged female/feminine body as it performs on stage.

In a postmodern, capitalist patriarchal society such as the United States, a “fat” body is seen as repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all something to lose (Braziel and Lebesco 2). However, ethnic subcultures such as African-American, Chicano/a, and other Latino/a communities (to name a few) have historically offered internal sites of resistance to the dominant cultural assessment of corpulence in North America (2). By presenting her body, naked, on stage, Bustamante as Maybelline challenges the conception of thinness as a marker of beauty. She deconstructs the negative image of the “fat” body in order to show that “fat” is merely a malleable construct that has served dominant economic and cultural interests, to the detriment of all people (3). The fact that she is a Chicana also contrasts with the idealization that beauty is embodied by White females. Her work *America, the Beautiful* therefore represents her reworked definition of both what is “American” and what is “beautiful.”

Bustamante derives much of the inspiration for her performance pieces from her experiences growing up. Since the research on the life and work of Bustamante has been relatively scarce, much of the information that I have gathered regarding her life and works has come from interviews that Bustamante has done over the past several years. I also draw upon the works of such scholars as Laura Gutierrez and José Esteban Muñoz, particularly Gutierrez’s interpretation of Bustamante’s performance as “unsettling comforts” (that is, challenging U.S. and Mexican societal norms) and Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification.”

The aspects of Bustamante’s life that she would later come to analyze, critique, and re-create are the very aspects that contributed to her marginalized position as a Latina in both her community and society: that of being a feminist, Chicana lesbian who did not conform to

standard ideals of beauty of the dominant Anglo-American culture. These ideals included features such as being blonde, curvaceous, and heterosexual. Bustamante grew up in the 1970s in California, a Chicana lesbian in the conservative San Joaquín Valley. The 70s and 80s were pivotal decades for Chicanos and the feminist movements of the time, especially in places such as Texas and California, where various labor unions and the works of activists such as Dolores Huerta were key moments in the defense of the rights of Mexican farm workers. The writings by Chicana feminist lesbians Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (i.e. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 1981) also contributed largely in promoting Chicano/a culture as well as in asserting the social and political rights of women, homosexuals, and other marginalized subjects in U.S. society. The early 1980s, in particular, represented an important moment in the life of Bustamante, who was coming to terms with her identity as a Chicana lesbian.

In 1984, Bustamante took a summer workshop in San Francisco, and “never left.” From there, she began to immerse herself in the culture of the Bay Area, with its “spirit of experimentation,” as she explains in an interview by art curator Emael. By this, she means that she was fascinated by the various alternative lifestyles and subcultures that surrounded her in San Francisco, i.e. gays, lesbians, artists, performance artists, and even “urban cowboys,” people who comprised a world that she had not experienced in her small town. She later went to the San Francisco Art Institute and actively participated in the International NOW (National Organization for Women) Foundation, which promotes women’s rights and equality. Bustamante took art classes at the art institute and later worked as a receptionist there. These experiences allowed her to meet various people, and eventually she began to work closely with poets who incorporated dance into their works, as well as engaging in public street performances.

Currently, Bustamante resides in Troy, New York and works as an Assistant Professor of New Media and Live Art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Her work as a performance artist has been as multi-dimensional as the people with whom she has engaged throughout her life. Her collaborations include working with such artists as Coco Fusco and Osseus Labrint. In 2001, she received the prestigious Anonymous Was a Woman fellowship, an unrestricted grant of \$25,000 that enables women artists, over 40 years of age, to continue to grow and pursue their work. One of Bustamante's most intriguing performances as an artist includes her work *America, the Beautiful*. In this chapter, I will show that this performance highlights the constructed nature of beauty, femininity, and love as it relates to her identity in the U.S.

Bustamante's performance was first presented at the London Institute for Contemporary Art in 1995. New York University's Hemispheric Institute possesses a digitalized recording of the performance, by means through which viewers can have access to Bustamante's piece. The title of the performance, *America, the Beautiful*, is meant to call into question the hegemonic discourses that center around notions of beauty as well as that which is "American," since this term has often come to imply "North American" and in many cases, White American (see George Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics*, 2006). From the outset, then, the title sets the stage for a satiric look at the social constructions that have shaped Bustamante's life. In this 55-minute performance, the artist, through her character Maybelline, reworks *latinidad* by highlighting the fact that her "America" includes Latin America, specifically Mexico. The artist therefore uses her performance art to challenge her audience to think critically about the ways in which such concepts as beauty, femininity, and love are defined in the U.S. A process of deconstruction takes place through the act of satirizing; the artist exaggerates ideals of beauty by wearing excessive lipstick around her

mouth instead of on her lips, and pokes fun at the very notions of beauty as well as the rituals that women undergo in order to be beautiful. At the same time, the artist works to reconstruct her identity by rejecting the notion that one must live by the standards and norms of society, offering instead her own conception of *mexicanidad* that challenges the dominant discourses that have traditionally defined it.

In her reworking of *mexicanidad*, Maybelline does not speak at all during the performance. The lack of dialogue is a resistant stance that forces the audience to instead read the body's messages as Bustamante-Maybelline "stares back" at her audience. Stereotypes and other preconceived notions are thus parodied in this performance by the employment of the character's body and her gaze upon the audience to watch their reactions. She uses the stage as a space to subvert cultural canons and engage in a series of exercises that test her own balance and stability while the audience is left on edge. For example, when she climbs a tall ladder, the audience members become so engaged that they begin to question their own roles in the performance, wondering whether or not they should act to save the artist from potential harm. As the performance continues to unfold, Bustamante's overall message becomes evident as she reworks an image of *mexicanidad* that demonstrates that social roles, such as spectator, performer, woman, Chicana, etc, are highly subjective in nature and are merely constructs. In the next section, I offer an overview of Bustamante's performance piece, *America, the Beautiful*.

Performing America, the Beautiful

In deconstructing the definitions of beauty, Bustamante's first step is therefore to present on stage the struggles of women to be beautiful. The piece opens with Bustamante setting up and transforming the stage. She first appears wearing her street clothes (a knit cap, with baggy

pants and a large sweater), goes about setting up the props (among other things, an antique record player and a makeup kit), and begins to undress and ritualistically transform herself into her character Maybelline. During the transformation, the stage is pitch dark with the exception of the artist on stage. As her transformation into Maybelline continues, the character undresses, and a recording can be heard of a man's voice from the 1940s, as he argues for the superiority of the spirit over the body: "Every part of my body is in harmony with the living Spirit within me...my body is the temple of the living spirit / the life of the spirit is my life" (Holmes 101). These lines are from spiritual writer and teacher Ernest Holmes' *This Thing Called You* (1948), a book which served as an intimate guide for healing, improving mind and body, and for reaching one's divine self. This selected recording demonstrates Bustamante's attempt not only to emphasize the role of the body as inferior to that of the spirit, but also to criticize the authoritative position of males over the outer world (body) as well as the inner world (spirit) of women, since it is a male voice that apparently speaks for all human experiences, within U.S. society. This criticism is made most evident as the artist begins to nod her head in agreement and silently whispers "yes" in response to the spiritual affirmations from the recording, yet at the same time she continues to remove her clothing in front of the audience. This sparks laughter in the spectators, who read her actions as a sarcastic response to the statements being made, since they do not deter her from still being concerned only with displaying her external features.

Soon after she is completely naked, Bustamante sits on a small stepladder and continues the transformation into Maybelline while listening to the song "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing." After curling her eyelashes with a curler, she puts on grotesque and excessive makeup, including golden facial powder and rich red lipstick beyond the boundaries of her lips, including her cheeks, to simulate, at once, a "clown like appearance and a film noir femme fatale"

(Gutierrez 144). The application of makeup also confirms the idea behind the Maybelline 1991 commercial slogan, that one can “become” beautiful as opposed to being “born with it” (n.p. “The History of Maybelline”).

In the final stages of her transformation, Bustamante puts on a blonde wig and begins to spray a full can of hairspray on the wig, with great exaggeration. The wig, coupled with her powdered face produce a “whitening-up effect” as the character transforms her body in an attempt to conform to standardized notions of beauty (Muñoz 199). The whitening of her body represents conformity to the norms of U.S. society, which associates whiteness with beauty. The exaggerated way in which she presents these images, however, gives the performance a satirical tone as the very notions of beauty are deconstructed and made fun of through the character’s use of her body.

As “Love is a Many-Splendored Thing” continues to play, Maybelline stands up and wraps her legs and waist with clear wide packing tape. Muñoz explains that the tape is an attempt to reshape the character’s large curvy body, causing her individuality to disappear in a sense as she molds herself to conform to a body image that is the norm (199). Gutierrez sees this act as “an ironic citation of Marilyn Monroe’s infamous flesh-colored dress...into which she had to be sewn for her performance of ‘Happy Birthday, (Mr. President)’ because there was no way that she could slip into the finished dress” (147). Maybelline, who physically looks nothing like Marilyn Monroe, however, shares with the “blonde bombshell” the pains and struggles to be beautiful by literally squeezing into this role.

Now with a new song playing on the record player, an instrumental of the Carmen Miranda classic “Mama eu quero,” Maybelline proceeds to balance on a stepladder as she tries to put on a pair of high heels and a pair of elbow-length women’s gloves. As the Carmen Miranda

song comes to an end, Maybelline comes down from the stepladder in order to play the song again. This happens repeatedly, and the audience is amused by Maybelline's growing frustrations as she attempts to put on the shoes and gloves before the music has to be replayed again. This constant ritual of starting and re-starting the music parallels the beauty ritual that Maybelline engages in as she attempts to put on the beauty accessories.

Once she has finally put on the shoes and gloves, Maybelline begins to climb, as Gutierrez describes it, "a rather flimsy, unsupported, wooden A-shaped ladder that is over ten feet tall" (144). It is only when she has transformed herself into a woman that society views as beautiful that Maybelline is able to climb what can be interpreted as the (socio-economic) ladder of success. While she climbs to the top of the ladder, the next song being played is Johann Strauss' *The Blue Danube Waltz*, a very popular classical music piece in the U.S. When she has finally reached the top she does not quite know what to do while she is there. This is evident when she begins to make fun of the music that is being played below on the record player. She laughs quietly each time a pattern of notes repeat over and over again. She appears to be bored while sitting at the top of the ladder, and thus critiques the mundane scene of both the music being played and, I propose, the life of the woman who has reached the top of success on the ladder. Like Troyano, who does not like the taste of homogenized milk, or Báez, who must twist her mouth like a glove, Maybelline takes issue with the idea of conforming to U.S. societal norms, as is indicated by this change in her demeanor as she looks bored after reaching the top of the ladder.

As she slowly climbs down from the ladder, she engages in dangerous acts, turning the focus onto her audience so that they themselves become spectacles on display, waiting in suspense and questioning whether or not they should act to save the would-be "damsel-in-

distress.” In one such act, for example, she lies in a horizontal position, with her head and upper torso resting on one of the rungs of the ladder, still in its A-shaped position, while her legs and feet rest on the opposite side of the ladder. As Bustamante shares with Muñoz in an interview: “...Often I hear people say that they want to run up to the stage and stop me. But nobody ever does because they want to see it happen and they want to experience that” (121). She likens the experience to a car accident: “you don’t want to watch, but you have to watch” (121). In a similar vein, the audience doesn’t want to see her fall from the ladder, but they just have to watch.

After performing various stunts, for example, she comes down from the ladder unharmed, to the relief of the audience. But this relief is short-lived. While she stomps menacingly at the edge of the stage, demanding applause from the audience, she holds a bouquet of roses that was thrown to her earlier. The performance slowly starts to wrap up as the character’s monstrous rage consumes her and she begins to bite and chew at the roses in an animalistic frenzy, spitting mutilated roses at the audience as she begins to choke.

After she chokes on the roses, Maybelline sets up a table with water-filled bottles, while the Chuck Berry classic, “Maybellene, why can’t you be true?” (1955), plays on the record player. At this point, close to the end of the piece, Bustamante blows on the bottles to elicit the melody of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” licking the tips of some of the bottles in a sexual manner. She then demands applause from the audience, and they oblige. The performance ends as Maybelline blows a kiss to an audience member after mouthing, “I love you.”

Bustamante’s performance, *America, the Beautiful*, represents an intimate look inside the mind of the artist, as she critiques the perceptions of Latinas, specifically Chicanas, and offers a reworked image of how *mexicanidad* is defined. Her use of her body and manipulation of

language during the performance serves a dual purpose: to deconstruct notions of *mexicanidad*, and to reveal new modes of existence. I begin by first discussing the standards of beauty, sexuality, and femininity that have shaped Bustamante's identity as a Chicana in the U.S., and how her performance offers a critique of traditional notions of *mexicanidad* within this conceptual framework. In addition, I will show how she redefines *mexicanidad* by showing that it can be embodied by a "corpulent," feminist, lesbian body (Gutierrez 144). In the end, the artist communicates the message that *mexicanidad* can be reworked according to the personal experiences that shape her own identity. She shows that beauty is subjective; she is beautiful because she herself sets this standard of beauty.

America, the Beautiful: Bustamante's Critique of Mexicanidad

The parodic strategy employed by Bustamante throughout her performance serves to reveal both the constructed nature of U.S. dominant discourses, as well as the negative effects of subscribing to such social constructions. She acknowledges this point in her interview with Muñoz as she says, "I reflect back what society has given to me; no matter how beautiful or grotesque that mirror is, I reflect that back to people, so they can look at that" (121). Like Báez, whose Performance Autology is rooted in an analysis of the self and the discourses that have influenced one's identity, so too does Bustamante want her audience to examine the roles that U.S. society plays (through its discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality) in the formation of one's identity. Previously, I discussed Troyano's critique of societal pressures to assimilate as highlighted by her drinking of white, homogenized milk. In turn, Bustamante's character Maybelline represents society's pressures on the artist to be white, blonde, and straight.

As I discussed in the introduction to my dissertation, Arlene Dávila's research indicates that Spanish language TV networks emphasize whiteness as the norm, as television programs often cast actors and actresses who are light-skinned and who could pass for White (43). Such a portrayal reflects an image of *latinidad* that promotes European ancestry at the expense of one's African and / or indigenous roots. For her part, Bustamante critiques repackaged images of *latinidad* in the U.S. and the constructed image of beauty that it promotes: that of the blonde, curvaceous, light-skinned woman. She uses significant names and titles in her performance to subvert their meanings and to offer a critique of the elements of *latinidad*. Just as Troyano comes up with the name "Carmelita Tropicana" to allude to sexy Latina (Brazilian) Carmen Miranda's parodied embodiment of *latinidad*, Bustamante gives her performance the title of "America, the Beautiful" in order to reflect a critique of what defines *latinidad*; specifically "Latina" beauty. At the same time, "America, the Beautiful" duplicates the title of the patriotic U.S. folk song⁶, with Bustamante's version representing a reworked concept of "beautiful."

In addition to utilizing language creatively through their word plays and suggestive titles, both Troyano and Bustamante use references to lipstick to critique U.S., Latin-American, and Caribbean socio-political relations. The name of Bustamante's character, Maybelline, is derived from a U.S. brand of makeup that is sold world-wide, and therefore a marker of beauty on a transnational scale. In her performance, Troyano uses Maybelline lipstick to contrast with the image of a butch lesbian. Both artists therefore allude to makeup as a way to critique the constructed nature of *latinidad*, with its heterosexism and objectification of Latina women as it

⁶ The lyrics to the song "America, the Beautiful" were written by Katharine Lee Bates, who originally wrote the words as a poem, *Pikes Peak*, while taking a trip by train from Massachusetts to Colorado and exploring the scenery along the way (Collins 19).

views them as sexy or exotic. In her piece, Troyano points to this objectification when she offers lipstick to a young girl in a hotel lobby, and then concludes that the lipstick results in “winning the girl a steak dinner” (Troyano 102). Furthermore, as previously discussed, Troyano reworks the meanings attached to the wearing of lipstick by arming herself with “lipstick in one hand and a machine gun in the other,” a stance that connects power and agency with her femininity (Roman 90).

In her performance, Maybelline not only wears lipstick but also dons a blonde wig, wears high stiletto heels, and exposes her naked body on stage. Furthermore, during her performance she proceeds to wrap clear tape around her body. Judith Halberstam notes that with Bustamante’s blonde wig and makeup, along with her flesh pulled tight, she displays the demands of feminine beauty (143). However, she also shows the dangers of such beauty when she later performs various stunts in front of her audience, who watch nervously as the artist puts herself in dangerous positions. Through her satiric performance, Bustamante-Maybelline calls into question hegemonic ideals of what defines beauty, and, to a larger extent, Mexican (American) beauty.

The figure of Carmen Miranda that is referenced when Maybelline plays “Mama eu quero” suggests a view of *latinidad* that includes an all-encompassing, repackaged image. With this song choice, Maybelline critiques the constructed, media-propagated image of *latinidad* that Miranda came to represent, with her tutti frutti hats and her constant portrayals in movies of generic representations of Brazil, Argentina, and other Latin American countries. Earlier, I discussed how Troyano re-appropriates Miranda’s tutti frutti hat by “queering” it. In her own reference to the portrayals of *latinidad*, Maybelline extends the discussion (by her appearance and by the music that she chooses to play) in order to reveal the constructed nature of any labels

placed upon Latinas, who are repackaged into a monolithic image in the U.S. and who must navigate multiple cultures.

Bustamante's playing of a waltz can be interpreted as the dance between cultures of U.S. Latinos/as. I explained previously how the "memory mambo" (Perez Firmat's phrase) equated to the migrant experiences of Cuban-Americans. Likewise, the waltz in Bustamante's performance can be read as her dance between cultures as she critiques the dominant discourse that make up her multicultural identity and the standards of beauty that these discourses promote. Her selection to play a waltz also hints at the Eurocentric ideologies found within many Latin-American and Caribbean dominant discourses, which promote European heritage over indigenous or African heritage.

Furthermore, Bustamante finds that the portrayal of the "blonde bombshell" (seen in U.S. figures such as Mae West and Marilyn Monroe) has extended across transnational borders in such a way that across the globe, blonde, curvaceous women have become models of beauty, in contrast to dark-haired or dark-skinned women (Baer "Art Related"). The artist cites the image of *la rubia superior* and incorporates it into her performance. This figure was a blonde spokes model for the Mexican beer company, Superior, and her excessively sexualized poses on billboards were used to sell products (Gutierrez 146). *La rubia*, the blonde woman, therefore has become a transnational model not only for beauty but also for denoting female sexuality. In Mexican culture, then, it is the blonde that represents a "superior" way of being and looking. In her performance, Bustamante critiques this image by poking fun at the blonde bombshell. The blonde wig that she wears as she becomes Maybelline reflects the notion of identity as drag. By donning this wig, Bustamante plays with and pokes fun at the constructed nature of the very

image. As she explains in an interview with José E. Muñoz: “For me, it’s a joke. The idea of bleaching my hair” (121).

The idea of beauty as a social construction also entails an image of a sexually attractive, heterosexual woman. In both U.S. and Mexican cultures, heterosexuality is considered a norm, which places lesbians in a marginalized position in both societies, relegating them to what Anzaldúa calls the borderlands. Those who reside here are: “the females, the homosexuals of all races, the dark-skinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, [and] the foreign” (87). In addition to the heteronormative stance of the dominant Anglo-American culture of the U.S., perhaps equally problematic is the idea that women in heterosexual relationships assume an inferior role to men.

Through the songs that she chooses to play, Bustamante communicates the extremes taken by women in order to be beautiful, to attract attention (presumably from males), and their need to be loved. As a backdrop to her performance, for example, such musical tunes as “Love is a Many Splendored Thing” (The Four Aces, 1955) and “Some Day My Prince Will Come” (Miles Davis, 1961) can be heard playing. These songs suggest that beauty is a prerequisite to obtain love; that females are expected to wait to be loved, by their male “prince.” The songs thus position females in a passive gender role, while placing power in the hands of males with regard to love and relationships. Therefore, just as beauty is being called into question, so too are notions of love and heterosexual relationships. In the lyrics to “Love is a Many Splendored Thing,” there are two lines in the song that read: “Love is nature's way of giving a reason to be living/ The golden crown that makes a man a king” (The Four Aces, “lyrics”). The idea that love gives someone a reason to live implies that if one has not found love, their life has no meaning.

With songs such as these, the artist critiques the idea that heterosexual relationships are what define the norms of society. A few lyrics of the song “Some Day My Prince Will Come” read:

...how thrilling that moment will be
 When the prince of my dreams comes to me
 He'll whisper, "I love you,"
 And steal a kiss or two
 Though he's far away,
 I'll find my love some day
 Some day when my dreams come true (Davis “Lyrics”).

As seen with these lines, love is equated with a momentous life experience, with dreams coming true. The emphasis, however, is placed on heterosexual love. Later in the song, similar lines repeat, but the line “Though he’s far away” is replaced with “Though she’s far away,” implying a male-female relationship. These songs from the 50s era, while romantic on the surface, exclude same-sex relationships, and they marginalize single, un-married persons who wish to remain single and who opt not to find love. Furthermore, the songs present love as a masculinized experience, thereby prioritizing the male perspective and rendering that of the female insignificant.

Bustamante’s strategic use of language through means of a recording also allows her to interject traditional religious beliefs (U.S. Christianity and Mexican Catholicism) in her challenge to hegemonic discourses by questioning its premises. While Báez uses a modern digital player to access her jazz music for her meditation rituals, Bustamante chooses to play her music using an old record player, which in itself implies a critique of old, out-dated practices. At

one point in her performance, she holds one of the records up in order to show that one of the corners is chipped off. This suggests Bustamante's overall message: that the records on display are as old and as flawed as the songs that are being played on them.

During the first recording in the opening scene, Bustamante critiques institutionalized religion, as mind, body, and spiritual teachings play in the background for a woman who nods in agreement, partially accepting the role that the male voice dictates to her. As I discussed earlier, Báez makes a similar critique and through her Performance Autology, she uses her own voice in her guided meditations. Both Báez and Bustamante therefore emphasize the importance of the self in one's spiritual development, and place less emphasis on the role of males in guiding this process. Such critique serves also as a response to the submissive role of women within U.S. Latino/a cultures, in which they are often defined by their bodies and measured against a model of *latinidad* that perpetuates a curvaceous body image (Aparicio 99).

Bustamante's decision to perform nude is therefore due in part to the fact that she is aware of the fictions that are inscribed upon her naked body, readings that traditionally translate a naked Latina body as sexy or exotic. As Debra Walker King puts it, the "body fictions" of women (that is, their identities as defined and represented by dominant discourses) speak louder than what they know to be their lived experiences (vii). These body fictions are perpetuated through television, magazines, cultural mandates and myths. The lives and relationships affected by the stories that these fictions tell are frequently female and "of color" while the interpreters and empowered authorities are not (vii – viii).

With regard to Latinas specifically, body fictions perpetuate such myths as that of the "Latin woman" being an exotic, sexy woman with a curvaceous figure. Such fictions further facilitate the "repackaging" of *latinidad*, to the point that even the buttocks, or "rear ends" of

Latinas, to use Aparicio's words, serve as a racialized marker; a feature that separates them from Anglo females and in turn connects them to other Latinas (98). After all, it was "Jennifer's butt," as Negrón-Muntaner explains, which apparently justified casting a Puerto Rican (Jennifer Lopez) to play the role of a Mexican-American (Selena) in the movie about the slain Tejano singer's life (181). Such a process of repackaging is problematic because, as King explains, the body fictions that are perpetuated mask women's individuality and mute the voice of personal agency: This cultural construction of racialized, gendered, or sexual body fictions disfigures or conceals women beneath a veil of invisibility, threatening economic, political, emotional, and spiritual suffocation (viii). The fiction that the blonde, curvaceous bombshell is a "superior" way to be and look places pressure on women to mold themselves to this image, much to the detriment of their individual personas (Bustamante, "Interview by José E. Muñoz" 120). Previously, I cited celebrities such as Jennifer Lopez and Shakira who have done just that, by donning a blonde look in television and magazines, implying a U.S. fashion trend and also suggesting that bloneness has become synonymous with beauty in the U.S.

Furthermore, in Sandra Cisneros' coming-of-age novel, *The House on Mango Street*, the protagonist Esperanza associates high-heeled shoes and makeup as a part of this process of molding to the ideals of beauty in Chicana culture: "It's Rachel who learns to walk the best all strutted in those magic high heels" (41). As Cisneros' protagonist learns, however, this ideal image of beauty leads to the objectification and exploitation of women: "On the avenue a boy on a homemade bicycle calls out: Ladies, lead me to heaven. But there is nobody around but us" (41). The "magic" in the high-heeled shoes therefore converts the young girls of Esperanza's neighborhood into women, in men's eyes. In becoming "beautiful" to embody this image, much like Maybelline who puts on the wig to become the blonde bombshell persona, Latinas run the

risk of losing their individuality, or, in Esperanza's case, their child-like innocence, as they are seen as the stereotypical "sexy Latina."

To combat this phenomenon and to speak against these body fictions, Maybelline performs beauty on stage and highlights the very constructed nature of these body fictions. Her performance confirms an idea shared by several scholars (i.e. Anaïs Nin, Judith Butler, and Karen Christian) that one's identity, and elements such as beauty and sexuality, can be "worn." This idea is also reflected in the popular slogan from the Maybelline commercials: "Maybe she's born with it. Maybe it's Maybelline." The lines suggest that "maybe" the elements of one's identity (race, gender, sexuality, etc) are fluid. "Maybe" they are like garments that can be worn, like a pair of high heels, or a shade of lipstick. Troyano also appropriates the idea of identity performativity as she dresses in drag to perform as Pingalito, the embodiment of Cuban masculinity.

Furthermore, Maybelline's performance contests the body fictions that place blonde, curvaceous, and light-skinned, heterosexual women in a superior position while marginalizing dark-haired, dark-skinned women, or perhaps worse, exoticizing their features to present them as a "hot," Latin "commodity" (McCracken 2). Recall Pingalito's praising of the dancer Tongolele, whose buttocks were seen as the hallmark of the black / *mulatta* body. Instead of being defined by her body, however, Maybelline uses it to present a reworked image of beauty by U.S. standards; a lesbian, Chicana body that is not curvaceous, but is instead "fat." She invites the audience to stare at her body, by not speaking, and by presenting herself nude. Furthermore, the struggles to become beautiful are made into a parodic performance as Bustamante tapes up her body. I discussed earlier how Báez shapes her mouth "como un guante" in order to criticize the process of molding to societal norms by learning a new language

through formal schooling. Likewise, Maybelline shapes her body, via the painful process of taping it up, in order to criticize the process of molding to the norms of beauty.

Bustamante's body-centered performances follow the tradition of feminist art from the 1960s and 1970s, in which the artists worked tirelessly to reclaim their body ("my body is my temple") from modernist constructions of femininity and female beauty (Gutierrez 142). Earlier, I discussed how Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta used her naked body as a canvas, juxtaposing disturbing images such as the slaughter of a chicken to divorce the meanings associated with Latina bodies from any sexual or desirable connotations that they might otherwise have. For her part, Bustamante uses her naked body to evoke fear and at times humor from her audience, performing dangerous stunts on a tall ladder and placing herself in vulnerable positions so that her audience is forced to react and to question whether or not they should help her.

Bustamante is well aware of the exotification of the Latina body that has been manifested through the media and other vessels. The exotification that goes along with repackaged images of *latinidad* therefore masks the individuality of Latinas, muting the "voice of [their] personal agency" (King viii). I would add...if they allow it. But what if Latinas could take the very exotic images that stereotype them and use them to their advantage? What if they could perform these notions of beauty in such a way that forces the audience to re-think the very definitions that characterize them? This is precisely why Bustamante as Maybelline comes out on stage, and chooses to be seen rather than heard. Since her body, as a Latina, has been objectified through history, she continues this tradition of being silenced by her body fictions....it would appear. Her lack of dialogue is a choice, however. She does have something to say, but she chooses to say it with her body. Her intent, therefore, is not simply to conform to hegemonic norms but

instead to underscore the problematic nature of such conformity. Given that the ladder that she later climbs is flimsy and unsupported, for example, she risks harming her body by attempting to climb it. Similarly, the blonde wig, makeup, high heels, and gloves all share the effect of masking the artist's individuality, as King described as an effect of subscribing to norms. Therefore, the reshaping of her body and other acts of conformity all come with a price.

Mexicanidad as Subjective Performance

I have shown that Bustamante presents alternative modes of existence through her performance on stage, shocking her audience with stunt performances on a tall ladder and thus blurring the line between performer and spectator. By reworking the space of performance, the artist implies that identity (being itself a performance of race, class, gender, etc) can also be reworked. Her intent is to show that dominant discourses in U.S. society reflect social constructions, and due to this malleable nature, they can be consciously reworked by presenting a view of *mexicanidad* that challenges these discourses and liberates women from marginalized positions.

Through the use of her body and her manipulation of language, Bustamante forces her audience to view her version of reality. Regardless of whether she identifies more with U.S. or Mexican cultures, Bustamante demonstrates through her performance that the life of a Chicana consists of a constant process of putting on, squeezing in, or slipping into multiple roles. Maybelline conveys this idea by the way in which she puts on a pair of high heels and white elbow-length women's gloves. Instead of simply slipping them on, she stands on top of a stepladder, places the heels on one of the rungs of the stepladder, and attempts to slide her feet into the shoes, all while trying to balance herself in the process. This act, done with extreme care

and a bit dangerous as she risks falling off of the stepladder, conveys the meticulous process of becoming beautiful. In addition, high heeled shoes, as I mentioned earlier, can symbolize female sexuality and womanhood, as in Cisneros' novel about Esperanza, a Mexican-American girl in search of her identity. In placing heels on her feet, then, Maybelline connects with Cisneros' character as they both essentially "slip into" sexiness, exoticism, and Latina objectification. Such an act moves both characters away from the traditional Mexican (-American) model of femininity and sexual purity, the Virgin of Guadalupe. The white gloves make yet another reference to Marilyn Monroe, who often wore this accessory, and imply an elegant occasion, or a ballroom scene, evoked also by a famous waltz that is played during the next part of the performance. The elegant occasion can also be read as a pageant scene, as Maybelline expresses a need for approval from her audience by dressing and looking beautiful. As a result, the audience is kept on edge as they watch the extremes taken by the character in order to be beautiful.

At a poignant moment in her performance when she is perched on the ladder, Bustamante turns her back to the audience and uses the stage lights to create a puppet show with her hands, inciting laughter and applause from the audience. The flickering shadows that she creates on the backdrop, as Halberstam points out, mirror her blurry status as puppet, mannequin, and doll (143). I would also add that the shadows also reflect her blurry identity as a Chicana who resides "on the border" of U.S. and Mexican cultural traditions. Halberstam further explains that Bustamante becomes her own puppet: "she ventriloquizes herself, constructs her body as a meeting point for violent discourses of beauty, profit, coherence, race, success" (143). As is true for Troyano and Báez, Bustamante's body serves as a canvas upon which hegemonic discourses are represented. However, like a canvas, her body can also be recreated to present a challenge to

these discourses and to suggest new conceptions. Maybelline's position on the ladder, therefore, enables her to create new shapes. Like the puppets that she makes with her hands, her gestures are meant to suggest the constructed nature of identity as she presents an alternative conception of *mexicanidad*. A principal image that is reworked is that of the curvaceous, blonde bombshell for that of a woman who does everything but succeed at portraying this image. This failure, while humorously deconstructing the blonde bombshell image, at the same time highlights Bustamante-Maybelline's awareness of society's pressures on women to conform to norms of beauty. In her reworking of this image, Maybelline opts to give up her efforts to become beautiful by society's standards, as the latter half of her performance indicates.

While bored at the top of the ladder, Maybelline proceeds to light a cigarette, despite the fact that her hair is coated with flammable hairspray. She cannot ignite a spark from the match, and finally decides to give up the effort. This scene of a blonde with a cigarette can be likened to the image of the Virginia Slims cigarette brand, which was a female-oriented product that promoted women's liberation with the slogan "You've come a long way, baby," implying women's empowerment. However, Maybelline ultimately subverts this image because her body does not conform to the ideal slim figure, and also because she is unsuccessful in even lighting the cigarette. Furthermore, the cigarette, like the Cuban cigar, can be read as a phallic symbol; a staple of masculinity. Thus, like Carmelita Tropicana, who vomits in response to the smell of a Cuban cigar, Maybelline's failure with regard to the masculine stimulant also hints at her lesbian identity. In this scene, she essentially gives up the "act" of being at the top, presumably at the top rungs of society, and abandons the image of the sexy, slender, blonde female with a cigarette in her hand. By rejecting these images, she constructs her own identity as that of the rebel; an individual who does not have to prove herself nor conform to any societal standards.

The chewing of the roses at the end of the performance can be read as another rebellious act as the artist rejects the rose as a symbol of beauty and femininity. By chewing on them and spitting them out, she reworks the definition of beauty by divorcing its meaning from the sight of roses and replacing it instead with the act of eating. Here, then, a rejection of an ideal body weight is implied, while ravenous eating and a “fat” body image is promoted. This ravenous eating furthermore produces a sight that looks as if Maybelline’s face is covered with blood. This effect is intentional on the part of the artist, intended to shock the audience, as she explains in an interview:

Often during my fit, I run into the back wall suddenly, “out of control,” and spit out the red saliva. It’s an old slapstick gag, where it seems you are hitting your nose, but actually you hit the wall with your foot to create the impact. But when I come away from the wall, there is a violent spat of red (Jones and Heathfield 298).

By reconditioning the audience to associate a seemingly violent scene with symbols of beauty, Bustamante succeeds in challenging the definitions of beauty, sexuality, and femininity that are entailed in the concept of *mexicanidad*. The apparent blood that is splattered on her face removes the makeup that had produced the whitening effect in the earlier part of the performance. This act therefore implies that the concept of whiteness has been challenged as a prerequisite for beauty.

Gutierrez cites Bustamante’s last act of mouthing “I love you” as a reference to Marilyn Monroe’s famed and televised 1962 rendition of “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” (146). The parody of Monroe’s performance, coupled with the song playing in the background, solidifies the overall message of the piece as Bustamante unravels dominant constructions of identity and

presents a subjective reconstruction in her performance of *mexicanidad*. Braziel and Lebesco liken the final act of performing the anthem to comedian and actress Roseanne's famous and outrageous performance of the U.S. national anthem at a baseball game in San Diego (288). Like Roseanne, who sparked controversy because of her off-key performance, Maybelline also gives a controversial performance by incorporating sexual innuendos in her delivery of a patriotic song.

Furthermore, as the artist asserts her sexuality on stage, the applause from the audience indicate that she is in control of the performance. The audience obeys her demands for applause, thus subverting the object-spectator relationship as Maybelline, a sexual object in this case, looks to her audience to give her satisfaction and entertainment, instead of vice-versa. By reworking the elements of performance, the artist effectively shows, by extension, that her own identity is itself a construction. *America, the Beautiful* is therefore the product of the artist's alternative definition of *mexicanidad* as it relates to a subjective concept, open to multiple representations, and thus can be embodied by a full-figured, Chicana feminist lesbian. Bustamante thus joins with Troyano and Báez in showing the effectiveness of performance art as an oppositional tool against stereotypes that reflect dominant discourses on race, class, and gender and that are influenced by U.S., Latin American, and Caribbean relations.

For Bustamante, performance art is the most viable tool for expressing her identity because it allows her the physical, mental, and creative space to do so. In her interview with Emael, she defines performance as "a way to express the self." In her works, she engages avant-garde strategies of presentation, also known as "shock art," and combines it with Chicano/Mexican popular performance practices such as the circus-like pantomime tradition of the *teatro de carpa*, which combines slapstick humor with biting satire (Gutierrez 79).

Bustamante focuses on exploring popular constructions of femininity and racialized, transnational, and queer bodies (Gutierrez 142). As Báez uses her body to oppose hegemonic discourses and to communicate in Dominicanish, Bustamante uses her body to rework *mexicanidad* so that she is not defined by oppressive body fictions. Furthermore, while Troyano “does gender” (to use Butler’s language) by dressing in drag in order to reveal the constructed nature of gender roles, Bustamante “does beauty” by presenting the complexities, and even the dangers, of concepts such as beauty rituals, femininity, and love.

With regard to the creative process behind her performances, Bustamante explains how she begins with an image that she can’t seem to get out of her mind. It is only when she is distracted, or when she diverts attention away from the image in her mind, that the next step of her creative process begins. As Bustamante explains in her interview with Emael, “My [creative] building comes in the transitional space or in other words, the ‘interstitial space’...the moments between the moments. From there, I figure out what my mind is trying to talk about.” This interstitial space can be seen as a metaphor for her identity as a Chicana. Anzaldúa is perhaps best known for her reference to this “space-in-between” as a geographical and psychological “borderland” (*Borderlands /La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987). Here, the term can be applied to Bustamante’s psychological process of creation, in which she must interpret the meanings of elements and situations that she encounters in her bicultural world. Báez undergoes a similar process in her methodology known as Performance Autology. Her solution is to combine the various elements in her multicultural environment, forming a new method of creation that is centered on the self. Bustamante, in turn, is meticulous in her process of transforming the images in her thought space into a creative production that can be acted out in a performative space.

She describes the continuation of this process onstage as “creating an aura” around herself, and forming a “delusional space” (Bustamante, “Interview by Emael”). Her wording here of “delusional” is in reference to a childhood story in which one day Bustamante asked her mother if she recalled the elephant rides that they would always take at the carnivals every year for Bustamante’s birthday, to which her mother replied, “Mi hija, that never happened” (“Interview”). Bustamante had created a fantasy in her mind that had become her own reality. Now years later, the same “delusions” that she created have been transformed on the stage as Bustamante plays out the workings of her mind for her audience. Like Troyano, who through her horse and pig characters presents the collective consciousness of Cubans and their history of colonization, Bustamante also uses the stage to present the elements of her subconscious mind as they are translated into physical manifestations of cultural analysis and criticism. As the artist further explains:

...my performances communicate on the level of the subconscious language, taking the spectator on a bizarre journey, cracking stereotypes by embodying them. I disarm the audience with a sense of vulnerability, only to confront them with a startling wakeup call. (n.p. “Statement Nao Bustamante”).

Bustamante effectively cracks stereotypes by reworking *mexicanidad* and showing that it can be embodied by a full-figured, lesbian, Chicana feminist. This is her definition of beautiful, and she communicates this to her audience by strategically embodying the very stereotypes that seek to define her, even to the point of becoming vulnerable to bodily harm.

Muñoz in effect labels Bustamante as a “vulnerability artist,” meaning that she often evokes emotions from her audiences by making her body vulnerable to the point of duress:

[The character Maybelline] seeks approval, attempting to both mold her body and her comportment to be in sync with dominant maps of looking and feeling, especially looking and feeling both female and white” (198).

The artist renders herself vulnerable, such as when she puts on the wig and high heels, when she is perched on the ladder, and when she demands applause from the audience. These “performative stunts,” to use Gutierrez’s term, represent a performance of femininity, the quintessential “damsel in distress,” and an extreme form of female dependency and insecurity. Bustamante’s intent is to confront the constructed nature of *mexicanidad*, particularly as it relates to (White, blonde) beauty and (heterosexual) love.

The realm of performance art is essential for accomplishing this task, as it allows for such installments as the Brechtian techniques. One element of such techniques, as I discussed earlier, involves the suspension of disbelief, that is, keeping the audience aware that what they are viewing is not real but is instead an object of critical study. Such awareness allows the audience to critique every aspect of the performance. Furthermore, Bustamante challenges them to become a part of the performance, and to experience what she wants them to see, hear, feel, etc. By redirecting their attention so that they focus not on her body but on her bodily acts, she effectively challenges the performer-spectator role. As she projects onto her audience feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, and questioning, Bustamante compels them to break the Brechtian “Fourth Wall” by becoming a part of the action on the stage. This break in the performer-spectator relationship also forces the audience to question the role that they play in the larger society with respect to perpetuating stereotypes.

Bustamante’s performance of *America, the Beautiful* thus challenges various systems of power: political, economic, and sexual. The spectator is left with a skewed beauty that exposes

the horror as well as the beauty of human nature. By using language via song lyrics, non-speech gestures such as staring at her audience, and by incorporating her body into the performance, Bustamante accomplishes two tasks: 1) she challenges U.S. dominant discourses that affect Latina women, and 2) she creates a new mode of existence by challenging her audience to reexamine the definitions of love, sexuality, and beauty. The audience, in turn, is made to feel uncomfortable in many parts of the performance, not knowing whether to cross the audience-performer line in an effort to rescue the artist from possible harm. Bringing the audience to that point, eliciting panic or discomfort in the spectators, allows Bustamante-Maybelline to challenge the audience to look again, to “stare back” at the images that have long shaped the way in which norms are defined. They are bombarded with images that contrast with traditional notions of beauty, sexuality, and love, and are therefore forced to reconsider the very definitions of these terms. Bustamante’s performance is thus a tool against the workings of stereotypes, as her body and actions on stage help to mold a new image of what it me

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

My dissertation considers the realm of performance art as a method to respond to the repackaging of Latinidad through an analysis of Alina Troyano, Josefina Báez, and Nao Bustamante as they incorporate and critically analyze U.S. dominant discourses in their works. I have explained my own reasons for using the label “U.S. Latina” in my study, showing that this term can also be viewed as a way to describe Latinas’ shared similar historical experiences as colonized subjects. One such experience has involved the repackaging of Latinidad, a process that works to categorize Latinas and contributes to the myth of the Latinas as whore, domestic, or criminal. Furthermore, in the U.S., the term Latinidad is set against a standard of beauty that assumes light skin, blonde hair, and a curvaceous body as sexually desirable. The repackaged image of Latinas’ curvy bottoms, full lips, and dark hair, as such, symbolizes the “exoticism” of Latinas.

As a result of the repackaging process, the bodies of Latinas, as well as other women of color, contain writings that reflect U.S. dominant discourses of race, class, and gender, which seek to define them. The problem is that these writings are often fictional, what Debra Walker King calls “body fictions”. The works of Troyano, Baez and Bustamante serve to reveal these fictions and to present a reworked construction of their identities as Latinas.

My work considers the realm of performance art as a tool to address critical questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. It can be used to cast an oppositional gaze; a critical look at the ways in which social constructions and dominant discourses take shape not only in the U.S.

but also on a transnational scale. I have explored the ways in which performance art sheds light on repackaged images of Latinidad as they relate to Cuban-, Dominican-, and Mexican-American women. As a mode of expression, performance art goes beyond the novel or the painting on a canvas because it allows the performer to directly engage with the audience. The performer is free to change the script, and to act against the norm, to present an alternative version of reality that asserts an individual identity. This reworked identity challenges stereotypes created by hegemonic discourses and the perpetuations of these discourses as reflected in U.S. society

Performers such as Guillermo-Gomez Peña, Coco Fusco, and Ana Mendieta, along with the productions of the Wow Theater Café, all denote a move away from the socio-political movements of the 1970s and 1980s. These artists instead shift their focus toward the individual, emphasizing the need to assert one's individuality amidst the dominant discourses of race, class, and gender that often produced the repackaging process for many U.S. Latino/as and other marginalized subjects.

The performativity of identity is therefore the overarching theme in the performances of Troyano, Baez, and Bustamante. These artists engage their audiences through the use of their bodies and through the ways in which they manipulate language. The audience, in turn, participates as they analyze, re-think, and reflect upon the acts of the performers on stage. By redefining the performer-spectator relationship, the artists effectively redirect the gaze of their audiences while helping to firmly establish the realm of performance art as a successful tool for casting an oppositional gaze.

Troyano reworks Latinidad by presenting a feminist queer retelling of Cuban-American history through her characters Alina, Carmelita, Pingalito, and the horse and pig characters that

she embodies. She plays upon the shared Cuban migrant experience of exilic memory through her title, *Milk of Amnesia*, while critiquing the forced assimilation that many Cuban immigrants face. Through her character Carmelita, the artist comes to embrace the multiple elements that make up her identity, reaching the conclusion that “We are all connected”. This message to her audience implies that one can combine the multiple elements of one’s identity in order to form new creations, as Troyano herself reworks *cubanidad*.

Josefina Báez challenges *dominicanidad* as she deconstructs the “White, Spanish, and Catholic” image that has been promoted by the elites in Dominican society, claiming instead an identity as a Dominicanyork woman, who speaks Dominicanish. She incorporates music in her performance on stage in order to critique, among other things, spirituality (by playing jazz music during her meditation rituals), the assimilation process (by listening to the Isley Brothers in order to learn English), and the very definition of *dominicanidad* (by engaging in *kuchipudi* dance). Her work, *Dominicanish* challenges Dominican and U.S. dominant discourses on *dominicanidad* by celebrating African heritage and by rejecting the process of assimilation to U.S. culture, respectively. In addition, as she reconstructs her identity in the U.S., Báez reworks the conventions of theater with her methodology of creation, Performance Autology, which focuses on the self and one’s role in the process of creation. Her performance text is thus a product of her reworked conceptualizations as she asserts her identity as a Dominicanyork.

In Bustamante’s reworking of *mexicanidad* in her performance *America, the Beautiful*, she critiques the multiple, overlapping and conflicting meanings of beauty, femininity, and love in the context of the U.S. Her character Maybelline represents societal pressures to be white, blonde, and straight, and in her performance, she does everything but fit this mold perfectly. From her lipstick that is applied around her lips, to her white face powder and blonde wig, to her

trapeze-like stunts, Maybelline plays with the very social constructions that have shaped her identity.

Unlike Troyano's transformation into such characters as Carmelita Tropicana and Pingalito Betancourt, Bustamante's transformation into Maybelline is witnessed, step-by-step, by her audience. Such a process is crucial in order for the audience to observe the various rituals that women undergo in order to be perceived as beautiful. Thus, while Troyano "does gender" with her performance as Pingalito Betancourt, Bustamante "does beauty" by parodying beauty rituals seen in a U.S. and Mexican context, perpetuated by U.S. and Mexican hegemonic discourses through such figures as Marilyn Monroe and *la rubia superior*, respectively.

In addition to her bodily acts, Bustamante utilizes language to reveal the constructed nature of *mexicanidad*. Although she does not communicate verbally throughout the performance, Bustamante – Maybelline's manipulation of language can be seen through the songs that she chooses to play on her record player. If beauty is a prerequisite to love, as implied through the lyrics in the songs that play in the background, then it follows that by deconstructing notions of beauty, the artist by extension also calls into question the foundations of love, and the role of women in heterosexual relationships.

Showing that her efforts to be beautiful entail a painful, even dangerous process, Maybelline's final act is to assert her own individuality as she gives up the efforts to conform to societal norms, while getting her audience to obey her demands for applause, and thus subverting the performer- spectator relationship. Gutierrez views Bustamante's piece as an "intervention" as the character Maybelline works to "unsettle the comfortability between the object and the spectator" (143). Utilizing the realm of performance art and the multiple disciplines that foreground it, Bustamante is free to assert her reworked definition of *mexicanidad*.

The works of Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante reveal the possibilities for the realm of performance art to be used as a tool to respond to the dominant discourses of race, class, and gender that marginalize Latinas and other women of color. Their works are an important contribution to the study of U.S. Latino/as because they represent the ways in which marginalized subjects can respond to their positions in society, transforming the stage into a space of opposition and an assertion of reworked definitions of what it means to be Latino/a. An important question to ask is, why should we add new meanings to the definitions of Latinidad? The reworked meanings of *cubanidad*, *dominicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*, as expressed by the artists, underscore an element that is missing in traditional conceptions: that of individuality. The reworked definitions established by these artists are not intended to set new standards by which future Cuban-, Dominican, or Mexican-American performers should be measured. On the contrary, the act of reworking Latinidad, as the artists exemplify, opens up a space of possibilities for conceiving of a multitude of ways of expressing one's identity, particularly for marginalized subjects in the U.S. The reworking of Latinidad, seen through the lens of performance art, allows for a "queering" of Cuban-American history, it allows for the use of "Dominicanyork" in place of the label "Latino/a", and it provides an arena in which artists like Troyano, Báez, and Bustamante can be mentioned in the same conversation. Although the content of their works differ drastically, I find similar strategies employed by the artists as they manipulate language and use their bodies to achieve similar goals in the reconstruction of their identities.

By incorporating a feminist queer element into expressions of her Cuban-American identity (reminiscent of the approach taken by Gloria Anzaldúa), Troyano permits an acknowledgement of aspects of her identity that would otherwise be marginalized. Báez, by

celebrating her African heritage and embracing Tibetan rituals, allows for an understanding of *dominicanidad* that strips away the monolithic images entailed in U.S. and Dominican elitist definitions. Bustamante, in turn, shows the futility of conforming to societal norms and thus presents *mexicanidad* as a subjective experience. The artists, through their performances, deconstruct the meanings embodied in Latinidad by celebrating the various ways in which they deviate from this all-encompassing term. Instead of adhering to the repackaged image of Latinas, then, the artists essentially un-pack the very elements that threaten to mask their individuality.

My dissertation provides several avenues for future areas of research. Future studies on U.S. Latino/a performance art may draw upon the works of other artists from Puerto Rico or from Central American migrant communities, to cite just a few examples of areas that have been underrepresented by the research. I also find Báez's Performance Autology to be particularly interesting, and future studies may explore the applications of Báez's methodology in the works of younger artists who attend her workshops and who are inspired by her artistic creations. Lastly, more scholarly productions can acknowledge the contributions of U.S. Latino/as in performance art as well as in other areas such as comedy, slam poetry, and virtual arenas (i.e. blogs, websites). In this moment, my dissertation serves as an important step towards advancing the field of both U.S. Latino/a studies as well as that of performance studies as they continue to be used as tools to contest oppressive dominant discourses of race, class, and gender.

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