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Transindigenous Materialities:
Gender, Indigeneity, and Objects
in Mexicana and Chicana Performance

A dissertation in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in Theater and Performance Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Transindigenous Affinities:
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in Mexicana and Chicana Performance

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

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Professor Sean Aaron Metzger, Chair

This dissertation addresses issues of gender and indigeneity through an analysis of ceremonial and quotidian objects used within contemporary Mexicana and Chicana performances. Performances by women residing on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border—specifically works by artists Jesusa Rodríguez, Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (FOMMA), Cherríe Moraga, and Paulina Sahagun— draw on embodied forms of knowledge to resignify myths, record testimonies, construct forms of female solidarity, and demonstrate lateral connections among oppressed populations. This project posits the concept of transindigenous materialities as the shared though distinct ways that Mexicana and Chicana performances tactically use material items, which have indigenous markers, in ways that strengthen female agency. In contrast to other work that focuses on objects in more static environments like museums or archives, this project centers on the study of objects used in performance since a reading of objects as

stationary risks relegating indigenous cultures to the past and European cultures to the present. This dissertation focuses on performances that rely on objects to stage dynamic relationships between objects and subjects.

The dissertation of Yvette Martínez-Vu is approved.

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2016

*Para mi mamá Rosaura, mi pareja Joshua, mi hijo Emiliano, mi familia,
y todos mis antepasados*

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Introduction

When I was about six years old my father gifted me a gold bracelet with the Virgen de Gualalupe's image imprinted on it. I wore it everyday and considered it my lucky charm. I felt protected whenever I wore this piece of jewelry. Something about feeling the bracelet caress my skin every day reminded me that I was not alone. The Virgen is a prominent cultural icon for both Mexicana/os and Chicana/os alike. She is considered the patron saint of Mexico as well as the patroness of the Americas, with indigenous features (dark hair, eyes, and skin complexion) but associated with Catholic symbolism. As a child, I remember my father telling me that the Virgen would take care of me, watch over me. Then one day, while I was playing with some girls and boys outside of the swap meet where my parents worked, I realized that I had lost the bracelet. My father was furious, and I was just as upset. My lucky charm was gone, and I had disappointed my *'apá*. A few frantic minutes later, he found the bracelet on the floor outside of the front entrance of the swap meet. He had it resized, so that it would not break off again; I have kept it ever since. This bracelet, despite its size and fragility, made me feel safe, the way a security blanket does to my two-year old son.

After my father passed away, this Virgen bracelet took on stronger sociocultural meanings. On the one hand, I associated it with my father's absence. In nuclear families the father is typically portrayed as the one providing financial and physical security; in his absence, all that was left to take care of me was this object. I also associated the bracelet with my Mexican family's Catholic religion. Whenever anything traumatic happened to our family, we would pray to the Virgen. Whenever I was forced to attend mass at the Santa Rosa Catholic Church, I would identify most with the image of this brown feminine Virgen standing on the right side above a

small altar rather than the image of the white masculinist and “sexy” Jesus hanging above the main altar. This bracelet was an object that sustained a form of cultural patrimony, because my father chose to pass it down to me, rather than my brothers. This gold bracelet also reminded me of my working-class roots. Growing up with a single mother working full-time to provide for six children, we had few items that were considered monetarily valuable. I did not own much jewelry, let alone anything made of gold. Wearing this bracelet reminded me of how much labor my parents had to provide for my dad to afford this gift.

My father dying was but one of several other male figures and family members who have passed. In their absence, the women in my life have been forced to make do without a partner. Suddenly, it was the women providing the physical and emotional labor in our families. This bracelet, then represents both what is materially there (a gold object of adornment) and also what has been lost (my father who gifted me this object), as well as the strengthening of women’s agency produced by that loss. I consider this bracelet a vehicle for the production or enhancement of women’s agency that is created in the absence of male figures. Further, I regard this bracelet as a transindigenous material because, even though in my youth I did not specifically understand the indigenous implications behind the story of the Virgen de Guadalupe, her female gender and indigenous features (dark hair, brown skin) allowed me to identify with her and use the bracelet with her emblem on it as a source of empowerment. I would wear it, and its contact with my skin reminded me that I was not alone and this then motivated me to take action.

The main question that remains to be answered in telling this story is, why does it matter? Why think about issues of women’s agency in relation to transindigenous materials? How has this story been influential to my dissertation project on contemporary Mexicana and Chicana

performance? I argue that through the use of transindigenous materials, working-class Mexicanas and Chicanas are able to connect with one another culturally and politically as well as form communities of empowerment. More specifically, in post-1990s performances, Mexicanas and Chicanas share the use of certain culturally-specific objects in order to gain or strengthen some form of agency in their lives. Mexicanas and Chicanas also, in the process of using these objects, produce and transmit a kind of indigenous and queer knowledge not just for themselves but for their audiences as well. This memory from my childhood where a bracelet helped to empower me provided the connection between my positionality as a working-class Chicana academic, my research, and the intended audience for this project.

My dissertation, “Transindigenous Materialities: Gender, Indigeneity, and Objects in Mexicana and Chicana Performance,” investigates performances that utilize objects, including theatrical backdrops, masks, costumes, and props, as a means of empowerment for working-class women in the U.S. and Mexico. In my performance analysis, when I say transindigenous materialities, I am positing this as a term that refers to the shared though distinct ways that Mexicana and Chicana performances tactically use material items, which have indigenous markers, in ways that strengthen female agency. I borrow the word “transindigenous” from Chadwick Allen’s *Trans-indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*. Allen’s work adds nuance to comparative indigenous studies by introducing the term “trans-Indigenous” as a kind of study that does not aim to displace the work on specific traditions and instead, aims to complement this research by positioning it from a global framework and in this case, across multiple countries. Rather than focusing on global indigenous studies, however, my use of the term transindigenous is positioned from a national as well as transnational lens, looking at the relationship between two countries. To clarify, when I use the term “nationalism,” I am referring

to ideologies and movements stemming from one particular country and when I use “transnationalism” I am calling attention to the interconnectivity between ideologies and movements from more than one country that share a border (e.g. U.S. and Mexico). The prefix “trans,” in addition to citing transnationalism, denotes an act of crossing, while the word “indigenous” often indicates a kind of rootedness. With the latter word, I focus more on the indigenous epistemologies that the performers cite in their work, and while the particular epistemologies might differ, the performances all prioritize forms of knowledge production and transmission that comes from indigenous cultural frameworks. To clarify, when I speak or refer to indigenous epistemologies represented in each performance, I do not mean to essentialize the complexity of indigenous peoples and cultures in the Americas or around the globe. Instead, I stress “indigenous epistemologies” to distinguish this phrase as a complex set of ways of experiencing knowledge from a perspective that accounts for issues of race, gender, colonialism, and imperialism.

While my research provides a comparative analysis of performances in the U.S. and Mexico, my aim is not to provide a global analysis of indigenous cultures. Instead, I am interested in providing a Chicana-centered analysis of Mexicana and Chicana performances. This Chicana-centered methodology is similar to Alice Te Punga Somerville’s Maori-centered approach to indigenous studies; she states:

It is worth being very clear about this: comparative work does not (and indeed, given the attention Indigenous Studies pays to specific land and specific place, it must not) insist that a ‘fair’ comparison needs to focus on the objects of comparison in exactly the same ways or to the same degree. When comparative methodologies insist that engagement must be ‘equal’ they privilege the idea of an

objective view in which the scholar's job is to step back and survey things from afar. My comparative work with Indigenous texts from a number of contexts is conducted by myself as a Maori scholar (and indeed conducted here on Maori land) and this both guides and underpins my comparisons. So I am doing Maori-centered comparative work" (Alice Te Punga Somerville quoted in Allen xviii-xix).

Like Somerville, whose work is informed by her positionality as a Maori scholar, the way I analyze the Mexicana, Chicana, and indigenous performances in my dissertation is also informed by my positionality as a Chicana feminist scholar. The methodology I use is what Alicia Gaspar de Alba calls an "activist methodology," which requires that a scholar reveal particularities about their identity and acknowledge how these particularities determine how they interpret their objects of study. Gaspar de Alba mentions that to work on a methodology means to presuppose a material experience that occurs with our bodies as well as the bodies of those we choose to study. She goes on to say that our "methodology, or what we do and how we see academically, is filtered through the diverse particulars of our ethnicity, which include history, culture, language and place" (3-4). Like Gaspar de Alba, my academic work is also meant to raise awareness and provide a voice for certain oppressed communities. Gaspar de Alba also mentions that she sees herself represented in the women that she writes about given that they are all a "rebel with a cause" (5). In my case, as a Chicana scholar raised by an immigrant Mexican mother, I also see myself in the women that I study. Just as they use objects in their everyday life and use theatrical performances as a means of empowerment, I too rely on objects like my gold bracelet to seek a feeling of security and comfort. Not only does my training in Chicana/o studies affect my object

analysis, but so too my personal and professional investment in feminism manifests itself in my writing.

My dissertation does not simply borrow the term “trans-Indigenous” but instead, introduces the phrase “transindigenous materialities” to bring together intersectional issues of race and gender derived from Mexicana and Chicana performance, with a discourse on materiality. Materiality as a term is useful for this project because not only does it refer to the material contact between the performers and the physical objects they use on stage, but the word also implies that the work performers do and the materials that they need to perform their work matters. When I use the term materiality, I am calling attention to both the objects used on stage and the labor involved in producing and using those objects. In other words, one can uncover personal, political, and social meanings of theatrical productions by studying them in the context of the objects used and the labor involved in using objects. As a scholar in performance studies, I have observed the ways that materiality is a strong component of Mexicana and Chicana cultural production. Not only is it necessary to study the gendered and racialized identities that inform the political performance work of Mexicanas and Chicanas but also to provide an in depth understanding of the ways that materiality is involved in those social, cultural, and political formations. I have observed how most of these performances are contingent on certain props or costumes, like masks. The actresses do not perform alone and instead are in the company of other actresses as well as these props or costumes. My dissertation aims to shift the focus away from bodies and texts towards the objects used on stage, in order to better understand the representation of Mexican, Chicana/o and indigenous cultures in each performance.

Defining Mexicanas, Chicanas, Latinas, and Indigenous Women in the Americas

My dissertation on contemporary Mexicana and Chicana performance requires that I define what I mean when I say Mexicana, Chicana, Latina, and indigenous. What do these terms mean? What is contemporary Mexicana performance? What is contemporary Chicana performance? In what ways can this comparative project provide a nuanced discussion of both identities and types of performances? In my work, the term “Mexicana” refers to a female-identified native or inhabitant of Mexico (“Mexican” def. 1a). I intentionally use the term “Mexicana” rather than the gender neutral term “Mexican.” Just as with the Spanish language, where the term “Mexican” (Mexicana/Mexicano) is gendered feminine or masculine, demanding the gendering of an object with each affirmation, my project seeks to make a similar distinction by stating that my research is focused solely on Mexican women performers. I also use this term to emphasize the Spanish-language’s influence on my project. Even though I write in English, much of the writing and research I did was in Spanish and the language used by all performers code-switched between English and Spanish. Finally, I use the term Mexicana to point out the feminist undertones of my project.

Unlike Mexican, which is a term tied to the Mexican nation and culture, the term Chicana/o references more than one national and cultural affiliation. When I use the term Chicana/o, I am referring to a particular politicized identity among individuals of Mexican-descent in the U.S. Or as Irma Mayorga points out, there is a process of becoming Chicana/o that occurs if and when Mexican-descended individuals:

begin to link their minoritarian status as U.S. citizens to a history of systematic oppressions.... Therefore, the category Chicana/o does not denote an ontological sense of being that relies on essentialist notions of race, but rather it describes the

politicized subjectivities and culturally-based ideology of Mexican American subjects.” (5)

I should mention that not all Mexican-descended individuals identify as Chicana/os. Some individuals identify as Hispanic, Latina/o, or Mexican. Whenever I use the term “Hispanic,” I refer to individuals who identify with a Spanish ancestry and/or who share a connection to Spain. When I use the term “Latina/o” I refer to individuals who identify with ancestry from the broader geographic location of Latin America as well as individuals who acknowledge a shared colonial history. Both terms overlap in that they stem from similar colonial relationships and histories of European imperialism. Whenever I refer to a “Chicana” in my project, I am referring to women of Mexican-descent who self-identify as such and share this politicized view of themselves.

My dissertation focuses on Mexicanas, Chicanas, Latinas, and indigenous women. I use the phrase “indigenous women” as an umbrella term despite the differences amongst the individuals that I study who identify as indigenous or work within an indigenous cultural framework in some way. Chapter One looks at the theatrical performances of Maya-identified women who are native to the southern region of Mexico. Chapter Three, however, investigates Chicanas in the U.S. (or Xicanas, using the Nahuatl spelling for the “ch” sound) who also self-identify as indigenous and perform works that seek to reclaim their indigenous ancestry. For the purposes of distinction, I use the terms Mexicana and Chicana with more frequency than Latina and indigenous women. I also use the term indigenous interchangeably when referring to more than one indigenous culture and then I specify the particularities of indigenous cultures within the analysis in each chapter. I make distinctions between terminologies to show the heterogeneity among the performers I analyze. I also make these terminological distinctions to show that individuals identify themselves differently according to the spaces they enter. How each

performer identifies herself in each performance indicates to the audience a particular political stance about how they view themselves in relation to others around them.

Contextualizing Mexicana and Chicana Feminisms in a Post-NAFTA World

My dissertation investigates post-1990s Mexicana and Chicana performances, particularly in light of NAFTA, which was a formative moment for indigenous populations in the Western Hemisphere. In this section I detail flashpoints in the 1990s that influenced the Mexicana and Chicana performances I analyze. I distinguish key political events by location, setting aside events occurring in the U.S. and in Mexico and then discussing how they have affected the feminist movements in each country. Through opening trade in North America and ending tariffs on goods and services, NAFTA shifted economies towards a global market and also opened the possibility for greater exploitation of Mexico's economy by the U.S. NAFTA reflects a shift towards globalization or "the late-twentieth century condition of economic, social and political interdependence across cultures, societies, nations and regions precipitated by an unprecedented expansion of capitalism on a global scale" (Lowe 31). The uneven circulation of global capital destabilizes state and national borders, thus affecting how subjects like indigenous women, inhabit spaces. Following NAFTA, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation; EZLN)—a radically democratic group aiming to promote the needs of poor and indigenous populations—initiated uprisings against neoliberal policies that strip their control of local resources and land. For indigenous women like the members of Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (Maya Women's Strength; FOMMA)— an all-woman indigenous organization and theater troupe located in the city of San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico— agreements like NAFTA further marginalize them by continuing to deplete

their resources and worsen their socioeconomic conditions. Paradoxically, in FOMMA's case, the shift towards globalization also opened up access to funds from private foundations in the U.S. FOMMA, as well as other performance groups in Mexico, have received funding from U.S. based foundations to produce theater in local and international venues.

This dissertation aims to give voice to the experiences of women in Mexico and the U.S. by analyzing performances in which Chicanas, Mexicanas, and indigenous women portray themselves in ways that are empowering to them. In Mexico, for instance, accurate and multidimensional representations of women in media are not a common occurrence, particularly in fictional genres like telenovelas. The representation of women in news media and nonfiction also often highlights moments of gendered violence. For example, in the 1990s a series of feminicides occurred in northern Mexico. Beginning in May 1993, more than five hundred women and girls were murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. A substantial amount of women murdered were perceived to be indigenous. As Alicia Gaspar de Alba mentions, not only have there been hundreds of murders but little is known about these women. Gaspar de Alba claims that “[a]t least three hundred women and girls were killed in Ciudad Juarez between 1994 and 2000” (“Introduction” 25). Most of those murdered were “Mexican, impoverished . . . young [a]nd all of them are female . . .” (3). These acts of femicide—“the killing of women qua women” (1)—and their perpetual silencing remind us that despite the visible presence of Mexicana and indigenous performances, such as the ones I analyze, the targeted violence against female, especially indigenous, bodies has not ended. The Juarez murders have since sparked a series of global movements taking a stand against femicide. Among these global movements include the “Ni una más” (Not One More) feminist activist group and campaign in Chiapas, Mexico. While my dissertation does not study the Juarez murders or the activism that has

followed, this project does aim to call attention to women's issues in performances where women are representing themselves because of the context of this renewed violence.

This dissertation shifts between using the phrases "Mexicana feminism" and "Chicana feminism" to distinguish between the context of each movement and the social justice issues that influence them. Admittedly, both Mexicanas and Chicanas remain prone to physical and discursive forms of violence, however, the way that these forms of violence manifest themselves is different. For Chicanas, they have suffered from discursive forms of violence given the ways that they have been oppressed both within and outside their culture. For instance, Chicana/o theater has played a larger role in the formation of the Chicana/o civil rights movement but since Chicana/o theater in the 1960s was male-dominated, women were often marginalized with limited leadership and acting roles. The patriarchal structure within Chicana/o theater and literature sparked the emergence of Chicana feminist literature. By the 1990s, Chicana feminism was on the rise and became a definitive and identifiable school of thought. As Ana Castillo points out:

By the beginning of the new decade, however, many Chicana/Latina activists, disenchanted, if not simply worn down, by male-dominated Chicano/Latino politics, began to develop our own theories of oppression. Compounding our social dilemmas related to class and race were gender and sexuality. For the brown woman the term feminism was and continues to be inseparably linked with white women of middle- and upper-class background. (This is also the case, by and large, in México.) Feminism, therefore, is perhaps not a term embraced by most women who might be inclined to define themselves as Chicanas and who, in practice, have goals and beliefs found in feminist politics." (10)

Since the 1990s, Chicana feminists have provided critical work that accounts for the intersections of Latina/o Chicana/o and queer identities (Burgett and Hendler). Due to the intersectional implications of using the stand-alone term feminism, this dissertation will intentionally use “Chicana feminism” and “Mexican feminism” in chapters where those movements affected the performances I analyze. This project will also refer to Chicana feminists and Mexican feminists in cases where performers explicitly identify themselves in that way.

This dissertation identifies the shared history of oppression and displacement by women on each side of the U.S.-Mexico border. This project, however, does not intend to conflate Chicana and Mexicana performances because the topics and issues that are addressed in their plays are distinct. For instance, in the 1990s Chicana plays had central characters who freely expressed their goals and desires, even at the expense of losing kinship or collegial ties. Chicana theater in the 1990s was shifting the focus from a male-centered Chicano perspective, to a more gender-inclusive portrayal of Latina/os and Chicano/as in the U.S. Some of these plays include: Beverly Sánchez-Padilla’s *La Guadalupe que camina* (The Walking Guadalupe; 1990), Josefina López’s *Real Women Have Curves* (1991), Cherríe Moraga’s *Heroes and Saints* (1992), and Evelina Fernández’s *Luminarias* (Illuminations; 1996) (Huerta, “Overview of Chicana/o Theatre” 218-25).¹ These plays share a concern for documenting and recounting stories that focus on the Chicana/Latina experience in U.S. workplaces— whether that be the Catholic Church, a sewing factory, the fields of California’s Central Valley, or a professional office setting. Additionally, other Chicana writers, including essayist Gloria Anzaldúa and fiction

¹ The dates provided for plays or performances refer to the premiere productions, not publication dates. While several anthologies were also present at the time, I choose to emphasize works that were performed in the 1990s.

² For example, Sue-Ellen Case’s article “Seduced and Abandoned: Chicanas and Lesbians in Representation” (1994) investigates Estela Portillo’s *The Day of the Swallows*, Cherríe Moraga’s *Giving up the Ghost*, and her own experience and construction of her “lesbian” identity in order to locate the cross-over dynamic of the displaced (lesbians and Chicanas). In this article, Case argues that identity

writer Sandra Cisneros were highly influenced by indigeneity but also incorporated issues of gender and sexuality. Scholarship on Chicana/o cultural productions started to take note of this feminist development.²

This transnational study of Mexicana and Chicana performance is useful for identifying not only the shared experiences but also the productive differences between the Mexicana and Chicana feminist struggles. Mexicanas, Chicanas, Latinas, and indigenous women continue to be oppressed not just through shared forms of gender discrimination but also through forms of discrimination depending on their race, class, and/or sexuality. My project aims to bring these performances together through a shared use of objects that strengthen female agency.

The Value of Transindigenous Materialities

A focus on transindigenous materialities links Mexicana and Chicana performance to the broader fields of comparative indigenous studies, gender studies, Chicana/o studies, object studies, and performance studies given that these fields are interdisciplinary. Comparative indigenous studies can benefit from this study because the performances analyzed incorporate not just indigenous peoples (e.g. the Maya women of Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya) but also mestiza/os who are indigenous identified (e.g. Chicana writer, Cherríe Moraga), Latina/os who are working through syncretic practices (e.g. practitioners in botánicas), and performers who are not indigenous per se but perform in the service of indigenous rights (e.g. Mexican artist, Jesusa Rodríguez). This dissertation is also in dialogue with Native American studies (also known as

² For example, Sue-Ellen Case's article "Seduced and Abandoned: Chicanas and Lesbians in Representation" (1994) investigates Estela Portillo's *The Day of the Swallows*, Cherríe Moraga's *Giving up the Ghost*, and her own experience and construction of her "lesbian" identity in order to locate the cross-over dynamic of the displaced (lesbians and Chicanas). In this article, Case argues that identity politics construct inclusionary/exclusionary practices and boundaries—in the process of gaining one identity one must displace another (91). Nevertheless, Case reminds us about the potential to form critical coalitions as a means for Chicanas and Anglo lesbians to abandon their centered subject positions (91).

American Indian studies), an interdisciplinary field that looks at questions of identity in relation to the history, culture, and politics of indigenous people in the Americas. Like the material in the anthology *Comparative Indigeneities of the Américas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach*, my work not only addresses the differences between indigenous and mestiza/o-identified individuals but also locates the shared colonial histories and experiences of displacement between them. Chapter Three, for instance, focuses more on the *mestizaje* of the Chicana performers and their sense of displacement in the U.S. and Mexico. In this chapter, I have to provide nuanced definitions of what indigeneity means for Mexicana/os and Chicana/os, particularly with the political ideology of *indigenismo*, which in the U.S. manifested itself as a movement that promoted a reclaiming of indigenous ancestry. For instance, in Mexico, *mestizaje* “was central to modernist ideologies of nation building and the consolidation of ethnic and religious identities within a sovereign state, specifically the years following the Mexican Revolution” (Díaz-Sánchez 35). In the U.S., however, and within ideologies of Chicana/o nationalism, *mestizaje* was associated with self-determination and empowerment. Similarly, in Mexico *indigenismo* refers to Mexican state policies aiming to reclaim an indigenous ancestry in the service of a nationalist project. These Mexican policies, however, did not recognize existing indigenous peoples and only further marginalized them by failing to add a platform to address indigenous concerns (A. Taylor 111). In the U.S., Chicana/os immersed in the Chicana/o movement, most of whom were mestiza/os, appropriated *indigenismo* to reclaim the indigenous part of their ancestry but rather than serve a U.S.-based nationalist project, they used *indigenismo* to fortify the nationalism promoted in the Chicana/o movement. My project accounts for the differences in the interpretation of the terms “*mestizaje*” and “*indigenismo*” in Mexico and the U.S. to highlight

the convergences and divergences among the experiences of working-class indigenous people, Mexicanas, and Chicanas.

Gender studies can benefit from this project because it identifies the ways that issues of indigeneity are inextricably linked to issues of gender. This project also points out the ways that issues of gender and indigeneity must be positioned within their respective contexts, particularly within their respective U.S. and Mexican feminist movements. In Chapters Two and Three, I provide an account of the ways that feminism differs in Mexico and the U.S., as well as how the feminist movements account for issues affecting indigenous women. In the U.S., for instance, the second-wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” may be relevant to Chicanas but is not relevant in Mexico and is problematic for Mexican feminists since it permits women to avoid broader politics pertaining to the public arena (Lamas 4). Mexican feminist scholars like Marta Lamas remind us that within Mexican feminism, democracy is an urgent concern because women also want to be involved in issues pertaining to “class, ethnicity, health, employment, and religion, as well as those specifically women’s issues such as abortion, inequality, and male supremacy” (4). As Chapters Two and Three demonstrate, my dissertation offers a transnational and feminist perspective to indigenous studies and provides new inflections to the field of gender studies by providing a comparative approach inclusive of the experiences of Mexicanas, Chicana, and indigenous women.

Chicana/o Studies can also benefit from this project because my work moves in a transnational direction to locate correlations between Mexican and Chicana/o performance. Admittedly, I am not the first scholar to provide such a comparative approach. My work expands the current scholarship that finds correlations between the treatment of women in Chicana/o

theater as well as Mexican theater.³ I also add to existing scholarship on Latina bodies in performance by analyzing the gestures an actress will make when using particular objects.⁴ My dissertation also expands on scholarship⁵ that analyzes visual representations of Mexicanas and Chicanas that expose their “shared history of exclusion and subordination within the cultural and political practices of various patriarchal nationalisms” (Fregoso xv). Finally, my dissertation can also be considered part of the scholarship⁶ that analyzes counterdiscourse to popular media

³ See Yolanda Broyles-González’s *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*, which provides a more expansive study of El Teatro Campesino (ETC) tracing its popular performance traditions from Mexico, its indigenous influences, and the role that women played in this theater. Broyles-González positions ETC within traditions of orality and part of a broader performance context inclusive of working-class Mexican oral traditions, popular performance traditions, and the Chicana/o Rasquache Aesthetic. Despite the fact that ETC drew inspiration from and were inclusive of their indigenous ancestors, the group was not as welcoming of women. Broyles-González mentions that the roles of women in El Teatro Campesino were reduced to two categories, a good or a bad woman and with the exception of one play, *La Virgen de Tepeyac*, ETC’s plays had mostly male-leads with males as the focus of the stories (135-6). Women in the group were often patronized and also dealt with resistance outside of the group due to the cultural association of women in theater as a loose woman and a *mujer de la calle* (woman of the street) (147).

⁴ In “Bodily Inscriptions: Representations of the Female Body as Cultural Critique in U.S. Latina Drama” Tiffany A. López provides an example of how to conduct an interdisciplinary study of Latina bodies in U.S.-based theatrical performances. She studies Latina dramatists like Maria Irene Fornes, Cherríe Moraga, and Migdalia Cruz, the theatrical traditions and political debates that inform their work, and provides close readings of their plays. In each play López focuses on the visual representations of the female body and how they reference a common theme of sexual violence. López’s work is useful for this project given that she too focuses on the theatrical performances by Latinas and Chicanas, however she looks at performances from the 1980s whereas I am focusing on the period of Chicana and Mexicana theater after the 1990s. Her work is transcultural (shifting from Puerto-Rican, to U.S. Cuban, and to Chicana/o theater) whereas mine is more transnational (shifting from U.S.-born Chicanas to Mexicanas, who are separated by a national border). Nevertheless, López focuses on performance and the emphasis on the “real bodies [that] will perform the text before a public audience” (24) and likewise, I too focus on the bodies of the actresses as well as the objects that they use during their performances.

⁵ In her book, *meXicana encounters*, Fregoso brings together a study of Mexicanas and Chicanas by using the term “meXicana” (pronounced me-chi-cana) to refer to the “amalgamation between Mexicana and Chicana” and the “contact zones and exchanges among various communities on the Mexico-U.S. border” (xiv). Fregoso reminds readers that while legal distinctions are made between Mexicanas as immigrants in the U.S. and Chicanas as native to the U.S., in actuality, those distinctions are blurry (xiv). Several Mexican inhabitants in the U.S. are native to the region, while some individuals may have been born in another country but still identify as Chicana/os.

⁶ Laura G. Gutierrez is another scholar who has conducted a transnational study of Mexicana and Chicana performance artists. Gutierrez’s focus is on representations of so-called deviant sexualities by cabaret performance artists like Astrid Hadad, Liliana Felipe, and Jesusa Rodríguez. She finds that these artists mediate forms of intimacy in a public mode as a way to provide a counterdiscourse to mass-media representations of female and queer sexuality (6-7). Gutierrez makes a comment that there is an

representations of Mexicanas and Chicanas. I position my work as distinct from Chicana/o studies projects that have come before me because I move my analysis in a direction that accounts for the ways that objects are used in performance to develop empowering representations of Mexicanas, Chicanas, and indigenous women.

My dissertation also provides new inflections to an emerging field called object studies that thinks about the ways in which objects produce meaning. Object studies is critical for my dissertation because objects are often manifested as a cultural product and they attain meaning based on their relation with the individuals that preserve and conserve them. Objects also travel or circulate in ways that people often cannot. Additionally, the life of objects can be prolonged long-term—longer than a human life span. In studying objects in performance, I am not attempting to silence the indigenous women, Mexicanas and Chicanas who create or use these objects. Instead, I am interested in strengthening what performers orally express in their performance through the ways that their narrative intersects with the objects they use on stage. Object studies is part of the broader field of material culture studies, which looks at how material objects can help one understand societies and cultures, which produce or use those objects. I specifically reenergize both the study of objects on stage and objects used in everyday practice by looking at how just as people are racialized and gendered, objects take on those associations as well. For example, in Chapter Two the object of study is a costume of the Aztec deity, Coatlicue. Mexican artist, Jesusa Rodríguez, dons this costume while making a critique against the use of genetically modified seeds as well as the neoliberal policies that promote them. The

interconnectedness between sexuality, sexual permissiveness, and neoliberalism in all the performances she analyzes. In other words, public discourses on sexuality affect and are affected by “the political, economic, and social shifts of the last twenty years or so in the national context of Mexico and Mexican diaspora in the United States” (7). These cabaret artists use the topic of sex and sexuality, which is considered private, as a way to enter and critique discourses that are considered public, particularly transnational politics (12). Gutierrez provides an example of a comparative study that is informed by both cultural studies and performance studies.

figure of Coatlicue is associated with notions of indigeneity, femininity, m(other)hood and transgression. In using a costume to make such a critique, I claim that Rodríguez provides a more nuanced commentary that accounts for the ways that these GM crops and policies affect indigenous populations in Mexico. Studying objects in performance is important because they reveal the gradations in the ways that race and gender are represented on stage. Studying objects in performance is also important given that it makes visible the ever-changing meaning and slippage in all objects. Being aware of semiotic and phenomenological differences in the ways we understand objects in our surroundings helps scholars become more sensitive to issues of race and gender.

This dissertation also offers an intervention for performance studies because it applies concepts from the field—such as embodiment, staging, and contact—to objects, rather than subjects. Applying performance studies concepts to objects can help one understand the ways that performers, in my case Mexicana and Chicana performers, produce spaces of belonging through the dynamic use of objects which come from a shared cultural framework. Performance studies incorporates the concept of performance as both a subject and method of study with the premise that performance is a central aspect of social and cultural life, and is present in theatre, dance, ritual, and ceremony. Chapter Four provides an example of a study that uses a performance studies lens to analyze glass candles and the culturally specific practices surrounding their purchase in U.S. botánicas (religious retail stores). This chapter demonstrates how glass candles provide a means for Latina immigrant women to continue their practices of spirituality and healing and in doing so they resignify these candles to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. By focusing on the performative and dynamic quality of objects, one can

uncover their empowering potential. Objects, when they are involved in acts of cultural performance, can help individuals navigate their raced, classed, and gendered identities.

Hemispheric Performance Reimagined

This dissertation claims that a transnational study of objects in performance provides insights on how both Mexicanas and Chicanas make sense of their displacement(s) and oppression(s). In the performances I study one can find political incidents recurring throughout the 1990s manifesting themselves materially through an actress' engagement with an object. And since each actress has an intersectional identity, I analyze the ways that their position as working-class women of color affects the way one interprets their performance. To study intersectional issues, I draw heavily from particular theories of performance and through these theories I have developed a lens that enables me to study performance across media (e.g. play text, video, live performance). This section will review some of the performance studies theory that I am in conversation with as well as how I either revise or extend the scholarship in this field.

One of my approaches to studying women's performance is to analyze gender codes across my chapters. To do this, I consider the specific sociocultural conditions that the women must navigate in order to produce their theater performances. For instance, when investigating Maya performances in Mexico, I locate the differences between expectations of masculinity and femininity for men and women in the rural highland areas where the actresses are performing. I employ and extend Iris Marion Young's ideas⁷ about gender socialization and phenomenology

⁷ Young looks at forms of body comportment, which include mannerisms and gestures and their relation in space and how they get read as masculine or feminine (139). For instance, treating one's body space in an enclosed manner (e.g. legs closed together or arms across one's body) is something that can be considered a form of feminine spatiality (154). While Young's work does not specifically address issues

by looking at how object-use impacts an actress' access to gender codes. Specifically, I look at how a theater prop can enable women to perform masculine gender codes in a setting where the cultural expectation is that they behave in a feminine manner. I also draw heavily from Judith Butler's theorizations on gender performativity⁸ because I am concerned with looking at how the use of objects in particular communal spaces, including theaters, affect the performance of gender codes and enable women to access more than one gender code.

The performers I analyze are negotiating performing in a public sphere that is dominated not only by rigid and dichotomous gender expectations, but also by heteronormative expectations as well. Constructing communities and modes of attachment is no easy task for minoritarian individuals like working-class Mexicanas and Chicanas. In fact, the public sphere that Chicanas navigate in the U.S. remains dominated by straight, white, male, middle class, able-bodied individuals who reiterate and reproduce these lifestyles. In many ways the trajectory of my work is part of a broader dialogue around minoritarian performance informed by the work of late performance studies scholar, José Esteban Muñoz. In his oft-cited book *Disidentifications* (1999), Muñoz provides an example of the ways that minoritarian individuals negotiate a majoritarian

of race and how racialization affects mannerisms and gestures, she does account for the ways that patriarchal cultures affect the gendering of behavioral codes. She states that “[i]nsofar as we [women] learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified” (154). Young’s study demonstrates that women in many patriarchal societies live in their body as both object and subject given that they are socialized or regarded by others as body “rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention” (154). Instead of viewing women’s behavior as something that is natural or essential, she looks at the way that movements of bodies are made through space as a result of particular circumstances.

⁸ Judith Butler further clarifies the way I am looking at gendered, racialized, and classed codes through objects that facilitate performativity. Butler refers to performativity as the repetition and enactment of norms, which create an effect of uniformity; she defines performativity from a gendered perspective to claim that the seeming stability of gender is an effect produced by the division, hierarchization, and constraint of gender differences, which are then reified and normalized (20). Much like Young’s approach to gender codes, Butler looks at the repetition of acts by which norms, specifically gender norms, are constituted. In Young’s study the repetition of these gender norms are informed by patriarchal cultural expectations, while in Butler’s case they are informed by regulatory regimes of gender, which can include patriarchies (Butler 21).

public sphere through a process he calls “disidentification.” Muñoz defines disidentification as a survival strategy where minoritarian individuals, particularly queer people of color, neither opt to assimilate within a structure nor strictly oppose it (11). While his work is contextualized within the U.S., I extend his theory of disidentification outside of that scope to show that it can be applied to straight and queer Mexicanas and indigenous women as well, since they are also living in a patriarchal and heteronormative environment. I also extend Muñoz’s theory to show how actresses can disidentify with the particular places they perform in. For example, in Chapter One, I analyze a performance in which FOMMA performed in a theatre venue and instead of performing on an elevated stage, they performed on the ground level. Rather than following, and thus identifying with, the theatrical expectation of performing on a stage, they opted to set up their white backdrop on the ground floor. The space may have been built with the expectation for performers to use the stage area; however, the actual use of the space did not follow that expectation.⁹

Referring to performances in which women construct communities and modes of attachment through the ways they tactfully identify or disidentify with their environment requires an intimate relationship between the performers, the objects they use, and their audiences. Each of the performances I analyze occur in what you can consider a public place (e.g. theater or retail store); however, they are all also intimate places due to the interactions that the Mexicana and

⁹ When thinking about power dynamics on stage and the tension between minoritarian and majoritarian spheres, I also refer to the work of Michel de Certeau. While not directly involved in the discipline of performance studies, De Certeau’s theory of tactics is useful for studying the ways that minoritarian individuals gain agency in performance. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau sets up a distinction between a strategy and a tactic to demonstrate the *tactical* ways that a consumer can act within delimited circumstances. The tactic functions in contradistinction to a strategy, which is a “calculation of force-relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated” (36). This subject can be an enterprise, a city, or a scientific institution. Conversely, a tactic is a calculation determined by the absence of a power. Tactics maneuver the spaces that strategies produce. FOMMA choosing to use their white backdrop in doors instead of using the theater stage is an example of the ways they engage with tactics.

Chicana performers have with each other and the objects in their surroundings. Intimacy¹⁰, as Lauren Berlant defines it, is a key concept in this dissertation because I analyze objects that carry with them intimate memories of former cultural and religious practices. I look at objects that are surrogated¹¹ to invoke these memories in ways that are empowering for working class indigenous women, Mexicanas, and Chicanas. In Chapter Four I specifically link concepts of intimacy with surrogation by investigating how candles in botánicas are surrogated and in that process they summon a syncretic memory of Santería practices. Even though these candles degrade or lose value, the intimate memory and cultural meaning behind these candle practices continue to manifest themselves materially in other candles or material items. I both revise and extend Joseph Roach's theory of surrogation by showing that memories are not erased or forgotten in the process of surrogation and instead they reappear in different material forms. Instead of focusing on bodies that surrogate particular roles the way Roach does, I study surrogated objects—objects that become a material manifestation of the displacement of cultural practices that become resignified in practice.

Objects in the Repertoire: Beyond the Stage and Its Archives

¹⁰ Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “intimacy” to refer to modes of attachment as Lauren Berlant describes them. Intimacy, according to Berlant, is a mode of attachment that “makes persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces” (288). Intimacy requires the sharing of something, often a private story, with people and within spaces that are familiar and comforting (281). Intimacy also produces worlds and creates what Berlant calls “transpersonal identities” given that these modes of attachment people have with one another are public and occur in a wide range of locations such as domestic (e.g. a homes), state (e.g. state agencies), national (federal government offices), and international (e.g. airports) places.

¹¹ Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation in *Cities of the Dead* has been a central concept within the field of performance studies, as well as for my work. Surrogation, according to Roach, is the process where death or other forms of departure call for a substitution to fulfill the deficit (2). Surrogation brings together notions of memory, performance and substitution given that performances often carry with them the memory of what was once rejected, erased, or forgotten (5). The process of surrogation offers cultures a way of recreating and reproducing themselves (5).

Just as performance studies is an interdisciplinary field informed by a wide range of scholarship within and outside theater studies, so too, my dissertation is informed by conceptual formulations that go beyond Western theatrical conceptions of a stage and beyond forms of knowledge production stored and displayed in archival spaces. I should also point out that I use the term performance, instead of just relying on the term “theater” because my chapter analysis includes a wide range of actions. In other words, performance does not always refer to theatrical practices, and instead also refers to cultural practices such as ritual or ceremony. A dissertation on Mexicana and Chicana performance benefits from a conception of performance that is not always directly linked to a theater space since so many of the performers I study are coming from an indigenous cultural framework and privilege customs and traditions of everyday life.¹² This dissertation also benefits from analyzing material outside of archival spaces, because it allows other forms of knowledge production, such as orality and gestures, to have a voice.

Even though I analyze cultural practices, I am not trying to dismiss the importance of studying theater. I believe it is critical to continue to study theatrical performance because historically, theatre has played a large role in providing a type of education accessible to those who are illiterate. In the Chicana/o theater movement, for instance, theater groups like El Teatro Campesino used theater as a medium to educate Chicana/os about their history as well as about issues affecting the United Farm Workers (UFW). Similarly, in the post-revolutionary popular

¹² For instance, in his foundational work on Chicano theater, Jorge Huerta has uncovered the indigenous and Spanish influences of the Chicano Theater movement in the southwestern United States. He notes that before the Spanish Conquest in Mexico, indigenous codices survived destruction and now reveal that theater existed pre-Conquest in the form of “recital, song, dance, and music” (63). Specifically within the Maya cultures, ritual drama existed through play scripts like “Rabinal Achi” (63). The Spaniards also had staged theatrical performances and performances of classical poetry (64). After the Conquest, the Catholic Church used theatrical performances categorized as liturgical and religious drama to convert the indigenous people, the most famous being “Los Pastores” (65). Huerta’s scholarship links Chicano performance to Mexican performance practices. Even though these practices are often viewed separately, these performance practices inform each other.

theater movements in Mexico, theater was used to convey information about battlefields as well as deliver political critiques (Kennedy 849). Cultural performances are also important to analyze because so many of the Mexican and Chicana theater productions are strongly associated with customs and rituals of everyday life. In both theater and everyday acts, the term performance is useful as a critical lens through which scholars can study gendered, sexualized, and classed behaviors.

Most of the theatrical and cultural performances I address deal with objects of analysis that cannot be found in an archive and in some cases do not exist outside of live theater. For this reason, Diana Taylor's *Archive and the Repertoire* provides a theoretical distinction between the archive and the repertoire that is critical to my work. Even though my work can fall within object studies, I find that there are productive divergences between my work and the existing scholarship on objects, which comes from those that work directly on objects as either curators, art and design historians (Candlin and Guins 8). Conventional curatorial and art historical scholarship remains invested in the study of objects found in museums and/or archives. My work, on the other hand, prioritizes objects in performance and as a result includes gestural analysis. For instance, Chapter One focuses on the embodiment of gender and indigeneity in relation to a white backdrop. In this chapter I follow Diana Taylor's distinction between literary and corporeal forms of analysis. Corporeal analysis, as Taylor claims, can destabilize established canons that have historically overlooked the body (16-17). Taylor also asserts that European colonial powers during fifteenth and sixteenth centuries emphasized the primacy of writing (archive) over the body (repertoire) as a tool for the transference of knowledge to better control their colonies (16). Nonverbal practices are often delegitimized as sources of knowledge since they cannot be easily archived. Although archives aid in constructing histories and repressing

memories, Taylor notes that performance offers a way to access them. Following Taylor's insistence on prioritizing the corporeal, rather than archival knowledge, Chapter One looks at a non-diegetic object—a white backdrop that is not present or implied in the script—and its relationship with the actresses. Thus, rather than attributing this object to the archive, I insist on its affiliation with the repertoire as well. In other words, while within object studies, scholars study objects within their respective archives (Candlin and Guins 3), in my work I study objects within performance repertoires. Analyzing the ubiquity of this white backdrop in FOMMA's performances, I argue, reveals the spectatorship and technical modifications that have affected the way these women can access masculine and feminine gender codes. If I relied on studying objects solely in archives, I would be unable to uncover details of how objects can directly influence Maya performance.

Objects and Material Relations

One way in which I focus my analyses in this dissertation is through the medium of performance. Another way I focus my analysis further is by analyzing material relations and objects used in each performance. My chapters focus on performances that require one to think about matter in terms of material relations as well as objects in terms of how they deviate from having a stable sociocultural meaning. This dissertation looks at ways that material factors shape society and circumscribe human prospects (Coole and Frost 3).¹³ This project also looks at how

¹³ I align myself with the work of scholars like Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, who in the anthology, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, state that they are interested in changing conceptions of material causality and the significance of corporeality (2). Diana Coole goes into more detail on matter's dynamic qualities in her article, "The Inertia of Matter and the Generativity of Flesh." Coole challenges the Western idea of matter as devoid of agency and views matter as "lively materiality that is self-transformative" (93). To position herself within a framework of materialist studies, Coole provides an overview of scholarship on matter and materiality. She describes how Descartes viewed matter and space as inseparable. Matter, for him, was without interiority and antivitalist; instead, matter is empty and

materiality has implications for politics and agency because so much of the content within Mexicanas and Chicanas performance is about politics and agency, and looking at materiality and material relations gives us another lens through which to study these concepts. The concepts of haptic materiality¹⁴ and haptic visuality¹⁵ are also useful because they call to mind instances of encounter between objects, materiality, and/or performers. For example, like Giuliana Bruno and Sean A. Metzger, I aim to demonstrate that a study of objects and materiality matters because in rethinking these concepts as active and continually changing, not only will every part of an actor's body have a function but likewise every object and material fabric on the stage will also have a function. As a result, the materiality will shape the actresses bodies and get shaped by their bodies and thus, shape the entire mise-en-scene and feeling of the performance.

devoid of animistic or human spirit. Aristotle, on the other hand, differentiated between matter and form. He did not view matter as coextensive with nature because objects have an actuality while matter represents the potential of that actuality. Both Aristotle and Descartes relied on a definition of matter dependent on metaphysical, theological and teleological assumptions. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty claimed that “corporeality . . . introduces meaning or structure into matter” (101). Corporeality spatializes through a body's capacity to move and gesture. Coole references these theorists because she is interested in reconceptualizing their work on materiality but in a way that resists mechanistic or mystical assumptions of materiality. Instead, Coole theorizes materiality as internally productive and emergent. She argues that materiality is inclusive of folds, deferrals and reversals that make it productive and contingent on other things. While I do not explicitly cite the work of Coole and Frost in my chapters, all of them are informed by their work in some way.

¹⁴ Giuliana Bruno provides a sartorial theorization of materiality and finds that material surfaces activate material relations. In *Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality and Media*, Bruno defines a surface as the material configuration of the relationship between subjects and objects. A surface is a site of active exchange between subject and object, a space of transformation, and a space of experiencing public intimacy. Bruno's work is relevant for my dissertation since she goes beyond the study of images and visuality to study tangible and material relations. She is interested in a haptic materiality, in surfaces rather than images, and how the visual manifests itself materially. She notes that “the physicality of a thing one can touch does not vanish with the disappearance of its material but can morph culturally, transmuting into another medium” (7).

¹⁵ Another scholar whose work has influenced my own is Sean A. Metzger. Similar to Bruno's conception of haptic materiality, Metzger expands this notion to define what he calls a haptic visuality. In *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance Race*, Metzger argues that clothing can induce a haptic visuality, which refers to “a way of seeing that activates a sense of touch, kinesthesia, and proprioception. Spectatorship in this sense suggests a synesthetic operation—that is, one that can be defined as the transposition of sensory images or attributes from one modality into another” (19). Several of the performers I analyze in this dissertation produce a haptic visuality through the objects, props, or costumes they use onstage.

Just as materiality can affect and be affected by an actress' body and movement, likewise, objects can shape and be shaped by an actress' engagement with them. When I study objects, I also consider how that object has changed over time, depending on the location, use, and bodies it has been in contact with. I treat objects similar to Sara Ahmed, as dynamic matter that changes depending how a performer directs their attention to them.¹⁶ When analyzing objects, I also avoid the trap of assuming that objects have a stable sociocultural meaning. While objects may have discernible meanings or functions, that determinacy does not remain stable. Instead, as Bill Brown notes, there are ways that in encountering objects, humans project meaning onto them, which produces the illusion of a fixed sociocultural determinacy. If and when that meaning does not sustain itself due to unintelligibility, confusion or failure, the object is rendered as something else, or what Brown calls a "thing." This project applies scholarship from object studies to ask: what happens when objects are used in myriad ways? What happens when we trace the changes in function of a property across theatrical performances? What happens when objects are appropriated into another culture? And what happens when an object is placed in a different time period? How does this affect such terminological distinctions? One approach to answering this question is by addressing how an object's presence on stage also affects its terminological distinctions. For instance, in my work I distinguish between objects and props. While objects may carry with them sociocultural meanings, that meaning becomes a citation in theater, which

¹⁶ One example of how to study objects from a phenomenological perspective is Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed uses a phenomenological approach to study the gendering of certain bodies and objects. Ahmed argues that "gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another...[In other words, b]odies are shaped by the work they do" (59). Ahmed's study treats objects as tools and in relation to their labor. Objects, in their usefulness, posit a body for which the item was made (50). Alternately, objects shape the bodies with which they are in contact with (54). But in its intended function, an object can have an intended failure—not *doing* in the *right* way. Phenomenology has become a key way to look at performance because it breaks with the linguistic textual model and interpretive expressive model. Phenomenology gives you another way to think about bodies and objects in space.

means that when I study props, I must also account for the ways that an object's social, cultural, and ideological meanings will change when positioned on stage.

Chapter Summaries

Each chapter investigates post-1990s theatrical and cultural performances by Mexicanas and Chicanas. I study post-1990s Mexicana and Chicana performances for distinct reasons tied to particular political events—including the rise of Mexican femicide, neoliberal policies, and Chicana feminist writings—that affected Mexicanas, Chicanas, and indigenous women. I analyze how each actress engages with a transindigenous materiality (an object, thing, or prop) in ways that are empowering for them. The first two chapters are on performances occurring in Mexico and the latter two chapters are on performances in the U.S. I divide the chapters by location so that I can identify differences in experiences of race, gender, class and sexuality in each country. I also divide the chapters topically. For instance, the latter three chapters are, explicitly or implicitly, centered on notions of motherhood. I have chosen to group the chapters in a way that demonstrates a gradation in representations of motherhood, from performances that implicitly reference the topic to the last chapter that is explicitly on the work performed by my own mother. Finally, the last chapter includes an analysis of cultural performances to show how sociocultural dynamics among Mexicanas and Chicanas are manifested in non-theatrical spaces. The chapters bridge multiple locations, topics, and objects of study to demonstrate ways that women, particularly working-class women of color tactically use objects as a means of gaining some form of cultural or political agency.

My study begins with the chapter, “An Object of Resistance: Gender Performance in Mayan Mexican Theater,” which offers an analysis of FOMMA. I investigate how their use of a

white backdrop indexes shifting gender relations and changes in their theater's development. I compare their use of a backdrop in two "Buscando Nuevos Caminos" performances (2011) in Chiapas, one in FOMMA's theater venue and another in a local Chiapanecan community center, as a means of identifying differences between in-house and itinerant performances. I posit that the presence and varied use of this white backdrop enables performances of resistance to patriarchal gender codes through the play on those codes. Such play serves to undermine the social expectations of indigenous women to behave in a quiet, submissive, domestic and disclosed manner.

My second chapter, "Indigenous and Queer Archetypes: Coatlicue Representations in Jesusa Rodríguez's Political Performance" investigates the contemporary Mexican performances of Jesusa Rodríguez, beginning with her performance of *Cielo de abajo* in 1992 and comparing it with her performance of *Arquetipas* in 2004. This chapter analyzes performances by someone who is not indigenous per se, not from a cultural group that is specifically identified as indigenous, but uses her racial privilege to serve the queer, gendered, and indigenous communities in Mexico. The object of study for this chapter is Rodríguez's use of a Coatlicue costume, in which Rodríguez embodies the Aztec mother of the gods. Rodríguez uses a hybrid performance practice and hybrid figure (her Coatlicue costume) to critique a different kind of hybridity that exists within crops—the rise in genetically modified crops. Rodríguez's uses a hybrid performance style to verbally and physically expose what would otherwise be occluded. In other words, Rodríguez brings together notions of indigeneity, movement and materiality and provides a commentary on neoliberal policies, contemporary science, and U.S. agricultural imperialism through her incorporation of a performance style that blends cabaret, carpa theater, indigenous rituals and cosmology.

Continuing an analysis of objects in theater, my third chapter, “Im(Prop)er Approaches to Mexican Motherhood Myths: An Analysis of Corn and Masks in the Theater Productions of Cherríe Moraga and Paulina Sahagun,” shifts the focus away from Mexican theater to U.S.-based theater and compares two Chicana performances centered on indigenous culture and mythology. This chapter examines props in Chicana performances, specifically skull masks and corn, that highlight transgressive female indigenous mythical figures associated with motherhood: Coatlicue and Cihuacoatl. Both performances, while stylistically and aesthetically different, use a prop, calavera mask or corn, to reference a preexisting Aztec mythology, reject Chicana gender roles associated with Catholic perceptions of women and/or motherhood, and affirm a post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. The resurfacing of indigenous myths via the use of props that occurs in both performances, I claim, critiques patriarchal ideologies that influence expectations of Chicana gender roles and motherhood. I analyze props in these performances because this method provides an intervention in Chicana feminism that accounts for how materiality is implicated in feminist projects.

Finally, I shift the focus towards the performances that occur and narratives that emerge in a very specific place, a botánica (religious and medicinal retail store) in my fourth chapter, “Intimate Acts of Healing: Surrogate Glass Candles in U.S. Botánicas.” This chapter examines the use of glass candles in botánicas, a practice that emerged from the amalgamation of Santería beliefs with Catholic iconography during the slave trade in the Americas. Through formal and informal economic transactions, these women can purchase glass candles with a purpose. For example, the “Road Opener” candle, which is meant to open possibilities, can be flexibly adapted to a particular person’s circumstances—like opening the road towards a job. By analyzing acts surrounding glass candles, this chapter sheds new light on ways that Latina

immigrant women in the U.S. use material objects to develop forms of community through shared acts of healing. In this chapter, I intentionally shift to using the term *Latina* since the immigrant women I study, the botánica's clientele, are of both Mexican and Central American descent. The last chapter is closest to me in kinship and experience and shows the ways that theatrical and cultural performance continue to be relevant for working-class women of color.

This dissertation investigates performances by women residing on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border—specifically works by artists Jesusa Rodríguez, Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (FOMMA), Cherríe Moraga, and Paulina Sahagun—that draw on embodied forms of knowledge to resignify myths, record testimonies, construct forms of female solidarity, and demonstrate lateral connections among oppressed populations. My project posits the concept of transindigenous materialities as the shared, though distinctive ways, that performers manifest indigenous epistemologies materially to challenge gender roles, seek forms of healing, rethink notions of kinship, and critique neoliberal policies. In materially representing indigenous epistemologies, these performers are also rethinking materiality and fostering new forms of connection between objects and subjects as well as the actress and the subjects she chooses to highlight.

The performances I analyze throughout my dissertation can be identified by their investment in gendered indigenous epistemologies that are made legible with the use of objects. Each of my chapters show dynamic objects that invoke a history or memory about gender and indigenous cultures that refuses to disappear or be forgotten. In their varied use, these objects demonstrate the ways constructs of gender and perceptions of indigenous cultures are not static. Quite contrary, the assertion of indigenous cultures as stable and relegated to the past falls under a colonialist framework that serves to construct an “Other” and reifies Western cultures as

dominant. My attempt is to demonstrate how objects used in performance do not reify heteronormative and/or reductive notions of women and indigenous people and instead allow these individuals to represent themselves and their ancestors in ways that are empowering for them.

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Chapter One: An Object of Resistance: Gender Performance in Maya Mexican Theater

In 2009, FOMMA participated in the Hemispheric Institute Encuentro in Bogotá, Colombia. Encuentros are biannual gatherings with elements of academic conferences and theater festivals where hundreds of artists, activists, and scholars from throughout the Americas engage with one another through lectures, workgroups, performances, and roundtables. At the Encuentro, FOMMA performed “El dueño de las mariposas” (Owner of the Butterflies) a story about an orphan named Chepe who helps coffee plantation workers by fighting for fundamental human rights (FOMMA, “Mariposas”). After the death of his parents, Chepe receives employment as a manager at a coffee plantation. Initially, Chepe exhibits a harsh attitude towards his employees, which we learn about through his dialogue. When he develops feelings for the beautiful Pascu, he eases his treatment towards the workers. However, as soon as Chepe begins to advocate for workers’ rights, his and Pascu’s lives are put at risk, further revealing the reality of the precarious working conditions in coffee plantations.

Set in an enclosed proscenium-style theater space, FOMMA’s performance made minimal use of stage properties. The women— each portraying masculine and feminine roles— told their story with a small side table, chair, and long white scrim. Rather than using a smaller portable white backdrop (as FOMMA normally does in their travelling performances), the scrim appears to be part of the theater space itself, as if lowered from above. The scrim provides the possibility for the actresses to play with gendered forms of visibility and invisibility through the use of shadows they use in front and behind the lit scrim (see fig. 1.1 and 1.2). While in front, the shadows call attention to morphology, the shape and form of the actresses’ visible bodies. When behind the scrim, the shadows also outline silhouettes but this time without the mediating

visibility of the actresses' bodies. Each silhouette emphasizes stereotypically feminine and masculine clothing, such as hats and shawls, without calling attention to particular bodies. The shadows themselves are a separate performance of gender; the shadows call attention to gendered markers of clothing with and without the actresses' bodies, proving that gender can function in fluid and unstable ways. This white backdrop is a prop¹⁷ that allows FOMMA's actresses to represent themselves publicly in ways that are unconventional within their patriarchal environment (e.g. donning men's clothing or citing masculine gestures).



Fig. 1.1. Scene with Chepe and Pascu in front of backdrop; “El dueño de las mariposas”

Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics Image Gallery, 29 August 2009; Web; 9 June 2013.

¹⁷ When referring to the white backdrop as a property (or prop), I follow Andrew Sofer's definition. Sofer's *The Stage Life of Props*, he claims that a rematerialization of props is needed in order to uncover how props map spatial trajectories and form temporal narratives in performance (2). For Sofer, a prop refers to “a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance” (11; emphasis in original). Sofer acknowledges how an object must participate in an action in order to *become* a prop. In other words, “[t]here is not such thing as a prop; wherever a prop exists, an actor-object interaction exists. *Irrespective of its signifying function(s)*, a prop is something an object becomes, rather than something an object is” (12; emphasis in original). This is not to say that props do not come with their social, cultural, and ideological baggage. Indeed, props can also be circulated, fetishized or commodified (17). For Sofer, props are lively not in the sense that they are subjects in their own right, independent of manipulation, but that they may transcend their usual function to metaphorically convey or index myriad references (e.g. time, place, character) (20).



Fig. 1.2. Scene with Chepe in front and Pascu behind backdrop; “El dueño de las mariposas” *Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics Image Gallery*, 29 August 2009; Web; 9 June 2013.

This example of FOMMA’s recent international performance illustrates the way a backdrop is used and modified in performance, which is a material theatrical development that I will be analyzing in this chapter. This backdrop brings together two seemingly unrelated ideological concepts, indigeneity and theater. “Theatre” is a European term that refers to a place for viewing dramatic plays. Indigeneity, on the other hand, is a term that encompasses particular notions of marginalization with relation to race and other markers of identity, often in contradistinction to European cultures and colonialism (Weaver 222). In Chiapas, Mexico, for example, Maya women deal with racialized and gendered forms of marginalization. Maya women are expected to become passive bearers of their culture and have few spaces to address patriarchy in their communities, which in turn affects how they perform their public identities. Therefore, even though theater does not exist within many indigenous languages—they have no

need for the term since the arts are interwoven with their cultures—its praxis does exist in Mayan Mexico and offers a space for Maya women to address their issues.

This study of contemporary Maya theater aims to problematize and debunk essentialized notions of “western” and “nonwestern” performance practices, which relegate indigenous cultures to the past and European cultures to the present. My work intersects these notions by addressing the ambivalence of contemporary Maya theater through an object-oriented analysis. Rather than objectifying and essentializing the women performers, I am interested in the function that objects, such as stage props, occupy in this representational process. More specifically, I investigate how the ever-changing status of a white backdrop enables performances that cite and transmit gendered codes that would otherwise be unavailable to these Maya women. My project aims to demonstrate the ways that objects can aid in the reiteration and transmission of gender codes that occur through embodied practices. I pay close attention to FOMMA’s use of a backdrop in two “Buscando nuevos caminos” (seeking new avenues) performances (2011) in Chiapas, one in FOMMA’s theater venue and another in a local Chiapanecan community center as a means of identifying differences between in-house and itinerant performances. I posit that the presence, location, and varied use of this white backdrop enables performances to resist patriarchal gender codes, through the play on these codes, which serves to undermine the social expectation of indigenous women to behave in a quiet, submissive, domestic and disclosed manner. In acquiring *tactical techniques* (to use De Certeau’s term)¹⁸, FOMMA is able to employ material theatrical developments—such as the varied use of objects—in a way that

¹⁸ Michel De Certeau in *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) sets up a distinction between a strategy and a tactic to demonstrate the *tactical* ways that consumers can act within delimited circumstances. A strategy is a “calculation of force-relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power can be isolated” (36). This subject can be an enterprise, a city, and a scientific institution, etc. Conversely, a tactic is a calculation determined by the absence of a power. Thus, tactics maneuver the spaces that strategies produce.

allows them to continue practicing theater despite the specific iterations of patriarchy pervading their hometowns.

In the remainder of this chapter, I investigate FOMMA's performance trajectory and comparatively analyze their more recent performances. Specifically, I consider their work from 1994 through 2011, since scholars to date have not attended to their technical and stylistic theatrical changes in the twenty-first century. Informed by existing scholarship on FOMMA (Erdman; Marrero; Underiner, 2004, 2005)—which focuses primarily on their performances in the 1990s — I revisit this scholarly archive to see how their twenty years of performing theater may have influenced changes in gender relations amongst women living in highland Chiapanecan communities.

Theorizing Objects and Things in their Respective Repertoires

The members of FOMMA are understood as pioneering indigenous women performers (Erdman 160; Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre* 54). They have also gradually developed international fame (Underiner 15). However, what has yet to be examined is how FOMMA's material use of properties influences and affects their performances. I argue that their backdrop— an item they have so frequently used that it has become a recognizable marker of FOMMA—indexes changes in their theater's development, more notably the gendered relations within and outside their theater performances. For instance, when accounting for the life span of the backdrop, the nuanced changes that occur to it when used in house or outdoors become apparent. Looking closely at the performance of gender that becomes possible through this object use, I claim that the backdrop functions as an often unacknowledged identifiable marker distinguishing FOMMA's performances. The white backdrop not only aids in establishing a

space to perform gender codes but also serves to highlight said codes, undermining the indigenous social expectations for women to act submissively.

As I mentioned in the “Introduction,” my dissertation echoes the work of Diana Taylor who prioritizes corporeal instead of archival forms of knowledge production. One way I extend her work is by looking at a non-diegetic object, the white backdrop, and analyzing its relationship with the actresses of FOMMA. My primary object of analysis cannot be found in an archive because FOMMA’s white backdrop does not exist outside of live theater—it is not mentioned textually and is only present in performance.¹⁹ I argue that the ubiquity of this white backdrop in FOMMA’s performances reveals their spectatorship and technical modifications that have affected the way these women can access masculine and feminine gender codes.

Thinking through gender socialization from a phenomenological lens, Iris Marion Young offers a perspective on corporeality that clarifies the differences in masculine and feminine codes to which I am referring. In her noted article, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,” Young incorporates a social constructionist perspective on gendered socialization and behavior. Rather than viewing women’s behavior in relation to objects as something that is natural or essential, she looks at the way that movements of bodies are made through space as a result of particular circumstances. Similarly, as I will discuss later, my approach on gender codes involves considering the specific conditions that the women of FOMMA must navigate in order to produce local theater.

While aiming to rethink approaches towards objects, shifting away from archival studies and towards corporeal studies, I must also unpack the signification of objects. I ask: in what ways do objects in performance have a life of their own? Rather than essentializing objects, I aim to rethink how scholarship conceptualizes objects to think about their lifespan (or temporality) in

¹⁹ In that manner, one could argue that this dissertation chapter is effectively archiving that object.

performance. Thing theory, as elaborated by Bill Brown, is a useful framework in that it distinguishes between an object's distinct function(s) from usefulness, to resignification, to obsolescence (15). Brown articulates the now oft cited distinction between objects and things. According to Brown, when objects fail to function or there is a slippage in interpretation, they assert their presence as things (e.g. a drill breaking or car stalling) (4). Furthermore, an object, like the backdrop, can represent a generational or temporal divide; for instance, a typewriter might be a thing to someone who does not recognize its function. Similarly, the backdrop might not be recognizable as a theatrical property to people who have not followed FOMMA's performance repertoire. And since FOMMA no longer performs puppet theater shows, the object has been resignified from what was once a puppet theater box to a backdrop. Thus, objects bring with them interpretive codes, which make them intelligible, meaningful, or useful. However, *things* refer to uncertainty, ambiguity, obsolescence, or failure. Brown indicates that the object-thing dialectic actually refers to a subject-object relation and this encounter leads to humans imposing meaning onto them. When that meaning does not sustain itself due to unintelligibility, confusion or failure, the object is rendered a thing. This project asks: what happens then, when objects are used in myriad ways? What happens when we trace the life span of a property across theatrical performances? How does this affect such terminological distinctions? Additionally, how does the white backdrop push us to think about gendered forms of indigeneity when the object is not marked with those cultural associations?

FOMMA's Performance Trajectory

In order to trace the shifts in development of their theater group and establish specific gendered and racialized formations within Maya communities, I provide a narrative and analysis

of FOMMA's theater trajectory. FOMMA is an indigenous organization founded by two pioneering Maya writers and actresses, Isabel Juárez Espinosa and Petrona de la Cruz Cruz. Juárez Espinoza and Cruz Cruz founded FOMMA as a means to offer performance and literacy programs that promote multilingual theater and education to women in Spanish and in the Maya languages of Tzotzil and Tzeltal ("FOMMA: A Brief History"). This organization helps Maya women and children develop skills that will improve their daily lives through workshops on baking (bread-making), sewing, and computer literacy ("FOMMA: A Brief History"). Considering that several initial members of FOMMA were single mothers, the organization has made it a priority to provide women with skills that facilitate an independent form of living. Similarly, FOMMA's theatrical performances have also helped the community by raising awareness about indigenous women's concerns. Throughout their repertory, FOMMA has worked to combat issues of alcoholism, domestic abuse, infidelity, migration, and worker's rights within indigenous communities (Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre* 15). FOMMA tackles these issues by shedding light on their personal experiences; rather than remaining silent, the actresses stage testimonial plays—plays inspired by moments from their households and communities where they were oppressed.

Indigenous women from highland areas of Chiapas, like Juárez Espinosa and Cruz Cruz, experience multiple forms of oppression in relation to religion, agrarian life, politics, and the domestic realm (Difarnecio, "Teatro Popular" 102). In San Cristobal de las Casas, where FOMMA's venue is located, both indigenous and mestizo populations coexist, however, indigenous populations are rejected physically and culturally due to Mexico's conflicted *indigenista* policies. In fact, indigeneity functions as a contested term in both Mexican and Chicana/o scholarship given that it signifies differently according to its context. For example,

indigenismo refers to a paradigm tied to Mexican governmental institutions and politics as well as an aesthetic sensibility found in twentieth century art and literature (A. Taylor 1-2). The central tenet of *indigenismo* was to have indigenous people assimilate into Mexico's national culture and thus belong as citizens (2). Dating back to the 1940s, *indigenismo* came to represent the understanding that indigenous people must be included in modern national life and consequentially must assimilate; one of the ways that Mexico's government has accounted for indigenous people is by forwarding the notion that the "indigenous past is gendered male [while] the indigenous present is infantilized and gendered female" (119). For example, contemporary indigenous people are continually portrayed as fertile and inert (3), feminizing while also racializing the dichotomy between traditional and modern life. Alternately, images of Aztec pre-Columbian warriors are portrayed as masculine (A. Taylor 4). While *indigenista* policies in Mexico have been dismantled, its ideologies continue to affect the daily lives of indigenous people. As Doris Difarnecio notes, *indigenista* projects have left behind an uneven distribution of natural resources and access to agrarian jobs, leaving indigenous populations— especially women— to migrate from their rural hometowns to urban cities (Difarnecio, "Teatro Popular" 102).

While bearing multiple forms of racialized oppression, indigenous women must also deal with gendered discrimination. In Chiapas, the prominent virtues of women include "immobility, invisibility, and silence" (Underiner, *Contemporary Theater* 48), therefore, limited opportunities exist for them to work in public realms. Additionally, there exists a "strong cultural prohibition against young unmarried women having conversations with men [and] ... on the streets ... it often results in hurtful gossip" (53). Another factor preventing women from interacting in public settings is a linguistic barrier. Several women are monolingual, speaking only their native

indigenous tongue, while more men tend to be bilingual and learn Spanish to stay in contact with ladinos²⁰ (Spanish speaking mestizos) (53). These circumstances, among others, impede Maya women in Chiapas from standing out in public. Such a racist and sexist environment limits the opportunities for indigenous women to develop public resources for themselves, let alone offer public performances.

The establishment of FOMMA was inspired by the founders' own experience of living in Chiapanecan highland communities that offer few options for Maya women to live independently (Cruz Cruz).²¹ The founders, Juárez Espinosa and Cruz Cruz, like many women from highland communities, share a background rife with gender discrimination. Isabel Juárez Espinosa was born in Aguacatenango, Chiapas on November 19, 1958 (Cruz Cruz). She left her hometown of Venustiano Carranza at age eleven (Cruz Cruz). Likewise, Petrona de la Cruz Cruz was born in Zinacantán, Chiapas on September 23, 1965 and left her hometown at age fifteen (Cruz Cruz). Both Juárez Espinosa and Cruz Cruz came from communities that rejected them — Juárez Espinosa for bearing a child out of wedlock and Cruz Cruz for choosing to raise a child conceived from a rape (Cruz Cruz). At twenty-one, Juárez Espinosa married a man who was soon murdered over a land dispute leaving her pregnant with her first child (Cruz Cruz). They each migrated from rural highland areas to the city of San Cristobal de las Casas as single mothers in need of jobs. San Cristobal is a touristic city full of landmarks like cathedrals, markets, and museums. Since it is located within a small valley surrounded by hills and is only a

²⁰ The term “ladino” is also used to refer to Spanish-speaking Indians and can be used derogatively to allude to someone who is cunning or treacherous. For related terms, see *Pocket Oxford Spanish Dictionary* (2014).

²¹ Most of the information I have gathered comes from formal and informal interviews and conversations I have had with the members and theater director for FOMMA. This means that the analysis I provide comes from the standpoint of the producers rather than the spectators. I acknowledge how power relations— particularly educational differences between the practitioners, the spectators, and myself— affect my reading and interpretation of their work.

short-distance away from many highland indigenous communities, many indigenous people migrate from their hometowns to this city in search of work. In southern Mexico, the migration and displacement of indigenous women from rural to urban areas is not an uncommon trend (Marrero 319) and, as mentioned, becomes a thematic in several of FOMMA's performances.

To provide an understanding of the theatrical shifts that FOMMA has undergone, I must go back to the moment when the founders first became involved in theater. Juárez Espinosa and Cruz Cruz met and started practicing theater in the late 1980s (Cruz Cruz), which was also when they were first introduced to the white backdrop. They learned to act by means of joining a mixed theater group, which was part of a larger cooperative of Tzotzil and Tzeltal Maya writers called *Sna Jtz'ibajom* (Underiner, "Unmasking Maya Mexico"; Difarnecio, "Teatro Popular" 99).²² In 1987, *Sna Jtz'ibajom* formed its first puppeteering group called *Lo'il Maxil* (Monkey Business), which both Espinoza and Cruz Cruz were part of (Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre* 49).²³ *Lo'il Maxil* was dedicated to theatricalizing Maya myths and reality through pre-Columbian puppet performances (49). At the time in Chiapas, *Lo'il Maxil* was the only theater group of its kind (Erdman 159). *Lo'il Maxil* produced its first play in 1988 (159). Through *Sna Jtz'ibajom*, Juárez Espinosa and Cruz Cruz were able to study theater with U.S.-based practitioners, Francisco Alvarez and Ralph Lee.²⁴ They developed the theatrical skills in

²² Robert Laughlin from the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. originally founded *Sna Jtz'ibajom* (Underiner). *Sna Jtz'ibajom* existed in part, due to Laughlin's funding efforts; he helped *Sna Jtz'ibajom* secure a grant from Cultural Survival, Inc., a Harvard-based organization that supports grassroots indigenous projects (Underiner). Organizations like *Sna Jtz'ibajom* and FOMMA work with and against U.S.-based scholars, practitioners, and organizations. They negotiate relationships with neoliberal structures as a means to secure funds that provide resources for the sustenance and development of indigenous concerns.

²³ This is not to say that these puppet shows have not changed over time. Like many theater practitioners, *Lo'il Maxil* continually modifies their venue, construction materials, audiences, and the socio-historical context of the performances as they interact with practitioners outside of Mexico.

²⁴ Ralph Lee is a veteran of Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre who serves as the artistic director for New York's Mettawee River Company.

puppetry and mask-making necessary for them to later establish their own theater troupe. This is also where Juárez Espinoza and Cruz Cruz first learned to use a puppet theater box called *teatrino*, which later became their white backdrop.

Even while having the opportunity to perform with and learn from local and U.S. based practitioners, Cruz Cruz, Juárez Espinoza, and other women faced discrimination on the part of their co-participants and were offered limited roles. Within the theater group, women could only perform femininity by providing the manipulation and voice of female puppets (Difarnecio). Keeping in mind that the actresses would perform behind a puppet theater stage, the male participants of *Lo 'il Maxil* were unwilling to portray female characters even if their bodies were invisible to the audience; these men refused to use puppets that donned feminine clothing and also would not imitate feminine voices (Difarnecio). Juárez Espinoza notes that “[m]ost of the women didn’t like it [gender discrimination], couldn’t feel comfortable in an environment so dominated by men, and they started to leave” (Erdman 163). While Cruz Cruz and Juárez Espinoza remained in the group longer than other women, the dissatisfaction they felt with the passive gender role expectations reinforced their decision to leave *Sna Jtz’ibajom* and *Lo 'il Maxil*.

In addition to the indirect forms of discrimination they faced with limited acting opportunities, Cruz Cruz, for instance, faced a more direct form of discrimination when *Lo 'il Maxil* refused to stage a play she authored. In 1991, Cruz Cruz wrote her first play, “Una mujer desesperada” (A Desperate Woman, 1991) and earned the prestigious Rosario Castellanos²⁵ state prize in literature (Erdman 160). Thereafter, she received negative critique from male figures in the surrounding communities, and *Lo 'il Maxil* decided not to stage the play (Marrero 314).

²⁵ Rosario Castellanos (1925-74) was a prolific Mexican poet, novelist, and playwright, and is regarded by many as influential among Mexican feminist discourse given that she addressed women’s issues in her writing.

Despite the fact that Cruz Cruz became the first indigenous woman to receive this coveted prize, the male critique overshadowed her achievement. Following this event, in 1992, Juárez Espinosa decided to leave the group for similar reasons of gender discrimination (163). Her pregnancy became a potent trigger for this decision. When her *Sna Jtz'ibajom* colleagues discovered that she was pregnant, some of them told her that pregnant women were not allowed in the group (Myers). Shortly after, Cruz Cruz also left *Sna Jtz'ibajom* (Erdman 160).

These incidents did not deter Cruz Cruz and Juárez Espinosa from continuing their creative practices. 1993 marked the year that they formed a travelling theater company where they recruited other women (Difarnecio). Thus, FOMMA and *Reflejo de la Diosa Luna* emerged. In February of 1994, organization was officially founded (Difarnecio).²⁶ Within two years (and with the help of outside funding), Cruz Cruz and Juárez Espinosa secured and stabilized the first theater organization centered on helping indigenous women and children (“FOMMA: A Brief History”). The actresses who form *Reflejo de la Diosa Luna* also served as board members for FOMMA. The establishment of FOMMA is a historic event since it marks the formation of pioneering indigenous women performers in Mexico. Juárez Espinoza and Cruz Cruz are recognized as the first indigenous actresses in Chiapas demonstrating a form of gender autonomy (which they did not have in *Lo'il Maxil*) by not only performing in public but also making collective decisions that impact the populations for which they provide resources.

FOMMA could be considered a feminist project, although the members themselves do

²⁶ Like *Sna Jtz'ibajom*, FOMMA received support from Robert and Miriam Laughlin from the Smithsonian Institution (Difarnecio). That year, Juárez Espinosa published her award-winning play “Migración” and also traveled to University of Massachusetts at Amherst and New York to participate in theatre festivals (“FOMMA: A Brief History”). In 1995, Juárez Espinosa and Cruz Cruz continued using these funds to tour their work.

not identify as feminists²⁷, due to the ways that the organization restructures its lines of power in ways that privilege collective work. Just as FOMMA remains invested in improving Maya women's lives, so too do FOMMA's theatrical productions emphasize similar topics and themes. A prominent component of FOMMA is their theater troupe also called *Reflejo de la Diosa Luna*, whose performances are often inspired by personal experiences uncovered in play-crafting workshops, which are then reworked collaboratively into scripts (Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre* 49). FOMMA uses a collective process for writing and producing their performances. Each actress is involved in the script writing process. The writing process requires that they host meetings to brainstorm ideas according to their own experiential memories. They organize these memories according to a theme (e.g. migration, education, labor, family life, domestic abuse). Once a theme is set, the actresses begin to improvise scenes from their daily experiences. From the chosen scenes, they develop the language and structure necessary to write their script. Here, I should mention that even though they have the freedom to write their own scripts, they are still limited by the theatrical parameters they learned from foreign practitioners. In other words, rather than experimenting with other genres of writing, the writers consistently focus on playwriting. Following the script-writing process, the actresses begin their rehearsal process. Since 1999, they have worked under the direction of one director, Doris Difarnecio (Difarnecio). Prior to Difarnecio, FOMMA worked seasonally with other theater practitioners, including: Amy Trompetter, Denny Partridge, and Patricia Hernandez (Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre* 54). Under Difarnecio's direction, the women make their own staging and blocking choices. Difarnecio may also have the actresses incorporate more parts of the stage. On other occasions, the director modifies their use of props. Nevertheless, FOMMA is ultimately in charge of making

²⁷ I will elaborate on the translation and cultural issue with the term "feminist" in the "Theatrical Traditions" and "Popular Theater" sections, which follows this one.

the final decisions for their performances, as exemplified when the actresses explicitly direct themselves, placing the power in the hands of the collective rather than an individual.

Theatrical Traditions

FOMMA's stylistic choices are made collectively by their theater troupe, *Reflejo de la Diosa Luna*, which consists of mostly poor indigenous women. Considering the social convention in Mexico where, as Mexican feminist, Mercedes Olivera reminds us, indigenous women have internalized a triple oppression “*por ser mujeres, por ser indígenas y por ser pobres*” (for being women, indigenous, and poor) and will submit to masculine powers (163), FOMMA's decision-making process is markedly feminist from a foreigner's lens.²⁸ I argue that FOMMA's ability to write their own plays and make decisions about their public theatrical self-representation is veiled under their other interest in working-class issues. In the next few sections, I highlight elements of traditional carpa, puppet and popular theater to demonstrate how FOMMA puts on performances with few resources and little to no resistance from their audiences. One material resource FOMMA does use is the white backdrop, which serves the stylistic function of citing all three previously mentioned traditions. This backdrop, which FOMMA actresses call *teatrino*, became an identifiable marker for FOMMA since it is a property they have used since their early work in the 1990s. Because it is made of fragments from everyday materials, this object is linked with the working class. The quality of this white backdrop is also reminiscent of *rasquachismo*, the Chicana/o working class aesthetic expression that is composed of:

discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials such as tires, broken plates,

²⁸ For instance, through my Chicana-centered lens, I might identify this as a feminist project given the way I define Mexicana and Chicana feminism throughout this dissertation, as concerning women's equity but through the concerns of respective temporalities and contexts.

plastic containers recombined with elaborate and bold display in yard shrines (*capillas*), domestic decor (*altares*), and even embellishment of the car. In its broadest sense it is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity. The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of rasquachismo. The source of rasquachismo rests in the everyday, the domestic sites of home and community. (Mesa-Bains 299)

The white backdrop can be associated with *rasquache* aesthetics given that it is made from a square-shaped plain white curtain or cloth hung over a series of worn rusty green pipes measuring at about six feet in length and width (see fig. 1.3).²⁹ The material proportions of this object make it accessible and mobile, which allows it to be easily transported from location to location. Thus, regardless of whether the women choose to perform indoors or outdoors with few or no funds, they have a property designed to help them delimit a theatrical space in locations where there might be no option to secure a venue. This backdrop helps transform any nontheatrical space into a thrust stage—a stage composed of four sides, one side intended for actors and the other three sides for the audience. Given its relatively small size, the backdrop also delimits the actresses' area to perform. The portability of the backdrop aligns FOMMA's performance with an accessible, outdoor, working-class aesthetic, with which carpa, puppet, and popular theater traditions have all been associated. Moreover, FOMMA's use of itinerant performance is significant since it aligns with histories of grassroots activism during tumultuous periods in Mexico.

²⁹ In performances located inside their theater venue, FOMMA may also use another backdrop, which includes a white cloth attached to a wooden frame.



Fig. 1.3. Backdrop in “Solo Crecí con el Amor de mi Madre,” 23 June 2011; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

For the Maya-identifying FOMMA actresses, the act of being seen (audience reception and visibility) is a form of activism because it works against the historical trend of silencing and negating women. In Mexico, there is a fear of “El qué dirán,” a Spanish phrase, meaning “what will they say?,” which reveals a concern for public opinion on private actions (Marrero 318-9). This is a phrase that comes from class-conscious women of Spanish descent who would use it in the context of protecting their own public image. In this case, however, it is the men who assume the position of protecting the image of the indigenous man (318-9). In Chiapas, many men follow a machista model where they:

assume the (neo)colonialist role of the ‘conqueror’ historically attributed to Hernán Cortés, the first European *chingón*, the ‘big fucker’ in the colonized Mesoamerican imagination. The act of rape by *ladino* and indigenous men replicates the initial act of violence by the conquistador, thus replicating the injury towards indias [indigenous women]. Worse yet, unwittingly ladino and indigenous men refract themselves in the image of the odious subjugator.

(Marrero 315)

This machista model is reflective of the construction of the Mexican nation during the nineteenth century following the Latin American wars of independence (Olivera 165). Mexico followed a positivist model of freedom, justice and brotherhood for its citizens, similar to that of the French and U.S. There were institutional and legislative changes that established new land-ownership and citizenship laws which marginalized indigenous populations who themselves were already following colonialized patriarchal ideologies that marginalized indigenous women. Given these circumstances that make indigenous women a particularly vulnerable population, FOMMA performed their earlier plays in the 1990s to an audience of mostly women and children. When performing in front of Maya men, their work was compromised due to disapproval (313-4). Agreeing with Teresa Marrero, who coins the emergence of Maya women's theater as a "quiet revolution," I note that the women of FOMMA cannot blatantly challenge patriarchy (316); they must work tactically within and against patriarchy. They work within patriarchy by dissociating themselves from overtly feminist political groups like the Zapatistas³⁰ and against patriarchy by staging performances that narrate the lived memories of how women are oppressed by patriarchal and colonial structures of power. According to Marrero, the mere act of making women visible on stage both within and outside Mexico is revolutionary (316). Though women

³⁰ Part of the organization's relative success is due to their intended neutrality in political matters, in other words, the organization's relationship, or lack thereof, with groups like the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation; EZLN), better known as Zapatistas, who openly identify theirs as a feminist project. FOMMA members are careful not to label themselves as feminists, for the term is often misunderstood as misandry. Juárez Espinosa states that men's initial intolerance for the group derived from the threat of feminism. She mentions, "Many men were against us. They thought we were feminists, or that we didn't like men" (Erdman 164). FOMMA posed a threat to indigenous men and their Tzotzil and Tzeltal power relationships. Maya men's patriarchal values are reliant on a definition of a women which is biologically deterministic and essentialist. Also, to avoid any affiliations with the Zapatista movement, FOMMA members do not ask any religious or political questions to those interested in joining (Marrero 316). As a form of negotiation, the organization's nascent feminism is often disguised or concealed.

must still negotiate a patriarchal structure, their choreographed movements serve to feminize³¹ and revive the public space of theater (325).

Carpa Theater

The founding members of FOMMA initially learned to use the backdrop via another theater troupe, *Lo'il Maxil*, who used it primarily as a puppet theater box. Since then, Isabel Juárez Espinoza and Petrona de la Cruz Cruz have used it within indoor and outdoor theater performances. While it could be argued that the white backdrop is a marker of European theatrical traditions (due to its connections with puppet theater), its current use more accurately reflects a lineage with the Mexican carpa and *teatro popular* (popular theater) traditions. Mexican carpa, a performance style that flourished in central Mexico and the Southwestern parts of the United States in the 1920s, was typically a travelling show held in a tent, which included musical numbers and sketches involving sexual puns and political parody, similar to American vaudeville (Fusco 76).³² Mexican carpa is part of a larger popular theater genre whose counterhegemonic strategies serve to benefit the disenfranchised and oppressed (Cohen-Cruz 247). Similarly, *teatro popular* (popular theater) is a theater practice stemming from Augusto Boal, who before coining his concept of the Theater of the Oppressed, used theater to advocate for social change (Boal 310). FOMMA's theater fits within both carpa and popular theater conventions since at its root FOMMA started out as a traveling troupe whose fundraising efforts were used to provide services needed for the subsistence of Maya women and children. Now that FOMMA has established their own theater venue, they continue to use this backdrop. Instead of

³¹ I associate theater with masculinity due to the fact that the first indigenous theater group in Chiapas, Mexico—*Lo'il Maxil*— was led by a group of male Maya (specifically, Tzotzil) men.

³² Mexican carpa genre encompasses a wide variety of practices, making it hard to define in unified or holistic terms.

performing on their three-story stage, they prop up seats on the elevated stage and perform on the ground area. Over the years, their continued use of this backdrop has transformed it from a *thing* used for practical means, to set the stage, into a focal *object*, used to reveal or hide the actresses from their audience.

The backdrop's ability to adapt to changes in FOMMA's performance style mirrors the ways that carpa emerges and refashions itself to fit the current needs of its participants. More specifically, the continued re-emergence of carpa aligns with periods of social and political turmoil (Broyles-González 7-8). Carpa is a working class theatrical tradition aligned with short, often improvised performances, which began in post-revolutionary Mexico and is present throughout northern Mexico as well as the current U.S. Southwest regions (7). These were informal comedic performances, which included elements of improvisational slapstick and satire (8). Carpa performances would recount quotidian struggles of Mexican workers; they served as a counterhegemonic and survival tactic for oppressed populations. Carpas attracted audiences consisting of "workers, Mexican Apaches, soldiers, Indians from the country, proletarian women with babies, in their blue rebozos, side by side with overdressed city girls and white collared men of the middle class" (8). These audiences could expect to be seated inside barn-like "show tents that were drawn on trucks and even mule carts from suburb to suburb and from village to village . . ." (quoted in Broyles-González 8). Regardless of the diversity within the audience, early carpa shows relied on staging highly political pieces reflecting current events from that period. While FOMMA's performances share qualities of carpa theater, they differ in that they not only stress working-class issues but gendered issues as well.

Even though etymologically, "carpa" has indigenous origins, historically carpa theater has catered to mixed audiences. Carpa is an ancient Quechua term referring to the covering of

intertwined branches, which was later used to signify a canvas covering, then a tent, and finally a circus (Kennedy 225). In Mexico, carpa theater emerged in the nineteenth century as a travelling circus. Carpas were composed of touring performers who would present on portable stages in main squares and streets for a mixed-class audience (225). They would perform comedic songs and skits on political topics in exchange for money or cigarettes from their audience. Since it was an informal environment, audience members would often also give the performers feedback. Carpas included stock characters, most noted was the *pelado* (naked one) who represented Mexico's national clown (225). The *pelado* was an underdog or oppressed man who would mock those in power. His class-conscious comic routines would involve critiquing issues like "high cost of living, political scandals, and treacherous political leaders" (225).³³ Other than addressing multiple issues, another way in which FOMMA differs from traditional carpa performances is with respect to spectatorship. FOMMA does perform for mixed-class audiences but their performances posit a poor indigenous spectator and they routinely tour highland Chiapanecan communities to perform for local indigenous audiences.

Since carpa theater surfaced in the current northern Mexico and U.S. Southwest region, it has been able to adapt to the needs of a wide-range of audiences. For instance, carpa theater became re-popularized in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s, which aligns with popular liberation movements, such as the Chicana/o Civil Rights Movement. In the United States, the 1960s marked the height of the Civil Rights era, where minoritarian racialized communities were rising against an oppressive white mainstream majority. The Civil Rights Movement was also a classed movement since many of those racialized were also fighting against social and political

³³ Mario Moreno Reyes, better known as Cantinflas, was a Mexican comedian and actor who popularized the *pelado* character in the 1930s. Often compared to Charlie Chaplin, he embodied the *pelado* with his "torn overcoat, drooping trousers, and comic antics, he was the tongue-tied little man who always manage[d] to mock and outsmart powerful people" (Kennedy 218).

injustices that made class uplift a near impossibility. The use of carpa theater, then, helped construct and uphold a sense of class consciousness among actors and spectators (55). In staging moments from their daily lives as well as acts of resistance, Chicana/o communities educated their audiences about farm worker, education, voting, and other political rights. More specifically, during the tumultuous civil rights movement era in the U.S., carpa performances helped construct a collective Chicana/o identity by: validating Chicana/o vernacular and use of code-switching; presenting a critical anti-establishment perspective; sustaining oral and comedic traditions; and developing a direct working-class aesthetic (55). Carpa performances are also aligned with the Chicana/o *rasquachismo* sensibility (Mesa-Bains 298; Ybarra-Frausto 1989). I view *rasquachismo* as a useful aesthetic to position in conversation with carpa theater as well as FOMMA's performances given that they emphasize concepts of home, family, and labor.

FOMMA's use of carpa qualities in their theatrical performances appeared in the 1990s, a time when global indigenous movements were on the rise. Both *Sna Jtz'ibajom* and FOMMA began to perform in the early 1990s, four years prior to the signing of the NAFTA. NAFTA aimed to open trade in North America and end tariffs on goods and services, which shifted economies towards a global market and drastically affected indigenous people (Marrero 314). With the signing of NAFTA came the reversal of property ownership laws and the dismantling of price controls for agricultural products. These neoliberal changes resulted in turning small-scale farmers (many of whom are indigenous) into "economic refugees" in their country (A. Taylor 6). That does not mean that indigenous populations have remained silent. Since the 1990s, there has also been an increase in autonomous indigenous movements that critique Mexico's failure to address indigenous concerns on their terms (110). For instance, the Zapatistas—a Latin American armed group aiming to promote the needs of poor indigenous populations, including

women—initiated uprisings against neoliberal policies that strip their control of local resources and land (Marrero 312). For members of FOMMA and other indigenous populations in Mexico, agreements like NAFTA further marginalized them by continuing to deplete their resources and worsen their socioeconomic conditions. On the other hand, NAFTA brought with it the rise of external funding for theater groups. This means that troupes like FOMMA were not completely devoid of resources as a result of NAFTA. Carpa, with its history of voicing political issues, became a vital theatrical form for FOMMA to employ. The carpa style allows FOMMA to produce theater with limited resources. The performances are involved in raising awareness of issues related to the daily lives of poor indigenous women. Additionally, indigenous women themselves get to decide how to self-represent themselves on a public stage. Thus, FOMMA modifies carpa performances by not only voicing concerns *for* but also *by* those who are themselves oppressed in racialized, gendered and classed ways.

Puppet Theater

I preface this section by noting that the word ‘theatre’ does not exist within Mayan languages, for they have no need for the term since their arts are interwoven with their culture (Frischmann 114).³⁴ Notably, it is “[o]nly in those communities where Western theatrical concepts have been introduced [that] the word *teatro* exist[s] as a recent borrowing into the native lexicons....” (114). If it is the case that “theater” as a whole in Maya Mexico only exists in locations where Western concepts have been introduced, then it can also be said that these places

³⁴ The earliest example of a prehispanic indigenous performance text is called “Rabinal Achi.” Additionally, Tamara Underiner notes that there were also missionary settlers in New Spain who wrote letters describing “a variety of performance forms: farces, comedies, jugglers, acrobats, magic shows, puppet shows, clowning, and elaborate spectacles in which wiggled, masked and costumed players enacted ritual stories” (21).

exemplify forms of *mestizaje*—the cultural syncretism and colonial representation that date back to the “whitening” of indigenous subjects through the conquistador’s easy access to Indian women (Arrizón 6). In Mexico, *mestizaje* “was central to modernist ideologies of nation building and the consolidation of ethnic and religious identities within a sovereign state, specifically the years following the Mexican Revolution” (Díaz-Sánchez 35). *Mestizaje* often distracts from and elides the inequalities and experiences that indigenous populations face, particularly indigenous women who face multiple oppressions. Considering the ways that Maya traditions are already modified due to Mexico’s history of colonization, syncretism, and *mestizaje*, it also would be a problematic task to pinpoint which components of FOMMA’s performances are strictly Maya or European. Authenticating and distinguishing markers of Maya and European performance run the risk of stabilizing and further polarizing these cultures, which are already in constant flux. Nevertheless, FOMMA’s performance style can also be attributed to puppet theater traditions, given that their founders’ initial performance practices were in a puppet theater group. To clarify, I repeat that the founders of FOMMA learned puppet theater from *Lo’il Maxil*, who learned how to practice theater from U.S.-based practitioners. As a result, FOMMA’s work borrows from Mexican traditions of working-class carpa theater and middle-class puppet theater. FOMMA’s work also incorporates both indigenous and European performance styles via its connection to puppet theater. Rather than identifying markers of an authentic puppet theater, FOMMA’s performances converge and diverge with that tradition.

For instance, FOMMA’s white backdrop, while not used for puppet performance, shares similar qualities to both puppets and puppet stages. When using the word “puppet,” I am referring to an object that is animated in an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic way. Different forms of puppets include marionettes (fully or partially jointed and operated from above), glove

or hand puppets (operated from below and donned on hands), rod puppets (operated from the back or from below by rods) and shadow puppets (similar to rod puppets but they are flat and held against a screen) (Jurado Rojas 1083). Puppet stages can range from the non-existent, to minimal sets, as well as miniature models scaled precisely to the dimensions of European opera houses (1088). In Europe and Africa, stages were built out of a cloth hung over a line between two trees and puppets were propped up on top of the cloth (1088). In Africa, itinerant performers would also travel with a frame about a meter in length, to which they would add a cloth to conceal their bodies (1088).³⁵ In FOMMA's contemporary performances, they no longer use puppets but their white backdrop is a modified version of a puppet stage. The white backdrop sustains a portable quality like a puppet stage since it remains minimal, relatively small in size, and requires a cloth to be hung over a few rods. The use of this backdrop to form shadows that highlight the actresses' silhouettes resembles shadow puppetry. In this case, rather than using a backdrop to hide the actors using the puppets, the actresses are intentionally using the backdrop to make their bodies stand out. Also, instead of portraying fictional stories, FOMMA depicts semi-autobiographical stories. To the extent that indigenous women face triple oppression, their marginalization renders them socially invisible. But FOMMA does not rely on Mexican ideologies of *indigenismo* to solely (mis)represent them, and instead takes action by putting their female indigenous bodies on stage and sharing their testimonial narratives.

The act of putting their bodies on display in the public space of theater is an overtly political act for indigenous women; it becomes even more political when taking into account Mexico's puppet theater history. Puppet theater in Mexico traces back to Mexico's colonial era

³⁵ The performances typically include "short dialogues, farces, and knockabout scenes" (Kennedy 1086). They can be part of an intermission for a larger performance or they may also be the primary show. The stories told consist of a heroic protagonist who after several encounters concludes his journey by fighting an antagonist (1086).

when it was a marginal form of entertainment located in portable stages outside of homes, fairs, and churches (Kennedy 315). In the seventeenth century, prominent families would hire puppeteers for personal entertainment. Puppet performances were also included as part of the acculturation process during the conquest of Mexico (318). Puppeteers were usually Spanish migrants known to travel with explorers and were called “tent actors” (318). They were between the ages of twenty-one to thirty and male (322-3). Their performances incorporated stock characters, including “the galan (young gentle man); the young man; barba (a beard), an older man; dama (a lady); a young woman, and gracioso (the comedian or fool)” (323). By the seventeenth century, several women were managing puppet troupes (324-5). Since the seventeenth century—with the exception of certain license requirements—most puppet companies held the option to stage stories of their choice (325). FOMMA’s work diverges from puppet theater here since theirs is not a colonial project aiming to acculturate others. While they did not always get to choose which topics to discuss in their performances, they did get to advocate for and provide resources that would aid working-class indigenous women.³⁶

Admittedly, documented forms of puppet theater in Mexico trace back to a European lineage, however, this does not mean that puppet theater did not exist within indigenous or non-European contexts. Puppet theater’s origins remain unclear but the earliest evidence can be traced to shamanism. In shamanistic practices, puppets have and continue to be used for magic purposes as a surrogate object for a human (Jurado Rojas 1085). In East Asia, for instance, puppets are used for religious and celebratory occasions, such as births and deaths (1085). In North America, Native Americans and other indigenous populations used puppets in a religious context to promote good harvest (1085). In the medieval Christian Church, puppets were used to

³⁶ Ironically, when FOMMA initially started performing for *Lo’il Maxil*, the Maya Mexican puppet theater company, they had no authority to stage their stories. They also had no visibility since they were hidden behind the *teatrino*.

assist with teaching scriptures (1085); they followed European colonizers as a didactic and colonizing tool, traveling to areas like North and South America, India, Japan and China. For example, in 1524, a puppeteer accompanied Hernán Cortés to Mexico (1085). By the nineteenth century, puppeteers would highlight the educational value of their occupation (1087). I position FOMMA's work in conversation with puppet theater since puppets and puppet stages are not only part of a Western European tradition, but part of indigenous practices as well.

Popular Theater

Carpa and Puppet Theater are both part of the larger genre of popular theater, which has existed in Mexico since the Spanish conquest. During the Spanish conquest in Mexico, most forms of theater were imported.³⁷ Still, other forms of performance existed in pre-Columbian Mexico. For instance, Mayas would still perform by reenacting creation myths via festivals, pageantry, and dances (Lóndre 18). Thus, despite the fact that the white backdrop more often references European practices than indigenous practices, this does not imply that indigenous practices are not a form of performance. Dance, shamanism and rituals were all performative practices present before the arrival of Europeans that were strongly associated with religious beliefs (16). Additionally, there were also practices not directly tied to religion that functioned more like entertainment and distinguished between performer and spectator roles (16). Some scholars have insisted that rituals of human sacrifices incorporated theatrical qualities by including performance events like the *mitotes*, which included song, dance, pantomime, creation myths and aspects of tribal history (25). In contemporary indigenous communities, there are locations where theater as a European concept has not been introduced. Alternately, there are

³⁷ This is not to say that Mexico did not produce its own renown playwrights. Indeed, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-95) is considered a major Baroque playwright and a pioneering feminist writer in Mexico.

also areas where it *has* been introduced; however, theater remains a borrowed term, which is inserted into their native lexicons. While theater was not a term familiar to indigenous people in pre-Columbian times, the concept of performance was.

It was not until the Mexican Revolution that Mexico began to develop a strong tradition of popular theater. Popular theater is a style of theater created by and for the popular classes—those belonging to the working class, including farmers and indigenous people (Frischmann 30). Popular theater entertainment was a means to transmit information about battlefields as well as deliver political critiques (Kennedy 849). In the early twentieth century (more prominently in the 1930s), the use of popular theater in Mexico aimed at constructing a national theater (Monterde 117). By the 1960s, the new popular theater movement was developed, which was rooted in forms from the early twentieth century but now includes theatrical influences from indigenous performance, *commedia dell'arte*, proletarian dramas and European dramas. Certain popular theater organizations in the 1970s, such as CLETA (Centro Libre de Experimentacion Teatral y Artistica/ Free Center for Theatrical and Artistic Experimentation), held annual international theater festivals with participants including Augusto Boal, Enrique Buenaventura, and Luis Valdez (Castillo 76-7). Over the years, popular theater in Mexico has continued to focus on topics related to the current social, political and economic conditions of the working classes.

In contemporary Mexico, there are now independent and alternative theaters. Independent theaters attract upper middle class audiences since box office revenue are what run these performances (Kennedy 849). These theaters include Broadway performances and other commercial hits. Alternative or experimental theaters are located in nontraditional spaces like bars, cabarets, cultural centers, museums, and bookstores (849). One of the best known alternative theaters is the *El Hábito* bar and *Teatro de la Capilla*, run by Jesusa Rodríguez and

Liliana Felipe.³⁸ Alternative and experimental performances attract students, artists, and intellectuals (849). Due to corruption and tumultuous Mexican politics in the 1990s, popular forms continue to be present as a means to perform political skits. FOMMA's performances can be labeled under the term popular theater since they question Chiapanecan politics within the contexts of gender, human rights, health, sexuality, alcoholism and abuse (Difarnecio, "Teatro Popular" 97). The fact that FOMMA draws from all these traditions testifies to their commitment in addressing popular working-class issues from a gendered perspective (i.e. issues affecting indigenous women).

I claim that theirs is a feminist project even while this is a term that members of FOMMA themselves do not apply to their work.³⁹ Their work advocates for equitable resources for racialized indigenous women, in a similar fashion as U.S.-based third-wave Chicana feminists advocate for issues of working-class women of color. The Chicana feminist movement worked with the Chicana/o civil rights movement to advocate for issues of race, education, and the work force, but critiqued the patriarchy and heteronormativity of the movement and therefore also addressed issues of race and sexuality. The current state of feminism in Mexico, however, is more similar to U.S. second-wave feminism, considering the majority of those advocating on behalf of women's issues have been educated middle-class mestiza women. The term,

³⁸ In my second chapter I expand more on the presence and value of alternative theaters in Mexico by analyzing Jesusa Rodríguez's contemporary performances.

³⁹ It is important to stress here that the Maya women in this context do not identify as feminists. My concern with the use of the term feminism is more of a translation issue. What is perceived as revolutionary from a U.S.-based scholar's lens (that is, my lens) may not seem liberal, feminist, or revolutionary elsewhere. Take Saba Mahmood's work for example, in her accounts of the women's mosque movement in Egypt; here she describes the ways that first-world feminism often shares normative liberal assumptions about topics of freedom and agency. The trend in feminist scholarship is to define agency in terms of subversion and resistance to a larger structure of power. On the other hand, Mahmood defines agency as "the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)" (Mahmood 8). Mahmood's use of the term agency includes having the choice to follow or resist traditions. She reveals the ways that terms like "feminism," "freedom," and "agency" are relative and specific to a particular context.

“Feminism,” was not introduced in Mexico until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Cano); the central focus of the feminist movement was advocating for intellectual and educational equality among both sexes (Cano). Since then, the movement has disregarded indigenous and working-class concerns. By the 1990s, indigenous feminism emerged, with groups like the Zapatistas at the forefront of the movement (Hernandez Castillo 40).⁴⁰

The White Backdrop

Given the fact that these are some of the first indigenous women in Chiapas to perform theater, FOMMA’s use of the backdrop helped establish behavioral codes that allow them to perform masculine male characters without becoming the target of abuse in public. Coming from a culture where women are expected to stay outside of the public realm, women performers in Chiapas continue to be uncommon and frowned upon often due to the fear of being abused (Marrero 315). FOMMA, as the first all-women indigenous theater troupe in Chiapas (Erdman 160; Underiner, *Contemporary Theatre* 54), initially started performing for their friends, family and strangers who then expressed anger, aversion, and disappointment towards them (Cruz Cruz). For audiences who have had little to no contact with theater, establishing a norm where spectators must stand or sit still, remain silent, and not interrupt or participate in the performance was a way for the women to ensure their own safety from their male counterparts (Difarnecio). Twenty years later, it appears that much of the initial anger and resentment with which FOMMA dealt with has waned. Instead, a common reaction to their performances is laughter. Several women have confessed, after watching their 2011 performance of “Buscando nuevos caminos” that they felt empowered, lifted, changed or inspired by FOMMA (Cruz Cruz).

When considering their twenty-year trajectory, not only does the backdrop’s function

⁴⁰ I continue and expand my discussion of Mexican feminism in my second chapter.

change but its naming changes as well. The backdrop's change in function over time becomes apparent when paying closer attention to its different terms and definitions given that "[t]he values, functions and social meanings contained in, or attributed to, objects over the duration of their lifespan are not fixed" (Candlin and Guins 7). The members of FOMMA call the white backdrop a *teatrino* while their theater director Doris Difarnecio calls it a *foco blanco* (Difarnecio). *Teatrino* is a term used to describe a puppet theater—a sturdy wooden stage intended for a puppeteer to put on a show. The use of this term directly highlights the period when Cruz Cruz and Juárez Espinoza worked with *Lo'il Maxil* to produce puppet performances. *Foco Blanco*, on the other hand, is a term that translates to a white spotlight. For the director, this object is the focal point or spotlight of the performance since all the action that happens occurs in front of this object (Difarnecio). In other words, the object is prominent— usually present in their indoor and outdoor performances. For each practitioner (actresses and director), the backdrop's name directly references its functionality at different points in time. *Teatrino* reflects the backdrop's earlier period in its life span—FOMMA founders initially used it as a puppet theater in the 1990s. Alternately, *foco blanco* denotes its current usage—since 1999, the director has made stylistic changes to use the backdrop in innovative ways. In calling this object a white backdrop, I am neither privileging its function or value at any point in time. Instead, I am interested in noting how this object's ever-changing meaning affects FOMMA's performances.

I also call this object a backdrop rather than tent or scrim since its most prominent use is to construct a theatrical space by establishing the front versus the back stage. I use this term since backdrops are usually known as objects that establish theatrical scenery. Within European theatrical conventions, backdrops typically hang on the back of the stage to indicate location and mood (Carver xxviii). As such, they are usually painted in a way that represents the performance

setting. Within the European convention, sometimes what is painted on the cloth represents a landscape. In other occasions, backdrops aid in concealing the backstage area from the audience. When used to project images on both sides (front- and backlit), the backdrop is used as a scrim. Backdrops can also be used simultaneously as an object depicting scenery and as a curtain revealing and concealing items and actors on the stage (xviii). FOMMA makes use of the backdrop in these ways as well but the physical properties of the object itself remain the same (the white curtain, pipes and/or wood). Thus, while the object's function has changed over time, it remains recognizable and intelligible for loyal audiences given that its form has not changed much since their early work in the 1990s.

Other than signifying and appearing in theatrical conventions, backdrops in Chiapas reference certain rural aesthetics. The backdrop cites a rural aesthetic in that it resembles a clothing line, which many people in Chiapanecan highland areas use to dry their clothes and sheets. The construction of the backdrop functions similarly to a tent, in that it requires manual construction and deconstruction after each use.⁴¹ Due to the minimalist conditions of the backdrop and economical use of materials (rusty pipes, wood, and white sheets), this object (regardless of whether it is associated with a rural or urban aesthetic) strongly evokes a perspective reflective of the classed issues that FOMMA remains invested in publicizing. As mentioned earlier, the minimalism, accessibility and portability of the backdrop aligns it with a working-class style of theater that comes from a lineage of carpa, puppet and popular theater traditions. What these traditions have in common is using theater as a platform to portray working-class issues. Likewise, FOMMA's collectively-authored plays deal with working class as well as indigenous and feminist issues, such as migration, education, labor and family life.

⁴¹ The white sheet can also reference tents, resembling those in Mexican Tent Shows following the Mexican Revolution (Broyles-González 7-8).

They differ from these traditions in that FOMMA's work portrays said issues in ways that account for how they specifically affect the lives of indigenous women.

Prior to establishing their own theater troupe, the founding members of FOMMA learned to use the white backdrop when they were part of the writer's collective *Sna Jtz'ibajom* (House of the Writer) and theater troupe *Lo'il Maxil* in 1991 (Cruz Cruz). As the few marginal women in the group and without a voice to make authoritative decisions regarding *Lo'il Maxil's* productions, Juárez Espinoza and Cruz Cruz decided to leave the troupe. Having no theater venue to perform in, they decided to start their own travelling theater company in 1993 (Erdman 163-4). As a travelling group, the actresses learned to perform in front of this single generic backdrop (Underiner, *Contemporary Theater* 56). FOMMA relied on this backdrop to construct a theater space. In these outdoor performances, it is the combination of the white backdrop and the arrangement of properties that ultimately indicate how much space the actresses have to perform. In some occasions, audience members with no place to sit will get so close to the backdrop that the performers must use their bodies (and in some cases remain in close proximity to their audience) to delimit and enforce their acting space. Alternately, when FOMMA secured an indoor venue to perform in, chairs could be prearranged in a manner that already determined the boundary of the acting space. Ultimately, the performers decide how close or far they would like to set up the white backdrop, which will determine how much room they have to perform. In other words, the space left in front of the backdrop marks the front stage (the location where the actresses perform), while the space left behind the backdrop marks the back stage (where the actresses make their entrances and exits as well as change costumes).

Since 1999, the year when FOMMA hired Doris Difarnecio as FOMMA's theater director, their performances have made use of the backdrop in dynamic ways. This includes

using the white cloth as a screen to project light from behind, producing shadow images. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, in 2009 FOMMA staged their piece, “El dueño de las mariposas” in Bogotá, Colombia where the backdrop was used as a scrim (FOMMA, “Mariposas”). In telling a story about the harsh working conditions of coffee workers, the scenes included lighting projected to reveal shadows of actresses performing in front of the backdrop as well as shadows produced by backlighting that revealed actors performing behind the backdrop (FOMMA, “Mariposas”). In both instances, the backdrop helped provide a focal point and very much resembled a *foco blanco* (white spotlight) as well as stressed the distinction between the performers dressed in masculine versus feminine clothing. “El dueño de las mariposas” is an example of how the incorporation of light changes the content of their performance by modifying the visual cues that were formerly attached to FOMMA. Since FOMMA is known for their use of street performances and portable backdrop, by changing their location from outdoors to indoors and modifying the use of the backdrop from an object that established stage conventions to something that visually grounds the narrative of the story, the performance is no longer simply about testimony or a linear narrative but also about performative markers that affect these stories both within and outside theater.

FOMMA has also used the backdrop to project photography. The presence of the backdrop in an indoor setting brings qualities of the public and private spheres— as well as singular and collective experiences— together. In “Dulces y amargos sueños” (Bittersweet Dreams; 2013), Petrona de la Cruz Cruz performed an autobiographical monologue and used a wooden backdrop with no cloth to project photographs of her childhood, which reinforced scenery, mood, and added a mediated quality to her performance (FOMMA, “Sueños”). Rather than using the backdrop as a marker differentiating between the front and backstage, in this case,

she used it solely as a projection tool (see fig. 1.4). Scene by scene, Cruz Cruz recounted her childhood as a Tzotzil woman from Zinacantán, Chiapas (FOMMA, “Sueños”). Composed only of wooden boards, the backdrop was comparable with other props in the performance, which were pine branches and flowers, all of which set the scene in an outdoor setting. While projecting her black and white childhood images, the ridges of the wood were still visible, adding a textural and fractured quality to what were already images full of melancholy and nostalgia. Likewise, Cruz Cruz’s movements were mediated by the presence of her former self, which was projected on a platform directly above her. This is an example of FOMMA’s move towards intermedial performances, given that it incorporates both projections and lighting. This shift towards intermedial performance is not only a shift in changing relations between the production and perception of their performance but also a shift in the ways FOMMA chooses to tell their narratives. The distinctive use of the backdrop in this performance helps trace the development of their theater from a strictly outdoor performance to an indoor performance and from a collectively-authored to a self-authored piece. After years of using the backdrop, this object has acquired a theatrical association among local audiences. The backdrop’s predetermined function to set the stage allows for modifications in the way the backdrop is used without losing its intelligibility. Even though it is used as a projection tool, the backdrop also enables solo performance by reifying the theatricality and artifice of the performance. Establishing theatrical parameters reduces Petrona de la Cruz Cruz’s risk of persecution for performing alone in public. All in all, the backdrop here emphasizes a change in venue, technical requirements, and narratological style. Cruz Cruz’s experiences as narrated, performed, and represented visually serve as one example among many of experiences of gendered and racialized oppression that Maya women share.



Fig. 1.4. Petrona de la Cruz Cruz in “Dulces y amargos sueños,” 25 May 2013; photograph courtesy of Doris Difarnecio.

“Buscando nuevos caminos” in Moxviquil and FOMMA

In 2011, FOMMA began to adapt pieces from their repertoire to perform them both in and outside their venue. “Buscando nuevos caminos” was one such performance; this piece centers on the issues of immigration and the choices that immigrant families make in hopes for a better life (FOMMA, "Caminos"). There are three sisters who choose to cross the border into the United States in order to repay their family’s debt, however, in the process, they realize that the journey to the United States is not what they had anticipated (FOMMA, “Caminos”). One of FOMMA’s adapted performances was at a community center called Moxviquil while another was located in their theater venue. The performance in Moxviquil was inside an empty activities room. There were 40-60 people in the mixed audience, which included men, women, and children all from nearby communities. The white backdrop was positioned near the back area

covering a hallway in the mid part of the room. This allowed the actresses to have more space to change since they had the hallway functioning as part of the backstage area. In this example, the backdrop is used as an object in Bill Brown's sense of the term. Brown's "Thing Theory" articulates the distinction between objects and things where objects have qualities that make them intelligible or useful and things have qualities of uncertainty and ambiguity. Within FOMMA's performance repertoire, the primary use of the backdrop is to construct a theatrical space and in this case the backdrop served as a useful *object* given that it established the front versus the backstage. In other instances, the backdrop is used as a *thing*, defying preconceived expectations for this property. The backdrop demands closer attention to its lifespan, its use in a particular time and location, to uncover how its presence enables performances of resistance to gendered expectations associated with patriarchal and colonial ideologies.

Moxviquil is an environmental and sustainability center whose mission is to strengthen individual and collective capabilities through educational materials and comprehensive services ("Moxviquil"). Their work promotes equity, diversity, social participation as a means of transforming the environment ("Moxviquil"). Moxviquil also aims to be a locally, regionally and nationally recognized training facility for its quality and innovation of educational services that they implement towards conservation of nature and the development of human sustainability ("Moxviquil"). This center aims to become the main promoter of environmental awareness for this region by advocating for the conservation of flowers like orchids and forests ("Moxviquil"). If a performance has as much to do with the content of the play as the location it is staged in, then what are the implications in staging a play about immigration issues in a center that promotes environmental awareness? Firstly, the play ends with two of the sisters who in the process of crossing the border almost get raped by the *coyote* (smuggler). In running away from

him, the sisters get separated. One of them manages to cross the river and reaches the U.S.; she earns a job in a chicken farm. The other sister stays in the desert walking without water or food until she can no longer keep going. Through a series of monologues, the play ends with the sisters' ghosts recounting other similar stories of people who in the process of crossing, do not make it to the U.S. Sometimes they die of thirst and starvation and other times from policemen guarding the border (FOMMA, "Caminos"). The play broadly aligns with Moxviquil's mission given that it depicts a message of objection towards crossing the border. Instead, they promote the option to stay in their communities. The play supports the possibility of securing a job locally. Due to their low socioeconomic status, large Maya populations and especially women are incapable of earning goods, including land, pressuring them to migrate elsewhere (Herrera Torres et al). Rather than setting a play with characters who successfully move elsewhere to find resources, this play resists portraying the U.S. according to the ideology of the "American Dream" (a land of opportunity) and instead offers an alternate portrayal that prioritizes local resources. This is an example of how the performance broadly represents a resistance to colonial ideologies that represent the U.S as superior to other countries in the Americas.

In summer 2011, FOMMA had another performance located in their theater venue (see fig. 1.5 and 1.6). Like the performance in Moxviquil, here we have the object used as a means of establishing behavioral codes to sit and watch silently. In both pieces, the performers block their movement solely in front of the backdrop (see fig. 1.7). In FOMMA's venue, however, instead of staging the performance in the expected way with the actresses positioned on the elevated stage and the audience on the ground area, this performance had the audience seated with their backs to the stage and the actresses on the ground area. In this example, the presence of the stage made me anticipate the absence of the backdrop. Contrary to objects, this performance exemplifies the

backdrop as a thing. It was positioned on the ground area referencing though not replicating an itinerant theatrical style. While FOMMA's theater stage has three levels to perform in, in this performance, FOMMA reverses the audience/performer locations, having the performers sit near the stage area and the actresses perform on the same audience platform where the seats are located. This reversal of seating locations resists anticipated locations for each role (audience/actor) and is a transformation of a traditional theater space that mirrors the organization's mission of working collectively by making the space accessible to and literally lateral between actors and audience. Additionally, in this space, unlike in Moxviquil, the white sheet *does* function as a focal point because it stands in contrast to the bright yellow and blue paint on the surrounding walls, calling attention to itself as an object that marks changes in audience/performer codes.



Fig. 1.5. Image of FOMMA's three-tier stage, 20 June 2011; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 1.6. View of ground area from FOMMA's stage. 20 June 2011; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 1.7. Image of "Buscando nuevos caminos," 5 July 2011; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

In both performances of "Buscando nuevos caminos," there are other systems of

representation surrounding the backdrop, such as the use of costumes⁴² (see fig. 1.8). When actress Francisca Ocegüera Cruz plays the role of Güero—a *coyote* or human smuggler—her sombrero, slacks, and button down shirt contrasts the blouse, skirt, and *rebozo* (shawl) that she wears as Andrea—the eldest sister (see fig. 1.9). These costumes are involved in a system of constructing and naturalizing differences between men and women. The presence of the backdrop in this instance blurs the distinction between on-stage and off-stage costume changes. Even though it is meant to hide the actresses, both performances enticed men and children enough to creep towards the back of the backdrop and peep at the changing women. This visibility of costume changes further emphasizes the gender difference of clothing that is placed on the same body. Thus, while the performance relies on reinscribing a gender binary and constructs its own form of hyper-masculinity and -femininity, it still serves to resist them by calling attention to their instability. The white backdrop not only provides a space for the actress to change from one character to another, but it also enhances the women’s visibility by allowing them to access gender codes publicly without the audience questioning or hindering their performance.

⁴² Clothing also enhances or limits a body’s range of movements. Thus, when donning men’s clothing, the women performers are enabling a wider range of movements atypical for Maya women. All the while the performers are also feminizing men and their space (theater) by the mere fact that they are performing.



Fig. 1.8. Image of Francisca Ocegüera Cruz (right) from “Buscando nuevos caminos,” 2 July 2011; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 1.9. Image of Francisca Ocegüera Cruz (far right) from “Buscando nuevos caminos,” 2 July 2011; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

These performances display and make use of the backdrop similarly. In a scene where one of the sisters is sneaking up on others, the actress (Isabel Juárez Espinoza) creeps up against the

side of the white backdrop on stage left and takes a peek, only showing her head to the audience. This was a moment where the object was used diegetically. Nevertheless, very little contact occurs with the object itself. The actresses rarely touch it even when they make use of it as part of the action in the scene. In another scene, the backdrop was used as a hanger. A bag was propped up on the right side of the steel pole. This means that the backdrop, in addition to establishing spatial conventions, also acts as a prop— its functions are varied. While the actors are not in contact with the object, they remain in proximity to it. Likewise, the other props they use are also in close proximity. For instance, in this performance, a bag, plastic bowl and pitcher were all positioned in front of the backdrop but aligned with it as if propped up against it. The backdrop functions like a separate wall. Rather than thinking about the fourth wall in performance, the backdrop could serve as a fifth wall or as their theater director calls it, a “fifth actor.”⁴³ This fifth actor’s invisibility enables the actresses’ visibility. The backdrop’s ability to be rendered in the background allows the women to be on the foreground. I emphasize the importance of proximity between objects and subjects here given that objects, in their use value, are not reducible to themselves and instead only exist in their contact with others (Ahmed 247). As Sara Ahmed notes, depending on the sedimentation of tendencies that bodies orient themselves toward, a particular *kind of* body emerges. It is the repetition of “tending towards” certain objects that produces a body (247). Bodies are also oriented towards objects as a result of inheriting proximities. Thus, the performance space becomes clearly political if bodies inhabit or orient themselves towards objects and directions that are not intended for them, such as the women of FOMMA who often cross-dress to perform masculine roles on stage.

In addition to having similar costumes and props, the performances in Moxviquil and FOMMA were also similar in terms of staging and blocking. The white backdrop appears

⁴³ In an interview with the director, she notes that in some cases they call the backdrop the fifth actor.

upstage center with props and blocking downstage left and right, resembling a triangular shape. The white backdrop continues to be used as both a fifth wall and as a prop, such as a hanger that can hold purses and bags. The most pointed distinction between the two performances was the audience. The audience for the performance in FOMMA's venue was much smaller (about ten to fifteen people) including residents from the area, travellers visiting the space, as well as some of FOMMA's workers. In FOMMA's venue, this was a much more intimate performance, given the size of the audience and the fact that the main entrance of FOMMA had to be locked to ensure the people did not walk into the "stage" area while they were performing. In both performances, there is a mixed crowd consisting mostly of adults. Again, while the space has lighting fixtures, a stage, and wing areas, the performance in FOMMA's venue made use of minimal properties. The few props that were used were: a white backdrop, purses, chairs, shot glasses, a tequila bottle, and a plastic pitcher and bowl. All props are household items, tying the performance back to the theme of family and domestic work, which relates back to FOMMA's initial mission to help women develop skills that will improve their daily lives. For FOMMA, the white backdrop functions not only as a prop but a focal point that brings together and highlights everyday objects that mirrors FOMMA's investment in quotidian concerns.

Conclusion

On May 25, 2013 in FOMMA's theater venue, Petrona de la Cruz Cruz performed a semiautobiographical monologue called "Dulces y amargos sueños" (see again fig. 1.4). This is a story of a young girl living with her parents and siblings within the town's outskirts. Despite adopting adult roles and responsibilities at an early age, this girl manages to overcome her struggles by finding peace and prosperity in her life (FOMMA, "Sueños"). While this

performance was set on their three-story stage, the third and highest platform was used to project images onto a wooden backdrop. In this case, we see that the backdrop was rebuilt for this solo-performance. The object was used for more than one purpose—as a marker for theatricality and projection tool. I refer back to this example because twenty years since FOMMA's inception, FOMMA continues to use this backdrop. Its materiality and function is flexible enough to adapt to changes in spatial, technological and narratological styles. The white backdrop is an object that not only adds production value, but also denotes changes in the ways that indigenous women can perform.

By unpacking the varied use and signification of the backdrop in live performances, my work aims to give life to objects by shifting away from studies that render their intelligibility static and relegate them to particular archival spaces. This chapter addressed how and why indigenous women in Mexico choose to use theater as a medium for resistance and empowerment. Through the play on gender and the tactical use of an object, FOMMA is able to perform both feminine and masculine characters in spaces where the awareness of theater norms are established, which serves to reduce their risk of getting critiqued, shunned or abused. If gender is the result of the work that bodies perform (following Ahmed), then FOMMA's performances not only present a possibility for indigenous women in theater to access more than one gender but they also affect what they can do outside of it.

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Chapter Two: Indigenous and Queer Archetypes: Coatlicue Representations in Jesusa

Rodríguez's Political Performance

When you divide your body in a different way, which isn't the way you're used to dividing it, you feel other things. When you name your body in a different way, you feel it in a different way.

---Jesusa Rodríguez

...materiality involves a refashioning of our sense of space and contact with the environment, as well as rethreading of our experience of temporality, interiority and subjectivity. Rethinking materiality in this sense, then, means fostering new forms of connection and relatedness.

---Giuliana Bruno

This chapter investigates the contemporary Mexican performances of Jesusa Rodríguez; specifically, I compare her performance of *Cielo de abajo* (Sky from Below) in 1992 with her performance of *Arquetipas* (Archetypes) in 2004. While Chapter One chooses to highlight a property from the theatrical performances by indigenous women themselves, this chapter will look at performances by someone who is not indigenous per se but chooses to serve the queer, gendered, and indigenous communities in Mexico. My object of study will be Rodríguez's use of a Coatlicue costume.⁴⁴ In analyzing this costume of a noted Aztec deity I will consider the ways that these performances offer narratives and images that critique heteronormative patriarchal myths and neoliberal policies. I will also discuss Rodríguez's haptic form of engagement with the costumes she wears, an engagement that focuses on the friction between the costume and her body. This material friction mirrors the friction between dominant interpretations of the archetypes and myths she stages and the opposing ways that she embodies and interprets them. Ultimately, through her engagement with this costume and social critique, Rodríguez produces a

⁴⁴ In some writings, namely Jean Franco's writing on Jesusa she refers to Coatlicue as a puppet rather than a costume. See "The Return of Coatlicue: Mexican Nationalism and the Aztec Past" (2004) and "A Touch of Evil: Jesusa Rodríguez's Subversive Church" (1995).

performance that leads one to rethink materiality and foster new forms of connection between objects and subjects.

Jesusa Rodríguez's Artistic Trajectory

I begin with a critical description of Rodríguez's artistic trajectory so that I can position my analysis of her performances within a Mexican activist and theater context. Rodríguez was born in 1955 during a period of Mexican worker struggles, a period that brought a new order in the transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy. This was a period of expansion leading to the population of Mexico City growing from over one million to over five million inhabitants between 1940 and 1960. To deal with this urban expansion there was also the creation of "cultural centers, schools, universities, museums and theaters" (Costantino, "Inconvenient Woman" 184). The rural population surrounding the urban center was mostly indigenous and mestizo migrants. As the influx of indigenous people to Mexico City rose, so too the number of indigenous languages spoken in Mexico grew, particularly the languages of Nahuatl, Mixteca and Otomí. Rodríguez grew up within a period of unrest due to tragic events happening such as the Tlatelolco student massacre in 1968 and the destructive earthquake in 1985. Her performances are informed by current events that affect those marginalized, including the poor working classes, women, and queer individuals in Mexico.

Rodríguez is a multidisciplinary or hybrid artist who has worked as a director, actor, playwright, scenographer and feminist activist since the 1970s. Her formal training started in 1978 when she worked with director Julio Castillo at UNAM, Mexico's National Autonomous University (186). In 1980, alongside her partner Liliana Felipe, she opened El Cuervo de Coyoacán, a theater-bar in Mexico City. They formed a collective theater troupe in 1983 and

then in 1990 they opened a cabaret-bar called El Hábito⁴⁵ and the theater, La Capilla, the location where she performed *Cielo de abajo*. Roselyn Constantino's article "Jesusa Rodríguez: An inconvenient woman" goes over her performance trajectory, which includes private theaters, public streets, and cyberspace. Rodríguez blends a number of styles, forms, and traditions into what she calls *espectáculos* or spectacles. These include humor, satire, and parody. Rodríguez notes that for her "cabaret is a precision instrument to study social events and relations; opera is for emotions... Like a telescope and a microscope, they are similar objects of observation, only they observe from distinct points of view" (quoted in Constantino, "Inconvenient Woman" 186). Like most others who describe her performances (Taylor, Rodríguez), Constantino notes that Rodríguez uses her body as the main stage for her theater (184). In her works, Rodríguez's body "is never taken as value free; on the contrary, it is a primary signifier, a site for meaning, a location and sign of itself" (186). Constantino notes that in Rodríguez's performances themes will migrate from one night to another making it difficult to distinguish them as well as to distinguish her theatrical work from her political work. The same can be said about her performances in 1993 in comparison to her performances over a decade later in 2005. Her shows' themes migrate. Similarly, my object of study, her Coatlicue costume, is not only a theme that migrates but also an actual object that she dons from one performance to another. This costume is an example of a new Mexican feminist archetype that Rodríguez uses to revise rather than reinforce traditional myths. Since Rodríguez comes from a line of feminist Mexican cabaret artists who since the 1980s have been using parody and playfulness to comment on "sociopolitical and sexual dissidences" (Marín and Alzate 2), she too uses a mix of cabaret and other theatrical styles to call attention to feminist issues.

⁴⁵ The name "El Hábito" is a play on words. On the one hand, it can refer to habit or habitation on the other hand it also refers to a nun's habit. Rodríguez is well known for portraying the role of baroque Mexican nun Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, donning a habit and then stripping out of this garment on stage.

Besides her performance repertoire, Jesusa Rodríguez is also known to protest for the rights of the LGBT community, children, prostitutes, women, indigenous, and other oppressed groups in Mexico. Her *Hábito* cabaret-bar also blurs the lines of a performance space and bar by making itself useful as a space for organizations like the Zapatistas from Chiapas, feminists, and other human rights groups to meet. All of Rodríguez's work deals with humor. She uses humor as a "survival strategy for dealing with life in Mexico" (188). Some of the famous icons that she has embodied include the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, the 17th century Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, the translator and mistress of Hernán Cortés La Malinche, Argentina's Evita Peron, Hollywood's Marilyn Monroe, pop star Madonna and mother of God Madonna, and the pop culture doll Barbie (189). She also incorporates indigenous perspectives and frameworks in her performances. Rodríguez notes that:

In the indigenous frame, women are the most sublime and they are diabolical. It's a very Judaic-Christian mode of thought that the Church exploited which has been widely accepted in the West. In that way, things are dual, but their duality is of opposition, black or white. For the Nahuas [indigenous peoples of central Mexico], however, everything is dual and that duality can be contained within one entity; it or one is not good *or* bad, but both. The duality may be included in the visible and the invisible, in what you know and don't know—which is very different. (quoted in Constantino 190)

Most noted of all her characterizations is that of Coatlicue, whose statue famously appears at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, a museum known for its collection of pre-Columbian artifacts. Constantino associates Rodríguez's performances as a circulation of her body as text, and aligns it with what James C. Scott calls "hidden transcripts"—moments of

ideological resistance and a critique of power by subordinate groups (192). I agree that Rodríguez's work is hybrid— full of contradictions and tensions that critiques larger structures of power via her embodiment of historical icons.

The public protest work in which Jesusa Rodríguez is involved is just as important as her performance work that she presents on stage. Rodríguez is known to take the streets and plazas and use them as a space to perform spectacles that morph into rallies and protests near historic monuments. She has marched the streets of Mexico City leading large rallies dressed as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz amongst thousands of people in a Gay Pride parade. Constantino notes that Rodríguez “displays her female body as a site of public memory, knowledge, and action,” which can be seen as a response to the ways that the female body in Mexico has been “imprisoned, humiliated, whipped, and abused” (201). Constantino also states the similarities and differences between Rodríguez's theater and that of Bertolt Brecht's. Like Brecht, Rodríguez makes use of a set, lighting, props, and gestures (204). She has a different approach to acting than Brecht but she also views theater as a means of promoting reflection and change via resistance or subversion of norms. Part of her efforts to promote reflection and change includes producing theater that alienates audiences, asks for a call to action, and then going out on the streets to put that call into effect.

One of the reasons why Rodríguez has been able both to support herself practicing theater and continue with her public protest work has to do with the ways in which she receives financial support. In Jean Franco's “A Touch of Evil: Jesusa Rodríguez's Subversive Church” she mentions that Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe opened their independent theater, La Capilla (The Chapel) in September 1991 (157). As an independent theater, this space does not have to abide by the same rules and regulations as theaters that are regulated by the government. The

building had previously been a private house and chapel and was eventually owned by Salvador Novo an avant-garde and gay poet (157). Novo's heir rented the house to Rodríguez and Felipe. They opened a restaurant, bar, and cabaret called El Hábito (The Habit). The chapel became an eighty-seat independent theater (157). Franco also mentions the ways the Rodríguez protested against the papal visit in 1996 in the name of Coatlicue who is one of many figures that "embody the rejected, the excluded, the unmentionable" (160). Coatlicue is but one example of the figures and icons that Rodríguez takes on. In her interview with Jean Franco, Rodríguez mentions one observation she makes about the figure of Coatlicue and the Mesoamerican civilization in general. She states:

Mesoamerican civilization exists but nobody touches it. It is like the exterminating angel. It is there and nobody deals with it because it is like a taboo; something prevents us from dealing with it. We can discuss conquest. As everybody knows, we can go back that far. We can do plays, films, write books about the conquest but going further back is seen as too much of a challenge and seems impossible. (166)

Much of Rodríguez's performances and live actions are involved in dealing with taboo topics. Coatlicue is but one example of the taboo figures and icons that she takes on. Franco notes that Rodríguez's performances aim to address these myths along with the transgressive representation of her statue.

Jesusa Rodríguez is not the only performance artist in Mexico to put on cabaret shows that discuss taboo subjects. In fact, the style of cabaret that Jesusa Rodríguez performs belongs to a larger group of Mexico City-based performance artists who are part of a queer theatrical scene, which include Astrid Hadad, Liliana Felipe, Tito Vasconcelos, and others. Their work is

informed by a longer history of Mexican cabaret performance, which includes music, monologue and movement, and Mexican political theater called *teatro frívolo*. *Teatro frívolo* is a Mexican theatrical genre that emerged in the twentieth-century within the popular masses (Gutierrez 76; 102). This genre was also considered part of the *género chico* or “small genre,” referring to all forms of theater that were not part of the *género grande* or “large genre” that included “high-art” forms (76-7). Laura G. Gutierrez notes that within this *género chico* the two prominent manifestations were *teatro de carpa* (carpa theater) and *teatro de revista* (revue theater). These theatrical forms were the first to depict the Mexican popular classes (82). They were part of Mexico’s alternative modernist movement during the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and the Mexican reconstruction period of the 1920s (77). Contemporary cabaret artists like Rodríguez make use of these earlier forms of theater forms and hybridize them by performing a mix of sketches, musical numbers and parody to critique current events related to larger nationalist or heteronormative paradigms.

Conceptual Framework: Nahuatlismo, Haptic Materiality, and Friction

Rodríguez’s acting technique, as evidenced in her performance and artistic trajectory, draws from various influences, including that of Nahuatlismo. In her article on “Nahuatlismo: The Aztec Acting Method,” Jesusa Rodríguez offers a description of her acting technique, which she developed from Aztec culture. Rodríguez noticed in her performances that the characters she developed were considered identical to her not through costume but through *substance*; she never imitated her characters, but she captured their essence. Using Nahuatlismo as an acting technique, Rodríguez “started making connections, because they say the Nahuatl is a soul that leaves your body and can steal another person’s essence—or it takes a bite of their essence and

then takes hold of them, of their substance. Each person has his or her own substance. If you manage to suck it in, to possess it, then you can reconstruct that person inside you and let it express itself” (Rodríguez, “Nahuatlismo” 229). According to Rodríguez, she uses this Aztec theory of the workings of the body to allow her to take in another person’s substance when she acts. While one could assert that Rodríguez is arguing for a kind of essentialism, what is useful in her articulation is how she locates acting and essences in the body and in materiality. To clarify, Rodríguez does not believe in mimesis or *feeling* like someone else (as method actors do). Rather, she believes in the material performance of a social gesture, which for her can be linked to Aztec (and more broadly, Mesoamerican) workings of the body where “every part of the body is appointed its own function” (228). Rodríguez treats her theatrical performances with Nahuatlismo in mind and as such she appoints a function and meaning to every aspect of the performance, including her physicality and the objects she uses on stage.

Rodríguez’s version of Aztec cosmology overlaps with concepts in new materialism. For example, in Giuliana Bruno’s work *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality and Media*, she provides a sartorial theorization of surfaces and materiality. She is interested not so much in materiality per se, but in the material relations that are activated via surfaces. She defines a surface as the material configuration of the relationship between subjects and objects. A surface is a “site in which different forms of mediation, transfer, and transformation can take place” (3). A surface is also a site of active exchange between subject and object, a space of transformation, and a space of experiencing public intimacy. Bruno’s work goes beyond images and visibility to study the tangible and material. She is interested in a haptic materiality, in surfaces rather than images, and how the visual manifests itself materially. She notes that “the physicality of a thing one can touch does not vanish with the disappearance of its material but can morph culturally,

transmuting into another medium” (7). Likewise, in Jesusa Rodríguez’s work, rather than treating her theatrical performances merely as an event that is experienced visually, I argue that it is one that is experienced haptically for the actress (Rodríguez) but also for the audience who gets to experience the affect that is produced via this interaction between actress and object. The performance offers moments of haptic visuality for the audience as well. Following Sean Metzger’s work *Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance Race*, where he argues that clothing can induce a haptic visuality, I too view Rodríguez’s embodied performances and contact with her Coatlicue costume as producing:

a way of seeing that activates a sense of touch, kinesthesia, and proprioception. Spectatorship in this sense suggests a synesthetic operation—that is, one that can be defined as the transposition of sensory images or attributes from one modality into another. Experiencing the sight of an Olympic swimmer’s bodysuit as a clammy sensation on the skin is an example of synesthesia. This sort of visual incitement of the sensorium habitually involves the memory of objects and the feelings associated with them. (Metzger 19)

Rodríguez produces a haptic visuality given that her limited range of movements when wearing the costume could potentially remind the audience about their own lack of mobility while watching the performance. In her performances, Rodríguez dons the same burly box-shaped Coatlicue costume. The thick and stiff material of the costume make it difficult for Rodríguez to articulate its limbs. Audience members could potentially kinesthetically relate with the containment Rodríguez experiences in a square-shaped costume because of its similarity with the experience of sitting in cramped square-shaped theater seat. While donning the image of Coatlicue on stage, Rodríguez also transforms this image by animating it through a costume that

highlights the goddess's grotesque and sublime qualities. I aim to demonstrate that a study of materiality matters because in rethinking matter and objects as active and continually changing, not only will every part of an actor's body have a function but likewise every object on stage will also have a function. Rodríguez's frequent critique of the material effects of imperial nations and globalization can then be seen not just through her words or through her bodily gestures but through her interactions with the surfaces of the objects that she uses, which shape and get shaped by her body.

To put another way, Rodríguez's performances offer examples of global material encounters, encounters with objects that aid in critiquing global issues, and how these encounters affect the livelihood of indigenous people in Mexico. These encounters can also be called instances of friction, following Anna Tsing's definition. In Anna Tsing's *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, she argues that cultures are repeatedly coproduced as a result of "friction" or "the awkward, unequal, unstable and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (4). She uses a moment of friction, a moment when, say, two sticks rub against each other to produce heat, as a metaphor to refer to the unequal encounters produced in everyday life which may cause new configurations of culture and power (5). Tsing provides a useful perspective on globalization that accounts for the dissonances and moments of resistance in processes of globalization. Rather than describe globalization as simply an uninterrupted flow of goods, ideas, or money, Tsing accounts for the moments of encounter and restraint in this movement. For example, one definition of globalization refers to ways in which "previously distant parts of the world have become connected in a historically unprecedented manner, such that developments in one part of the world are now able to rapidly produce effects on geographically distant localities" (Szeman). While this definition may be true, these

developments that are produced as a result of globalization are actually not always produced with ease and instead, they encounter moments of friction. Similarly, rather than treating Rodríguez's performances as only related to issues pertaining to indigenous peoples in Mexico, I view my analysis as one example of a performance that comments on larger global processes that particularly affect minoritarian individuals. Thus, Rodríguez performances use an indigenous cosmology to discuss issues affecting not just indigenous populations but people around the world. For example, when I analyze her performances that target the topic of the genetic modification of crops, I am also acknowledging that this is a concern not just affecting one country, but several others. The genetic modification of crops that was started in the U.S. with the Monsanto Company is now a global phenomenon that is affecting countries across the globe and will continue to negatively affect certain populations more than others. When accounting for differences of race, class, as well as access to education and resources, those that are the most oppressed, which in Mexico are their indigenous populations, can become further oppressed by globalization. Rodríguez calls attention to these issues by embodying a kind of friction—the friction between her body and the costume she wears—which parallels the figurative friction between the rise in use of transgenic seeds and the indigenous populations which these seeds are affecting.

Mexican Feminism and Theater

To further contextualize Rodríguez's work, I turn to Mexican feminist scholarship as a way to position Rodríguez within a discourse of feminism. Mexican feminism, unlike U.S. feminism, has not occurred in clear self-contained activist "waves" and instead has manifested in sporadic and tenuous ways. However, for the purposes of this description, I will focus on the

more prominent historical periods in which Mexican women took an active role. For instance, certain scholars argue for a feminist period occurring during and after the Mexican revolutionary period (1915-1925) (Soto; Bliss; Fernández-Acevez). Other scholars identify feminism from the 1970s through the 1990s in relation to the U.S. second and third wave feminist movements (French 178). Lastly, there is also a contemporary feminist movement that can be described as occurring after the 1990s. Among these historical periods there have been differences between Mexican feminist movements within rural and urban areas. For instance, feminist activism in urban areas tends to privilege issues of middle-class women while activism in rural areas, including Zapatista feminism⁴⁶, tends to privilege issues of poor and indigenous women. Lastly, there is a difference between Mexican feminism and Latin-American feminism. In the introduction to *Feminism: Transmissions and Retransmissions*, Jean Franco notes that feminism in Latin America is concentrated on defining democracy for women and issues of democracy are particularly important to Mexico (Franco, "Thinking Feminism" 2). Unlike other Latin American countries that welcomed democracy following a series of often violent and ruthless military governments, Mexico was led by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (The Institutional Revolutionary Party or PRI) from 1929 to 2000. PRI's government was corrupt, full of bribes and internal decision-making. PRI's corruption continued despite ongoing student protests in the 1960s (2).⁴⁷ Despite such a corrupt government, Mexican women have been involved in activist

⁴⁶ Feminism in Mexico also includes the issue of fighting for indigenous rights. In 2001, another event particularly important for Mexican feminists was when the Zapatista commander Esther, a Tzotzil woman, appeared donning the recognizable black ski-mask in front of the Mexican Congress on behalf of indigenous women to discuss her experience of racial and sexual discrimination. This event is important since it noted that Mexican feminism was not simply a middle-class or mestiza issue, but an issue for working-class and poor indigenous women as well. For more information on Zapatista feminism, see Mercedes Olivera's "Práctica feminista en el movimiento zapatista," *Lola Press* (1998).

⁴⁷ In 1968, a Mexican army shot hundreds of student protesters who were demanding democratization as a means to temporarily silence these demands (Franco 2). This is where Jesusa Rodríguez's work intersects because she too has been known to take to the streets to protest against human rights issues.

movements and suffrage movements since the 1920s and 1930s (French 179). Rodríguez's performances and public actions stand out as a form of feminist performance, especially since they are located in a country where traditional and essentialist views about gender are pervasive; these beliefs include, for example, the idea "that women and men should occupy different spheres, and that there are 'natural' and exclusively masculine or feminine jobs" (Lamas 91). In performing publicly, Jesusa Rodríguez offers a different mode of engaging in feminist discourse by using performance rather than the written text to voice her concerns. She also uses her physical gestures and costumes to enhance the gendered and queer critiques she vocalizes in her performances.

To reiterate, Rodríguez's performance can be positioned within a discourse of Mexican feminism rather than U.S. feminism because feminism in Mexico cannot be conflated with feminism in the U.S. since different cultural and political issues influence each nation. Jesusa Rodríguez chooses to stage public actions on behalf of indigenous rights. Her identity as someone who is not indigenous per se is a racially privileged position that enables her to perform publicly to a wide range of audiences (working- and middle-class; white, mestiza/o and indigenous) and receive a different, often mixed, kind of reception from her audience than she would if she had visible markers of indigeneity. For example, Rodríguez has received a mixed reception due to the fact that many of her performances are offered to middle and upper class audiences, or individuals with class privilege. Her performances have also been staged in venues within and outside Mexico.

Mark J. Kelty describes an instance of this mixed reception when in January 1997 he participated in a discussion with Taller de Teatro Popular sponsored by the Centro Libre de Experimentación Teatral y Artística (CLETA). Many workshop participants, he states,

complained that Rodríguez's work was anti-popular given that she performed mostly for wealthier audiences as opposed to performing only for the pueblo and on the streets (74). But Kelty also acknowledges how Rodríguez's theater style mixes popular genres and carpa theater. This brings to mind questions of how racial and class privilege affect theatrical categorizations. In what ways can that performance be considered popular? Is popular theater only intended for popular audiences? Kelty notes that because of the mixing of genres, it is hard to identify Rodríguez's work in one particular theatrical category. Rodríguez's work seems to push against the boundaries of different performance styles.

Even though Jesusa Rodríguez's work is more accessible to a middle-class Mexican feminist audience, the issues she presents bring Mexican and U.S. feminisms into dialogue. In Anna Marie Sandoval's *Toward a Latina Feminism of the Americas*, she provides a comparative analysis of Mexicana and Chicana literature. This analysis comments on how both Mexicanas and Chicanas critique and respond to patriarchy (2). Even while commenting on the same issue, these writers differ in the ways that they experience colonization (2). On the one hand, until 1848, Chicanas and Mexicanas had shared colonial struggles. Following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, they began to identify within different national discourses, where the former could write within a Mexican national discourse and the latter could not (8). Some of the shared themes that both Mexicana and Chicana writers continue to stress (and I would extend this to Mexicana and Chicana theater and other forms of cultural production) include issues of sexuality, domestic violence, and religion (9). Both choose either to portray a more accurate depiction of traditional myths, legends, or cultural symbols or to re-vision them in a way that challenges patriarchy and other dominant ideologies (9).

Rodríguez and her political performance work can be positioned alongside other key

feminist figures in Mexico. When comparing Mexicana and Chicana feminism it is useful to understand that while Mexico has had a long history of efforts towards women's rights and liberation, women's struggles have not been widely published outside of Mexican feminist scholarship. In other words, prominent Mexican historical texts often omit women's role in Mexican history. Sandoval notes that Mexican feminists range from "the seventeenth-century Mexican nun, scholar, and poet, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who chose the convent in order to follow her intellectual pursuits, to the women who fought for women's suffrage, to the organizers of the first women's congress in Yucatán, to Rosario Castellanos, the writer and ambassador of modern Mexico" (9). She claims that Mexican women have been closely affiliated with movements and developments within Mexico even though not much has been written on the topic in conventional historical texts.

If Rodríguez's performances call attention to a variety of social justice issues, what aspects of her performances get read or interpreted as particularly feminist? To begin to answer this question, I refer to Laura G. Gutierrez's book *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage*, in which she argues that the Mexican and Chicana artists, including Jesusa Rodríguez, make connections between sex, which is considered an intimate practice, and the more public issues of political and economic accords (12). Mexican artists like Rodríguez, connect feminist issues of gender and sexuality with other issues that fall outside feminist discourses. These connections serve as a way to critique culture, specifically the heteronormative paradigms associated with *mexicanidad*, *chicanismo*, and *americanidad* (18). Gutierrez states that these artists employ "performative strategies to challenge general and fixed understandings of 'lo mexicano' but do not completely distance themselves from this dominant narrative of national and cultural belonging. The *vendidas* and *cabareteras* who make up the

pages of *Performing Mexicanidad* are queerly reshaping ‘lo mexicano’ (21). Artists like Rodríguez, then, are making use of forms of intimacy or sexuality to unsettle heteronormative paradigms constructed through Mexican national culture. Gutierrez’s work is in conversation with this chapter and informs the transnational scholarly dialogue I am entering given that she demonstrates the direct links between feminist issues and other sociocultural issues that Rodríguez addresses in her performances. Because Rodríguez highlights issues of gender and sexuality in explicit ways (stressing female to female relationships, showing nudity, embodying female archetypes), she is associated as a feminist performance artist even though she also uses her performances to comment on transnational and global issues affecting other populations as well.

From Coatlicue to Transgenic Corn: The Role of Indigeneity in Rodríguez’s Performances

Jesusa Rodríguez has staged the myth of Coatlicue in a variety of her performances. For example, in an interview with Jean Franco, Rodríguez notes that “[i]t occurred to me to construct a puppet Coatlicue and get inside her to make her dance. When I designed the puppet so that I could move the serpents all over the place and make her hearts beat, the response of the public astonished me very much because I never expected people to open up their hearts” (quoted in Newell 95). Deaneen M. Newell, in “Women Staging Change: Dissimulation and Cultural Politics in Mexico” (2005) notes that her performance of *La gira mamal de Coatlicue* (1990) works in opposition to the papal visit to Mexico in 1996 and the relegation of native iconography to museums. Likewise, my work on objects aims to resist the tendency to place native and feminine objects within archival spaces like museums. This is not to say that museums and archives are all working towards a nationalist project that mystifies indigenous cultures.

However, as I have mentioned in my other chapters, when objects are relegated to museum spaces, they often become decontextualized or contextualized according to a particular western frame of thought rather than from an indigenous cosmology, consciousness, or way of being.

Why does Rodríguez choose to depict Coatlicue as opposed to other indigenous female deities? What are the stories associated with Coatlicue that make her a particularly feminist indigenous icon? Fray Diego de Duran, who collected narratives from indigenous people after the sixteenth century Spanish conquest, provides an answer to these questions. The narratives he collected included the story of Motecuhzoma's (also known as Moctezuma) search for Coatlicue (Gómez-Cano 19). According to the story, Chief Motecuhzoma searches for Aztlán, his place of origin, and after five years of drought, there is rumor that Coatlicue, Huitzilopochtli's mother was alive. Motecuhzoma wants Coatlicue to stop the droughts but since she is unhappy due to her separation from her son, she refuses to do this. Motecuhzoma searches and sends for Coatlicue to receive presents; when they find Coatlicue she says that she's been waiting for her son to return and has been mourning and crying since then. Coatlicue also reprimanded the Mexica telling them that they are cruel for abandoning their families for positions of power. Her prophecy to them was that they would experience the same type of attacks from others that they had committed and would be forced out of their city. When the men return to report to Motecuhzoma and Tlacaelel, his second in command, they worry about Coatlicue's prophecy coming true. Shortly after Motecuhzoma's reign ended, and following another fifty-two years, European colonization began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

Grisel Gómez-Cano states in *The Return to Coatlicue* that this myth depicts Coatlicue in a positive light by disapproving of militarism and asking for the reunion of families (20), which is a striking contrast to the negative associations attached to her statue when it was disinterred.

When Coatlicue's statue was buried during the Spanish Conquest of Mexico and unearthed in 1790, she was perceived as an "object of horror" that defied European standards of beauty (Franco 205-07). The myths associated with Coatlicue also linked her with concepts of death and ritual sacrifices, which further reinforced these negative associations. Gómez-Cano, who cites Diego de Duran's narratives, provides a counterpoint to this perception by also demonstrating that Coatlicue has other associations as well, such as her identity as a mother. Coatlicue is used as a feminist icon because of these multiple and often dualistic traits. Coatlicue's presence as a statue in Mexico City serves as a reminder of the indigenous origin and presence in Mexico, and makes her both a national and feminist symbol of indigeneity.

Coatlicue's symbolic meaning as an Aztec goddess as well as her recognizable status in Mexico makes her a convenient figure to embody in Jesusa Rodríguez's performances of resistance to Mexican state policies. In her article "Body as Codex-ized Word" Micaela Díaz Sánchez, like Jean Franco and other Latino and Latin-American Studies scholars, notes how Rodríguez's performance of and as Coatlicue in 1993 was a response to a papal visit. She states that she was working against the "early-twentieth-century celebration of pre-Columbian artifacts in the name of nation-building by federally funded Mexican archeologists" (34). While investing in the preservation of Mexico's indigenous past, the government was also putting into effect policies that would exterminate the very descendants of the artifacts in these museums (34-5). In other words, "Rodríguez as Coatlicue spectacularizes this legacy as she indicts the Mexican government for its institutional exaltation of an [i]ndigenous past and simultaneous repression of contemporary Indigenous communities" (36).

Some of Rodríguez's contemporary performances that directly address indigenous issues include, *Arquetipas* (2004), *Cabaret Prehispánico* (2005), and *Maíz* (2008). All of these

performances protest against the use of genetically modified corn in Mexico and the Monsanto Company, which is behind this movement (Kumar 98). In 1996, the Monsanto Company initiated the first large scale planting of genetically modified plants in the U.S. This was a result of a technique developed from the 1970s forward that manipulated crops at a structural, functional, and subcellular level. In this field of biotechnology, scientists were breaking, reconnecting, and splicing sequences of DNA, transforming the physical characteristics of the life form with the intent to make farming less expensive, protect crops against pests, and enhance their nutritional value (100). U.S. agrochemical companies and corporations were trying to develop a monopoly to patent these transgenic seeds. By 1987, Monsanto was able to sow the first genetically altered plant in Illinois (101). The genetic modification of corn is of particular importance to indigenous people in Mexico because many of them are peasant farmers who rely on corn to make a living. Many of them also view corn as a central part of their Mexican and indigenous cultures. Rodríguez's performances comment on the use of transgenic seeds from the perspective of how they contaminate and homogenize Mexican crops, as well as limit the number of farming jobs, which further oppresses the indigenous individuals who are accustomed to working these jobs.

The movement towards genetically modifying seeds is not just happening in local communities in Mexico, and instead is an example of agricultural imperialism, which literally makes globalization a force of nature. Prior to Monsanto's involvement with Mexico, the company was based in the United States and sold consumer goods, such as lawn chemicals, to U.S. American homeowners during the early twentieth century (Landa, Covell, and Ingram). As the company expanded and took on new leadership in the 1970s and 1980s, it shifted away from these consumer goods and entered the field of biotechnology (Landa, Covell, and Ingram). In the

1990s, Monsanto expanded its products internationally and started testing genetically modified plants. It was during the 1990s that Monsanto began to sell products in Mexico (Landa, Covell, and Ingram). In Mexico, the use of GM crops has dramatically affected the indigenous farmers who work the land, and has received a different kind of reaction than in the U.S. One way that GM crops affect Mexico's indigenous population has to do with income inequality. Even though Mexico has a larger population of farmers than the U.S. or Canada, they are peasant farmers with few capital endowments; therefore they make a smaller income than the other countries (Pechlaner and Otero 356).

Another strong issue is the preservation of food sovereignty. Mexico is corn's place of origin; within both Maya and Aztec creation stories, all humans are made from and/or in the shape of corn. Thus, preserving the biological diversity of corn is an important issue to the country as a means of preserving not just the crop but the Mexican culture as well. Another way GM crops affect Mexico's population is via the use and distribution of land. The transnational corporation, Grupo Pulsar (also known as "Mexico's Monsanto") has attempted to push the use of transgenic seeds south of central Mexico towards the land of indigenous communities (363). Additionally, the Agrarian Reform Law that passed in 1992 facilitated the sale of this land, which was once inalienable (363). Again, this especially affects Mexico's poor indigenous population because having access to land allows them a kind of food security that would be unavailable to them, given the few resources or access to jobs they receive from the government. Since the rise in use of transgenic corn there have been a series of protests, social movements and even armed insurrections aimed at expressing resistance towards the use of GM crops, beginning with the Zapatista uprising I mentioned earlier.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ I understand that my description of agricultural relations in this chapter has simplified a very complex set of dynamics occurring on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico. Issues between the U.S. and Mexico related

Representations of Coatlicue from a U.S. and Mexican Context

Coatlicue can be understood as a symbol of resistance against the use of GM crops in Mexico; this is because Coatlicue has a history of being used as an icon to stand in for a variety of different political agendas, including the feminist movements in the U.S. In the states, Chicanas have used Coatlicue as an icon of resistance in their writings and cultural productions. For example, in Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, her chapter on "*La herencia de Coatlicue: the Coatlicue State*" provides a description of Coatlicue the goddess, Coatlicue the Statue and Coatlicue as a mental state that enters Anzaldúa's psyche. Anzaldúa's writing is exemplary as one of the many Chicanas to use Coatlicue as a feminist symbol and part of what Jean Franco calls "New Age Mexican Feminism" (Franco, "Return of Coatlicue" 216). Coatlicue, the goddess, births and devours everything. She is the monster that devoured all living and celestial beings. Coatlicue is also a "rupture in our everyday world. As the Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in darkness" (Anzaldúa 68). Coatlicue the statue has multiple limbs, each with a particular meaning. Anzaldúa describes the statue:

She has no head. In its place two spurts of blood gush up, transfiguring into enormous twin rattlesnakes facing each other, which symbolize the earth-bound character of human life. She has no hands. In their place are two more serpents in the form of eagle-like claws, which are repeated at her feet: claws which symbolize the digging of graves into the earth as well as the sky-bound eagle, the

to crop and farm worker exploitation are not new but rather ongoing and in fact, after World War II, the U.S. launched a bracero program that initiated labor agreements to bring temporary migrant Mexican farm workers into the U.S. For more information on the history of relations between the U.S. and Mexico from the perspective of Bracero migrants, see *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (2011) by Deborah Cohen.

masculine force. Hanging from her neck is a necklace of open hands alternating with human hearts. The hands symbolize the act of giving life; the hearts, the pain of mother Earth giving birth to all her children, as well as the pain that humans suffer throughout life in their hard struggle for existence. The hearts also represent the taking of life through sacrifice to the gods in exchange for their preservation of the world. In the center of the collar hangs a human skull with living eyes in its sockets. Another identical skull is attached to her belt. These symbolize life and death together as parts of one process” (69)

For Anzaldúa, Coatlicue is the goddess of birth and death given that she conceived all beings. However, she takes this goddess and articulates how Coatlicue has also become a state, one of multiple “archetypes” (68) that occupy her psyche. Anzaldúa, however, attributes a different definition of archetype. Instead of considering Coatlicue as an original model from which copies are made (OED def. 1), she takes Jung and James Hillman’s definition of “archetypes” as “the presences of gods and goddesses in the psyche” (quoted in Anzaldúa 118). This state represents duality, synthesis of duality, as well as a third perspective (68). Coatlicue, as a god, statue, or state, serves as a material embodiment of metaphysical presences. Chicanas appropriate Coatlicue’s enigmatic and polysemic iconography for a feminist agenda that stresses bridging multiple identities.

While Coatlicue in the U.S. context has been deployed by Chicanas as an image and symbol of feminism and solidarity, Coatlicue in Mexico has had a less positive and more mixed reception. As I referenced earlier, the statue of Coatlicue was buried during Mexico’s Conquest and unearthed from the Zócalo along with the Calendar Stone in 1790 (Franco, “Return of Coatlicue” 207). The statue was placed in the patio rather than the cathedral wall where the

Calendar Stone was placed. By 1805 it was reburied and disinterred following the Mexican Independence where it was displayed at the National Museum. Jean Franco notes that it was difficult to incorporate Coatlicue's statue into Mexico's nationalist ideology given that it "defied every aesthetic standard of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment that made human proportions the measure for beauty and the face the mirror of self-contemplation" (208). The myth behind the statue's presence was also difficult to incorporate into Mexico's national history given its associations with death and the ritual of sacrifice, which was considered by many as aberrant or primitive (208; 210). Another version of the Coatlicue myth, as written in the Florentine Codex, goes like this: one day while Coatlicue is sweeping at the temple courtyard she runs into a ball of feathers which touch her apron and impregnate her. She becomes pregnant with Huitzilopochtli, god of sun and war. Upon learning about their mother's conception, Coatlicue's children, namely her daughter Coyolxauhqui, became infuriated and plotted to kill her. Once Coatlicue gives birth, Huitzilopochtli dismembers Coyolxauhqui, and she becomes the moon. As Larissa Mercado-López notes, within Mexican origin stories Coyolxauhqui actually beheads and kills her mother while she gives birth to her son, who then murders his sister (81). This story along with Coatlicue's transgressive physical features was not easily accepted within Mexico's history. Around the time of the Mexican Revolution, Mexican scholars began to rewrite history and incorporated Coatlicue's statue as part of Mexico's ideology of mestizaje and started to embrace its indigenous traditions (Franco, "Return of Coatlicue" 210). Since then, "artists, many influenced by surrealism, read into the [Coatlicue] statue a prehistory of the human and ... art critics, with a nationalist agenda, argued that she represented a beauty superior to that of Greek and Roman sculptures" (211). Unlike other artists who attempt to incorporate Coatlicue within a nationalist discourse, Rodríguez uses Coatlicue's image in her performances to discuss

transnational and global issues related to advances in science and technology (transgenic seeds). Rather than objectifying Coatlicue to associate her with a patriarchal motherhood, Rodríguez embodies Coatlicue to queer these motherhood narratives and stress female-female rather than heteronormative male-female relationships. I will address how she queers Greek and Aztec myths in my analysis of *Cielo de abajo*.

Birthing the Queer: Life and Death Encounters in *Cielo de abajo*

This chapter has provided details about Rodríguez's performance trajectory, the conceptual framework guiding this chapter, the national context out of which she is emerging, and the role of indigeneity and Coatlicue in her performances. For the second half of this chapter, I am taking this information and looking at how it is reflected in two case studies, *Cielo de abajo* and *Arquetipas*. *Cielo de abajo* is a cabaret piece that Jesusa Rodríguez and her partner Liliana Felipe performed in Spanish and Nahuatl at the Teatro Bar El Hábito in Mexico City in June 1992. According to the Hemispheric Institute, *Cielo de abajo* is a 'prehispanic cabaret' focused on the interactions that a soul of an indigenous woman has while traveling through nine levels of the pre-Hispanic underworld in order to mourn her lover (HIDVL). As the story goes, the indigenous woman follows the path mapped in the sacred Nahuatl text of the Popol Vu and in the text from Alfredo López Austin's "Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas" (The Human Body and Ideology: The Ideas of the Ancient Nahuas). Based on the indigenous concept of the afterlife where souls must undergo a journey to reach their resting place, "this cabaret performance poses a poetic exploration of love, gender, seduction, sacrifice, and death" (Rodríguez, "Cielo de abajo"). Rodríguez's performance of *Cielo de abajo*, I argue, provides a series of critiques against heteronormative and patriarchal Greek and Aztec myths.

Rodríguez also reinterprets these myths through a queer and feminist lens. She accomplishes this by presenting a hybrid theatrical style, a performance style that blends aspects of cabaret, ritual, and activist performance genres. Specifically, one of the ways her hybrid theater gets materialized on stage is through her haptic engagement with a Coatlicue costume. While she does not explicitly use this costume to critique neoliberal policies or transgenic crops in this performance, she *does* provide a way for her audience members to rethink indigenous and queer concerns. Rodríguez's costume helps her disengage with the heteronormativity of the mythical narratives and enhances her focus on female-to-female relationships.

From the first section of the show, and before the Coatlicue costume is introduced, one can see that this is a hybrid performance due to the way seemingly opposing objects are positioned on stage. In the first section, the audience will see a human skeleton sitting next to office technological equipment. The paradoxical image of a skeleton sitting near "high-tech" devices can indicate to the audience that this performance will be about life, death, science, and technology. The play has four sections, including: the High Aztec, the Earth, the Underworlds, and the Finale. In this first section, the High Aztec, the scene begins with a series of small red dots barely lighting what looks like an imperceptible cage. This imperceptible cage is actually the rib of the human skeleton. The dots focus on the computer screen resemble what Diana Taylor refers to as a Pac-Man type character trying to get out of a pit. This seeming game escalates along with the sounds of a classical concerto until it all crashes ending in silence and darkness (144). Once the lighting changes, the cage becomes recognizable as the rib from the human skeleton mentioned earlier. This skeleton is then seen sitting on a "high-tech desk with computers, printers, fax, telephones, television and videos" (144). The descriptive program, provided for the audience to have an understanding of the play, does not offer an explanation of

this scene. Instead, it says that the play will be about an “undistinguished soul” who must travel across the nine levels of the prehispanic underworld only to finally reach the ninth level where they hand over goods to Michlantecuhltli and meet their final destruction (Taylor 143). The first section of the performance contradicts what is indicated on the program because none of the “high-tech” objects on stage reference a “prehispanic” world. Instead, these objects reference a kind of hybrid performance style because of the mixing of human and technological frameworks, the skeleton that provides a framework for the human body and the technological equipment that provides the hardware for technology to function.

Just as Rodríguez’s first scene seems to deviate from the description provided in the program, similarly, Rodríguez’s performance does not rely completely on a recital of a text. This means that both Rodríguez and Felipe, instead of prioritizing the text, place an emphasis on what can be communicated and performed gesturally, with their bodies. The emphasis is on the material and haptic experience produced with live performance. While there is ample scholarship on Rodríguez’s earlier versions of prehispanic cabaret, including *Cielo de abajo*, Diana Taylor’s article “‘High Aztec’ or Performing Anthro Pop: Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe in ‘Cielo de abajo’” is relevant here because she describes the steps involved in producing this performance. Taylor describes *Cielo de abajo* as a piece that is:

based on a prehispanic conception of the afterlife of mortal souls during their arduous journey to their final resting place. Jesusa and Liliana developed the idea over a four-year period, using sources such as the *Popul Voh* (sic) (the sacred text of the Nahuas) and *Cuerpo humano e ideología: Las concepciones de los antiguos nahuas* (The Human Body and Ideology: The Ideas of the Ancient Nahuas) by Alfredo López Austin. Their final script, partly Nahuatl (the language of the so-

called Aztecs), partly Spanish came together with the help of Malu Huacuja, a long-time associate of both women. Yet, the production is a visual tour de force, an animated, moving sculpture, and relies very little on the text. As Jesusa and Liliana make plans to tour the U.S. And Europe with the show in 1993, there is talk of eliminating the text almost completely. (Taylor 143)

It is critical here that Taylor refers to the text as something that is inessential, and possibly eliminated from future performances. Rodríguez's performance challenges the theatrical dependence upon a written text and instead favors a mode of performance that is more improvisational. By analyzing her gestures and use of a costume, I too am offering methodology that resists the textualism of dominant and Eurocentric forms of knowledge-production.

In the next section, the Earth, Rodríguez again deviates from a text but this time she deviates from the Greek myth she performs. In "the Earth," Rodríguez begins to introduce the queer aspects of the performance by querying the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and queering these gendered mythological figures. Rodríguez performs this Greek myth with a difference given that she emphasizes a lesbian relationship and body. Diana Taylor mentions that bodies are gendered inasmuch as they are socially produced. While this may be true, I would add that Rodríguez uses the theater stage to expand these limitations, by reinterpreting myths through a queer lens. This queer lens is revealed each time she critiques heteronormative and patriarchal myths through her language, gestures, and costume-use. "The Earth" section shows Rodríguez playing the part of an indigenous woman who is braiding her hair and mourning her lover's death. The scene ends with her leaving to the underworld to look for her lover—"a female Orpheus in search of her female Eurydice" (144). Taylor mentions that this performance is playing with rather than reiterating the trope of technology and human self-destruction and that the first

section in relation to the second section has to do with the difficulty of seeing cross-culturally and cross-historically (144). Taylor states: “We are trapped in our bodies, the play suggests. Our bodies are our cages, not only insofar as they situate and limit us in space, time and history but also to the degree that our notions of bodies and gender are socially produced” (144). She goes on that it is through contemporary eyes that we can try to understand the prehispanic world. It has been twenty years since this performance was presented and yet it is still as vital, if not more, to our conversations about understanding indigeneity and indigenous cultures in the 21st century. From my understanding and through my Chicana-oriented lens, I interpret Rodríguez’s performance as a way to prioritize the figure of an indigenous woman in performance by positioning her at the forefront of this scene. I also interpret this performance as an example of a scene in which a woman is mourning the loss of a female-to-female relationship rather than the male-to-female relationship represented in the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In both instances, she prioritizes the representation and experience of an indigenous woman all the while queering a Greek myth. I claim that Rodríguez’s performances add a queer element to the extent that her performance draws on elements of cabaret performance, a transgressive form that has always had a relationship of antagonism to the Mexican state and a relationship to queer sexualities. Rodríguez’s hybrid theatrical style, that includes cabaret, is a queer form that provides her with a framework to make such critiques about queer and indigenous issues.

In addition to queering Greek mythology, Rodríguez also cites Aztec myths to critique the patriarchy embedded in them. For example, Rodríguez and Felipe make fun of and critique patriarchal Aztec stories, such as the story of Iztaccíhuatl that Popocatepetl. They focus on the wordplay of terms like *popo* and *caca* to associate the names of these recognizable figures with shit. In doing so, they signal to the audience that there is something problematic, disgusting, and

worthless about the myth of Iztaccíhuatl that Popocatépetl. At one point in this performance, both characters (Rodríguez and Felipe) begin to drink undistilled tequila from a maguey cactus and while drunk also begin a cabaret in Nahuatl, repeating two words Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl (Mexico's two famous volcanoes) but as they repeat these words and break them down they start to pronounce the sounds of *popo* and *caca* colloquial words standing for shit in Spanish. Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl are names of volcanoes in Mexico that in Nahuatl refer to a male warrior guarding his sleeping female lover (147). According to one variation of the legend, Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl are lovers who plan to get married but in order to have Iztaccíhuatl's hand in marriage, Popocatépetl must first return victorious from war. A rival then chooses to tell Iztaccíhuatl that Popocatépetl died in battle and she dies of sadness. When Popocatépetl returns from war he discovers Iztaccíhuatl dead. To honor her, he carries Iztaccíhuatl's body up a mountain with a smoking torch, watches over her, and eventually dies. The Gods then transform their bodies into mountains. This story depicts Iztaccíhuatl as a passive woman who must be swept away and protected by a man. Mexican artists like Jesús Helguera depict her as a light-skinned and feminine woman while Popocatépetl is represented as a darker hypermasculine man. Rather than reiterate the same heteronormative story of this Aztec myth, Rodríguez and Felipe focus on critiquing it by highlighting the pun in the words "popo" and "caca" which associates this myth with profanities related to fecal matter. This type of wordplay, as I mentioned earlier, works in the service of challenging the patriarchal and heteronormative associations of these Aztec icons.

After this section in the performance, the audience is introduced to the figure of Coatlicue, who gives birth to Rodríguez on stage. After her birth Rodríguez forms a bond with Felipe, which reiterates the performance's emphasis on female-to-female relationships. In this

performance, Coatlicue is characterized as an outspoken figure that protests about her experiences of motherhood. In a scene where a pyramid emerges out of the dark, Coatlicue, mother of gods, also emerges at the top of the pyramid. Coatlicue sticks her tongue out, flaps her hands, moves her skull head, dances, and mentions the betrayal of her four hundred children. She self-consciously addresses the difficulty of motherhood and sacrificing for others with little appreciation. Ironically, she gives birth yet again but this time she gives birth to Rodríguez. This section ends with the women, Rodríguez and Felipe reuniting and celebrating. Following this part, the women travel to an unknown place. Felipe is wounded and while reaching towards the pyramid her naked skin shows blood spilling out of her heart. She dies at the pyramid underneath Coatlicue. Rodríguez's corpse suddenly joins her and they appear to be in a funeral home adorned with wreaths and toy skeletons. The women get up run towards the top of the stairs holding hands and fling open two French doors atop the pyramid jumping out through these doors towards a new life (149). In this section, the Coatlicue reveals herself as a figure that is self-conscious about the struggle of being a self-sacrificing mother to four hundred children. Coatlicue also gives birth to Rodríguez with no mention of her having a father. Another way that Rodríguez queers mythology is by representing the myth of Coatlicue in the absence of other male deities.

I should clarify that Rodríguez queers her performance and encourages her audience members to rethink indigenous concerns not simply through the image of Coatlicue alone, but also through the gestures Rodríguez makes and the haptic materiality of the costume she wears. Coatlicue's characterization in this performance transforms her into a figure who recognizes and vocalizes the problematic aspects of being a self-sacrificing mother. Coatlicue's visual representation, as demonstrated through her costume, is also transformative in that it influences

the way that Rodríguez inhabits the theater space. Donning a similar costume as in *Arquetipas*, the Coatlicue costume has no head and instead has two snakes as heads, with a skull as a belt buckle, human hearts on her waist, human hands on her chest, and claws as feet (148). Following her role as mother, Coatlicue gives birth on stage. This happens right before she begins to dance around in a circular motion. She expresses the sound of pain as if she is struggling to move, and that is when we see Rodríguez emerge from below her with green skin. She crawls down a staircase, assisted by Felipe, and then screams in pain. Felipe faces Coatlicue and addresses her, reminding her that this is her “criatura” (translates to “creature,” “thing” or “infant”), and Coatlicue jumps down from the top of the stairs towards the bottom near Rodríguez and Felipe. This moment serves as an example of Rodríguez’s transformative use of the Coatlicue costume. During the moment that Rodríguez as Coatlicue sonically expresses her birthing pain the costume literally becomes the space, home, or womb, through which Rodríguez emerges and is born. Garments like costumes, particularly the fold of the clothing, are “the first space in which you live. You access it as if entering your house, your own primary architecture” (Bruno 24). In wearing, articulating, and then coming out of the “house” that is her costume, Rodríguez reshapes and reconstructs this costume and thus calls attention to what it signifies for indigenous, particularly Aztec cultures. Coatlicue is a motherhood figure who simultaneously represents birth and destruction. Her characterization in the performance, as a mother who acknowledges the problematic aspects of motherhood expectations (e.g. a mother must self-sacrifice) but goes on to have another child, calls attention to the contradictory and unstable aspects of Aztec motherhood myths. In other words, Rodríguez’s representation of Coatlicue calls attention to the multifaceted aspect of Aztec motherhood myths where figures like Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl, and Tonantzin, for

example, will stand in for multiple, often dual, meanings and responsibilities including creation and destruction or life and death.

In other sections from this performance, the emphasis on unstable characters continues. Rather than reifying stable and limiting representations of women that follow heteronormative and patriarchal expectations, the female characters in this performance are represented as having split identities and split bodies. For instance, section three on the underworld continues to queer mythology by revealing and prioritizing the lesbian body. Here we find the indigenous woman reunited with her lover, played by Liliana Felipe. The woman wears a skeleton as a cloak “much in the way prehispanic warriors and heroes put on leopard skins or quetzal plumes to assume the animal’s powerful characteristics” (144-45). Felipe has been broken into body parts. In the recorded performance, we can see these body parts within a hole. We, the audience can see the lover’s hand, eyes, lips, tongue, breast, foot, and vaginal hair. The mouth spits at the audience with an angry tone. The woman (Rodríguez) and her lover (Felipe) lead the audience across rivers, winds, and other lands. Taylor notes that through this landscape “Jesusa and Liliana lead the audience on an exploration of love, gender, seduction, sacrifice, and death that radically recast both the highly gendered indigenous cosmivision (beginning with Mother Earth / Father Sky)” (145).⁴⁹ This exploration leads to the two women turning against each other as the woman’s lover mimics her feelings and they are both “emotionally and physically ... stripped down to the core” (145). The section ends with them losing their memory and selfhood. Not only do Rodríguez and Felipe lose their memory, indicating a rupture in their identities but also in exposing Felipe’s body parts one by one, her body is broken apart and objectified. This

⁴⁹ Because this piece has so much to do with eroticism and individuation, Taylor goes on to compare the performance to the work by Bataille’s work on *Eroticism, Death & Sensuality. The Sky Below*’s interpretation of eroticism and individuation does not reiterate the masculinist version of Batailles nor does it suppress the female body. Instead, the two women seek to please themselves as lovers.

fragmenting of their characterization and bodies suggests that representations of women as unified and stable can be problematic since they often also position women in limiting gender roles that follow heteronormative and patriarchal expectations.

The incorporation of Coatlicue into this “high-tech Aztec” performance is one way that Rodríguez both resists gender roles (i.e. Coatlicue is known to represent dualities) but also hybridizes her performance style (the Coatlicue costume functions more like a puppet than a garment). The Coatlicue costume, for example, provides a striking visual contrast to the costumes that Rodríguez and Felipe’s characters wear since the former is thick and dense while the latter is thin and light. By introducing an image of a prominent indigenous deity into her performance, the content of the performance changes; likewise, the interactions between actor and costume change. Looking at the image of Coatlicue the most prominent aspect of the costume is her serpent skirt. Indeed, Coatlicue was named in 1790 after this carved skirt (Klein 229). It is primarily this skirt that genders and names the costume— also the statue that it resembles—indicating that this deity is female. Merely looking at the size of the costume and the fact that the only limbs that Rodríguez articulates are the feet and the two pendant breasts sitting below where her head should lie, one can tell that the physicality of the costume affects Rodríguez’s movement; she moves Coatlicue’s large feet in quick short strides as opposed to the steady pace she has when not wearing the costume. Additionally, the presence of the Coatlicue costume also changes Rodríguez’s interactions with her audience due to the way that the costume affects the overall sentiment and reception of the performance. For example, up to this point the performance has focused on the theme of death. The performance commenced with an image of a skeleton. Then the official narrative began with the presence of an indigenous woman (Rodríguez) on stage seeking to find her lover (Felipe) in the underworld. Once Coatlicue

emerged, the performance visually identified its indigenous focus. Likewise, it was once Coatlicue appeared that the moment of a birth was staged.

Introducing Coatlicue into this performance also changed the interactions between actor and costume due to shifts in the available range of motion. Whereas the indigenous woman (played by Rodríguez) and her lover (Felipe) wear few garments—light cloths, loincloths, and/or body paint, the Coatlicue costume is made of thick, sturdy and boxy material resembles a seemingly immobile stone that stands in Mexico’s National Museum of Anthropology. The costume is not easily manipulated or foldable. Instead it lies on top of Rodríguez’s body, as if consuming her. The surface of the costume covers so much of Rodríguez’s body that her range of motion becomes limited. With regards to surfaces, Giuliana Bruno reminds us that:

When we touch a surface, we experience immersion and inversion fully, and reciprocity is a quality of this touch. There is a haptic rule of thumb: when we touch something or someone, we are inevitably, touched in return. When we look, we are not necessarily being looked at, but when we touch, by the very nature of pressing our hand on any part of our body on a subject or object, we cannot escape the contact. Touch is never unidirectional, a one-way street. It always enables an affective return. (19)

This reciprocal contact between a subject and object to which Bruno refers is similar to the occurrence that happens when Rodríguez appears on stage wearing the Coatlicue costume. By the very fact that the costume is larger than other garments Rodríguez wears and covers more surface of her body, the costume changes the mood and atmosphere of the piece. A change in costume results in a change in sensation, which produces a change in sentiment given that “the sense of sensing extends from sensations to sentiments, from sensory surface to psychic

sensibility” (20). As such, I would argue that the costume itself, through its difference in materiality, enhances the queer elements already introduced by cabaret performance. Since the costume is large and all encompassing, it affects the range of movements (e.g. walking or dancing) that Rodríguez can make while donning it. The costume then affects the way that Rodríguez orients herself on the space of the stage and affects the ways that she interacts with Felipe on stage. Since cabaret performance in Mexico is directly linked with deviant or queer sexualities, when Rodríguez dons the costume and begins to sing and dance while wearing the costume, the costume then takes on queer associations.

Staging Indigenous and Global Concerns: Transgenic Seeds and Hybridity in *Arquetipas*

In both *Cielo de abajo* and *Arquetipas*, Rodríguez shows a haptic engagement with a costume that enhances or strengthens her queer form and her critiques of either patriarchal myths or in the latter case, neoliberal policies. Both performances stress indigenous issues, whether it is a problematic and limiting representation of female figures or the use of transgenic corn in a post-NAFTA Mexico. I argue that in each performance, Rodríguez highlights the ways that well-known myths or archetypes oppress and erase both queer and indigenous people. Her strategy to accomplish this is to use a costume as well as other objects to disrupt the singular or multiple narratives represented in each performance. Before continuing my analysis of the Coatlicue costume, I begin this section discussing some of the other Mexican female archetypes that Rodríguez introduces in *Arquetipas*. I do this as a means of identifying the problematic aspects of these well-known archetypes and myths. I will then show how Rodríguez’s engagement with the Coatlicue costume not only critiques this problematic representation of female figure but also

critiques broader issues pertaining to globalizing policies that have affected indigenous peoples in Mexico.

Arquetipas is another cabaret piece similar to *Cielo de abajo* that Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe performed in English and Spanish at the Skirball Center for the Performing Arts in New York City on November 10, 2004. This performance was part of the MexicoNOW festival, an annual festival that brings artists from across Mexico to New York to share and celebrate contemporary Mexican art and culture (“Celebrate Mexico Now”). *Arquetipas* offers a comedic critique of U.S. based foreign policies that have affected Latin America through the embodiment of archetypal characters such as “Freaka Kahlo,” “La Serpiente Enchilada,” and “Coatlicue.” More specifically, Rodríguez critiques “consumer society, repressive U.S. policies against illegal migrants, the imposition of transgenic corn in Mexico (which is currently endangering the ecodiversity of native corn), and the opening of an American megastore (the controversial Walmart) nearby the pre-Columbian pyramids of Teotihuacán” (Rodríguez, “Arquetipas”). The title “Arquetipas” refers to one of many neologisms and forms of wordplay that appear in the performance. As Laura Gutierrez notes, this term is a play on words and does not have a literal translation into English. Gutierrez says that “the closest translation may be ‘female archetypes’ but the use of ‘tipas’ here is meant to signal a particular Latin American and specifically Mexican way of referring to anyone in some generic form. For example, ‘aquella tipa’ is a phrase that is often used in Mexican Spanish to refer to ‘that woman or girl (over there),’ or ‘que tipo’ would translate to ‘what a guy!’” (Gutierrez 192). Befitting the title, all of the archetypes or characters that Rodríguez embodies are female. Rodríguez uses these female archetypes to critique the U.S. and its global policies.

All of the archetypes that Rodríguez embodies call attention to current events from the

U.S. that, as a result of globalization and other imperialistic processes, affect Mexico as well. The first archetype that the audience is introduced to is Frida or “Freaka” Kahlo. Rodríguez as Frida enters the stage on a wheelchair. Her miniature hands resemble a doll’s. Similar to *Cielo de abajo*, Rodríguez as Frida breaks the fourth wall and speaks to her audience, offering metatheatrical comments indicating that she is supposed to be an actress but instead, she is a painter. She mentions that this is a prehispanic cabaret. However, unlike *Cielo de abajo* this performance has no consistent narrative and rather than following a singular story, Frida begins to comment on U.S. political figures. For example, she states, “I don’t speak English. You don’t speak Spanish. I only know how to say like two words in English like ‘fuck Bush’ and ‘he is your fucking problem’” (Rodríguez, “Arquetipas”) This is a moment where Rodríguez reveals who her posited audience is. She assumes her audience does not speak Spanish especially since this is a U.S. American venue. Rodríguez as Frida proceeds to comment on consumerism by bringing a Barbie on stage and performs a ceremony to bury her by drinking out of a flask, smoking a cigar, and throwing money at the audience, leading up to her placing Barbie inside a casket and pushing her backstage with her wheelchair. This is a critique on the production, commercialization, and objectification of Frida Kahlo who has become a third-world icon and has been replicated into dolls and Barbies. By choosing to focus on destroying a product produced by the American toy company, Mattel Inc., Rodríguez is providing yet another critique of U.S. capitalism, appropriation, and imperialism. Not only is she critiquing U.S. capitalism but she accomplishes through a series of gestures that mimic a wealthy masculine individual (e.g. smoking a cigar and throwing money at the audience). The death of the Barbie doll is but one example of the ways that Rodríguez uses an object to show how the U.S. has appropriated Mexican culture for its own gain.

In addition to embodying the icon of Frida, Rodríguez also embodies the archetype of a hot-peppered serpent. The first time that the performance mentions the term “serpent” is when Rodríguez chooses to call herself a hot-peppered serpent in front of her audience. Serpent is a term that in Mexico has deep ties to indigenous deities, primarily Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec feathered serpent deity and Coatlicue, the Aztec serpent-skirt deity who is the mother of the Gods. Adorned with chili-shaped lights on her body, Rodríguez as Chilicoatl, the hot-peppered serpent, continues to critique the United States while dressed as a prominent crop in Mexico: chiles. She mentions, “What is this country most afraid of? Terrorism? Aliens? Violence? Fundamentalism? Diversity? God bless America, godless America. Homeless America, friendless America, ruthless America.” Dressed as a chili, Rodríguez on the one hand provides an image of a crop that is mostly imported from Mexico to the U.S.. She demonstrates the irony of Mexico being depicted as “different” and “alien,” yet the U.S. is reliant on its reproduction of crops. On the other hand, Rodríguez is also calling attention to the ways that chiles are often used to portray Latin American women in a racist and sexist way, as either “hot” or “spicy.” Similarly, in Mexico, Aztec myths like Quetzalcoatl and Coatlicue have been used in ways to continue reifying patriarchal gender roles. By bringing together the popular associations embedded in the terms “chili” and “serpent,” Rodríguez is calling attention to racist and sexist representation of both women and indigenous people in both Mexico and the U.S.

Her embodiment of and critique of prominent female archetypes and myths all lead Rodríguez to promote a call to action against the U.S. movement towards the use of genetically modified or transgenic seeds. Following the Hot-Peppered Serpent, in the next scene Rodríguez performs as Coatlicue, the Aztec female deity. Dressed as Coatlicue, whose costume, like in *Cielo de abajo* resembles a puppet, Rodríguez comments on the issue of the Monsanto Company

monopolizing transgenic corn. The presence of the Coatlicue costume is important since it represents the image of the statue, which is one of the few markers of a glorified pre-Columbian past. There is a particular link between her use of the Coatlicue costume and her critique of the Monsanto Company. While the Coatlicue costume may reference issues tied to the Mexican state, her references to the Monsanto Company then directly link these issues with global matters. In this performance Coatlicue is introduced when she enters the stage from upstage center.

Coatlicue is large, bulky, and a cream color tainted by what appears to be blood coming out of her “insatiable” mouth. Coatlicue has small hands and large protruding feet. She begins to speak about the importance of corn, about corn representing the seed that can ensure the resurrection of life. As she says this, her limbs, which are made up of various serpents, move. As I mentioned, Coatlicue continues to say that Monsanto is trying to monopolize corn and asks the audience what they will do about it. From a comical and metatheatrical standpoint she calls attention to the performance by asking them, “Really, what are you going to do?” (Rodríguez, “Arquetipas”). In this instance, Rodríguez accomplishes a wide range of verbal, corporeal, and material acts of critique. On the one hand, her words verbally call attention to the theatricality of the performance by questioning the audience members for their lack of action. In articulating and moving with the costume, she is corporeally enacting the frustration of the limited action she is referring to. In other words, the heavy weight and size of the costume prevents her from making quick movements. Her words express frustration while her body physically enacts that frustration of the limitation caused by wearing such a heavy costume.

In the same manner, just as Rodríguez’s contact with the Coatlicue costume is not seamless, so too the issues of commodifying and monopolizing Mexico’s culture and resources to benefit the U.S. (vis a vis Frida as Barbie doll and genetically modified corn) are messy and

problematic. Rodríguez produces friction in the form of encouraging her audience to resist and take a stand against these global developments that are negatively affecting Mexico's indigenous populations. The actual presence of the Coatlicue costume adds a material element to this concept of producing friction. The costume can be said to represent the indigenous aspect of her call to action against Monsanto. But as a costume, Coatlicue is mobile, wearable, and as a fabric it becomes her "second skin" or "sensory cloth" (to use Giuliana Bruno's term). Bruno notes that certain garments, and I would include costumes, are in a constant state of transformation (24). In this performance, I associate this costume in a constant state of change as well due to the ways that this pre-Columbian costume is used to call attention to contemporary issues that affect the culture and livelihood of indigenous peoples. However, it is not the costumes per se that cause the transformation but rather the material relations between actress and costume that produce this. For example, in an interview where Jesusa Rodríguez mentions her acting technique, she says that, "... it's not enough for you to just wear the mask or the costume of a certain character to look like him. The question is rather: What goes on beyond the costume?" (Rodríguez, "Nahuatlismo" 228). What goes on beyond the costume is the relation between the costume and the body that dons it, the haptic materiality that occurs when the surface of a costume is in contact with the surface of a body in motion. In Rodríguez's case, she uses her contact with the costume to produce a friction or contradiction between what her words are saying and what her gestures are indicating. While her words insist on a sudden movement and call to action against neoliberal policies, her actual physicality is limited by the burden of the thick material. Rodríguez is experiencing her own form of friction when donning an indigenous costume to discuss other issues of friction related transgenic seeds affecting indigenous populations that were manifested by the developments in contemporary science.

Across a twenty-year span, one of the consistent markers of this performance is Rodríguez's use of the Coatlicue costume, which appears similar, if not identical, in each performance. Regardless of the temporal divide, narratological differences, and stylistic mixing in each performance, the Coatlicue costume is symbolic enough as an iconic Aztec female deity to render itself present in several of her performances. The costume's materiality also adds to its symbolic function on stage by affecting Rodríguez's range of movement on stage, which affects how she delivers her critique of myths or policies. Whereas the Coatlicue costume in *Cielo de abajo* and *Arquetipas* are markedly similar, the performances themselves are not. *Cielo de abajo* has a linear and consistent narrative whereas *Arquetipas* is more episodic and nonlinear. The former was performed in Mexico City in 1992 while the latter was performed in New York City in 2004. The former was performed at an independent theater and bar (Teatro Bar El Hábito) while the latter was performed at a corporately sponsored center (Skirball Center for the Performing Arts). The former has more Mexican references and the latter has more U.S. based references. Even the choice of garments that the actresses wear change. The former included the actresses wearing less clothing than the latter. Nevertheless, this Coatlicue costume aligns both performances by providing a material and physical space (i.e. the space inside the costume) through which Rodríguez can perform and voice her concerns.

Conclusion

In 2008, nearly fifteen years since her performance of *Cielo de abajo*, and a few years after *Arquetipas*, Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe staged their *El Maíz* performance at the Los Angeles Theater Center as part of the Actions of Transfer conference hosted at UCLA. Like *Cielo de Abajo*, *El Maíz* deals with the topics of indigeneity, gender, and violence but more

specifically in relation to the genetic modification of seeds for Mexican crops like corn (C. Rodríguez 194). The performance is a hybrid of cabaret, ritual, and activist performance. This piece highlights several of Rodríguez and Felipe's performance repertoire and their tendency to perform works that mix performance genres. Chantal Rodríguez in her article, "Indigenous Myth as Action and Activism: Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe's *El Maíz* (Corn)," claims that *El Maíz* stages the female body as the center of "ideological, economical, political and social discourses, and for the transference of ideas, histories, myths, traditions and, ultimately, actions" (194). Again, we see Rodríguez's body exposed, semi-naked, covered only with a loincloth. We also see Rodríguez undergoing a journey to the underworld but this time to "reactivate the myth of the origins of corn" (194). Unlike *Cielo de abajo*, this piece does not have Liliana Felipe as a character; instead, she provides the musical accompaniment for the piece.

Also, since this piece was staged in 2008, Jesusa Rodríguez incorporated an image of the *caracol* a well-known symbol of the Zapatista movement. Rodríguez claims that this image aligns Rodríguez's performance with the indigenous struggle in Mexico, aligning her mestiza body to bridge the gap between two common treatments of indigeneity: "the mythical and romanticized view that relegates the indigenous to the past," and the "self-representation and affirmation of culture, land, and rights by contemporary indigenous peoples" ("Performing Latinidad" 175). Similar to the celebration of *indigenismo* in the early Chicana/o theatre movement *El Maíz* engages with representations of indigenous ritual, myth and iconography. In this way, Jesusa Rodríguez's work intersects with Cherríe Moraga's work since they both prioritize the representation of corn and acknowledge its importance within indigenous, specifically, Maya cultures. However, the ways in which they depict corn is different. For example, "[r]ather than mobilizing these links to an ancient heritage and ancestry as a means to

understanding a hybrid, U.S.–*mestizo* identity [as U.S. Chicana/os do], *El Maíz* performs hemispherically, addressing contemporary social and political issues which directly affect indigenous and non-indigenous communities across the hemisphere” (195). Again, we see that there is a trend in Rodríguez’s and Felipe’s performances to cite but not replicate certain tropes, citing the indigenous trope, playing with it, but not entirely replicating it. In her *El Maíz* performance, Rodríguez embodies the Aztec deity Quetzalcoatl, the feathered Serpent, referring to the myth of human creation. She associates both the figure of the serpent and corn as central to indigenous cultures in Mexico. In doing so, Rodríguez aims to both celebrate indigeneity by calling forth her audience to act in the interest of fighting against the contamination, homogenization, and modification of corn.

The performances mentioned in this chapter, as well as others not mentioned here, bring together notions of indigeneity with movement and materiality. Rodríguez blends indigeneity with movement by articulating the serpent arms on her costume. Meanwhile she also blends indigeneity with materiality by citing and in some cases presenting actual corn in her performances. In rethinking her engagement between her body and the materials she uses, I claim that Rodríguez is also reimagining relationships between subjects and objects, as well as subjects that become objectified. In presenting a hybrid performance, she calls attention to global issues that arise with hybrid developments in contemporary science, specifically transgenic crops. Rodríguez calls attention to the ways that hybridity is not just about seamless mixing but is also about the moments of friction that are produced in that mixing. Hybridity also does not always produce something positive but can also produce something devastating. As Anna Tsing states:

the effects of encounters across difference [or hybrid encounters] can be compromising or empowering. Friction is not a synonym of resistance. Hegemony

is made as well as unmade with friction ... Friction makes global connection powerful and effective. Meanwhile, without even trying, friction gets in the way of the smooth operation of global power. Difference can disrupt, causing everyday malfunctions as well as unexpected cataclysms.... Furthermore, difference inspires insurrection. (6)

With friction in mind, Rodríguez's insistence on publicizing indigenous concerns via performance offers an example of the ways that Mexican mestiza women can work on behalf of and in solidarity with indigenous women however messy that work may be.

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Chapter Three: Im(Prop)er Approaches to Mexican Motherhood Myths: An Analysis of Corn and Masks in the Theater Productions of Cherríe Moraga and Paulina Sahagun

This chapter looks at Chicana performances that highlight transgressive female indigenous mythical figures associated with motherhood. One section of this chapter examines references to corn in Cherríe Moraga's, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2005) to highlight how Aztec and Roman Catholic myths portray paradoxical (either dualistic or dichotomous) messages about motherhood. Another section analyzes masks, specifically those that stand in as representations of *calaveras* (skulls) in Paulina Sahagun's *Calavereando* (2012). I analyze masks to uncover how they cite the Aztec myth of Cihuacoatl (and others), but in performance the myths are resignified to resist Spanish colonial claims that the goddess is a "devil." Both performances, while stylistically and aesthetically different, use a prop, calavera mask or corn, to reference a preexisting Aztec mythology, reject Chicana gender roles associated with Catholic perceptions of women and/or motherhood, and affirm a post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. I claim that the resurfacing of indigenous myths via the use of props that occurs in both performances, work in the service of critiquing patriarchal ideologies that influence expectations of Chicana gender roles and motherhood. An analysis of objects is necessary because it provides an intervention in Chicana feminism that accounts for how materiality is implicated in feminist projects. Materiality is an important aspect of the Chicana cultural production and studying objects, specifically theater props, helps one understand how materiality affects Chicanas performers' social, cultural, and political formations.

Female Archetypes, Mythical Figures, and Props in Chicana Productions

Paulina Sahagun is a Chicana performance artist based in Santa Monica, California. Sahagun's work foregrounds the displacement of Latina/o Chicana/o communities, the economic/labor involved in producing art, and the importance of preserving cultural traditions. Cherríe Moraga, the noted Chicana writer, also produces work related to the topic of the Chicana intersectional identity, third-world feminism, and sexuality. Both Sahagun and Moraga's work is influenced by the theatrical performances that came out of the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a movement that drew heavily from the post-revolutionary Mexican *indigenismo* ideology. Thus, both Moraga and Sahagun write and stage performances that make use of archetypes, mythical figures, and props that come from a particular Chicana/o and Mexican cultural framework.

The performance repertoire of both Cherríe Moraga and Paulina Sahagun can be said to fall under the category of Chicana feminist performance, and as such, they both cite noted Mexican and Chicana/o virgin/whore archetypes. Moraga and Sahagun employ these archetypes, not as a means of reinforcing a virgin/whore dichotomy, but instead, to resist Spanish depictions of these archetypes as brutal or evil. Chicana feminist discourse articulates that within Chicana/o Theater, female roles have been limited to the virgin/whore dichotomy through the reiteration of archetypes like the Virgen de Guadalupe (virgin) and Malinche (whore) (Costa-Malcolm 58). The Virgen de Guadalupe is often associated with the Nahua goddess, Tonantzín, because she is said to have appeared on Tepeyac-Hill, the same site of an ancient temple for Tonantzín. During the Spanish colonial period, views of Tonantzín were demonized due to Christian and Catholic beliefs about paganism and female transgression. As a result, the citing of the Virgen de Guadalupe drew attention away from Tonantzín towards the Roman Catholic figure of the virgin.

Within Roman Catholicism and Christianity, the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe or the Virgin Mary:

represents the divine power of mothering and motherhood. Mother to Jesus Christ, and in Catholic tradition also seen as mother to all humanity, Mary is imbued with the qualities honorable to all women in their roles as mothers, especially compassion and self-sacrifice. In cultures with a strong Marian Catholic tradition, such as in much of Central America, Mary is held up as the example of what the ideal woman and mother should be like.... Mary is seen as simultaneously the mother of Christ but also a perpetual virgin in the Catholic tradition, setting up what some critics term an untenable dual standard for women in these traditions” (O’Reilly 1058).

Spanish colonial writings focus on the Virgin Mary, also known as the Virgen de Guadalupe, to reiterate the notion that women, especially mothers, should express feminine qualities of “compassion and self sacrifice.” These colonial writings also depicted other goddesses, such as Cihuacoatl (also known as “Serpent Woman” and “Skull-faced Woman”) as destructive rather than the more holistic view of her as both destructive and creative (Lara 101). Moraga and Sahagun take these oft-cited archetypes and, through their Chicana feminist critique, resist Spanish colonial interpretations.

Moraga and Sahagun have been involved in Chicana/o theater since the 1970s, during the peak period of the Chicana/o movement, and since then, they have continued to contribute work that is in conversation with these female archetypes. One archetype that particularly affected Chicanas was the popular figure of Malinche. For example, during the early years of the Chicana/o movement, Chicanas were often placed in one of two identities, they were either

supporters (also known as “Adelitas”) or traitors or the movement (also called “Malinchistas”) (Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art* Ch. 3). As “Adelitas,” Chicanas could not identify as feminists because this was considered antithetical to notions of family, culture, and ultimately Chicanismo. Those Chicanas who did identify as feminists were deemed “Malinchistas” and considered sellouts, traitors, lesbians, and men-haters (Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art* Ch. 3).

While representations of Malinche often connote her as a myth or conflate her with other transgressive female goddesses, she is also a historical figure. Malinche, born under the name Malintzin, came from Aztec nobility (Del Castillo 123). Following Malinche’s father’s death, her mother Cimatl remarried and had a second child, a son. It is believed that Cimatl and her new husband sold Malinche off to reap the inheritance (123). While very little has been documented on Malinche’s life before her encounter with Spaniards, what is certain is that she went from being an “Aztec princess to Mayan slave” (123). These are the conditions under which she became the interpreter and mistress of Hernán Cortés (Messinger-Cypess 2). The historical event of Malinche’s encounter with Cortés has been repeatedly reinterpreted, however problematically, to reflect the needs of each generation (2). Despite the little information known on Malinche’s life, she now comes to represent a symbol of passivity and betrayal, *la chingada* (the fucked one) as Octavio Paz famously described her (11).

The figures of the Virgen de Guadalupe and Malinche function as a means of reiterating the notion that indigenous, specifically Nahua, myths and legends are evil given that Christians associate particular items, like serpents, with sin. In the twentieth and twenty-first century, this colonial legacy manifests itself with the resurfacing of Malinche myths (rather than historical facts), which continue to haunt Chicanas who are seen as traitors to the Chicana/o cause. As I will later elaborate on, Moraga takes the archetype of Malinche and hybridizes it with other

Mexican and Chicana/o figures like La Llorona, Tonantzín, Coatlicue as well as European figures like Eve, Mary, and Medea, in order to make a critique about gendered expectations that affect women, such as the ones depicted in *The Hungry Woman*.

Chicana feminists, including Moraga and Sahagun, have found Aztec motherly female myths and legends useful, given that they are seeking to resist the masculinist nationalism within the Chicano culture, the Chicano movement, as well as the patriarchal Western cultural norms that preceded the Chicano movement (Costa-Malcolm 167). This kind of well-documented Aztec indigenous culture grants Chicanas access to cultural affiliations and ideologies that fall outside of a U.S. and Mexican context in which they are subordinate. For instance, in predominant Mexican associations of Aztec motherly deities, like Virgen de Guadalupe/Tonantzín, the virgin/whore dichotomy remains. In addition to the Virgen and Tonantzín, other figures that are often conflated with one another within Mexican and Chicana/o cultures are the Aztec goddess Coatlicue and the syncretic myth of La Llorona. However, these gender roles are not present in the indigenous myths and legends from which they originate. For example, within classic Nahuatl thought, figures like Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue are sacred energies that are neither “virgins” nor “whores” (Lara 103). Cihuacoatl is known to impart “strength during childbirth and claims sacrifices to maintain the safety and well being of the people as a whole” (Costa-Malcolm 46). Similarly, la Llorona can be considered a mother who “must sacrifice her children for some greater good, and she grieves for the choice she has to make” (46). Both Moraga and Sahagun are harkening back to these indigenous myths and legends to portray gender roles and motherhood that deviate from masculinist and patriarchal expectations set in the early years of the Chicano movement.

The works of Moraga and Sahagun avoid the structural trap of the virgin/whore dichotomy that produces gender role expectations of Chicanas that fall under a limiting either/or binary. This virgin/whore dichotomy was prevalent in the female characters of the early Chicana/o theater plays. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano notes that during the emergence of the Chicana/o theater movement the “prevalence of cultural nationalism . . . led to the reinscription of the heterosexual hierarchization of male/female relationships” (390). Thus while organizations like El Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (TENAZ) as well as several theater groups—more notably, El Teatro Campesino—often excluded women from decision-making processes, the same was represented in 1980s theater. Theater performances from the 1980s were “still concerned with class and cultural identity” (391). Yarbrow-Bejarano also mentions the story of La Malinche and how she is the “site of representation of sexuality for a culture [that] illuminates cultural specificity in the construction of the gender of ‘woman’” (392). She continues, “La Malinche contributes to the construction of the gender ‘woman’ as object, as other, reserving the active subject role for the masculine gender” (393). La Malinche in representing female sexuality is also “the site of degradation and evil” (393). La Malinche represents *la vendida* (or the indigenous sell out) and also La Chingada (the indigenous fucked one) (393), which is placed in direct opposition with the Roman Catholic figure of La Virgen (mother and virgin) who represents all that is servile, obedient, and submissive. What I find useful about Yarbrow-Bejarano’s account of Malinche is that she is one of the first scholars to point out how this virgin/whore dichotomy structurally traps Chicanas into an either/or binary, and her writing affirms the value of the artistic work that Moraga and Sahagun are producing to fill this gap in female representation within Chicana/o theater. This chapter extends Yarbrow-Bejarano’s work in that it traces how Mexican female archetypes like Malinche continue to affect both Chicanas *and*

Mexicanas. My work also expands her research in that I look at the ways these female archetypes link transnational and contemporary performances.

Moraga and Sahagun are not the first, nor are they the only Chicanas to write and produce material informed by indigenous cultures and from a feminist perspective. In fact, since the 1960s, Chicanas have been writing about and referencing Ancient Maya and Aztec goddesses as a means of critiquing both Chicana/o nationalism, U.S. nationalism, and the broader western patriarchal perspectives from which they originate. Chicanas, in the 1960s and onward, were referencing the lack of female roles in Chicana/o plays and acknowledging how this is a manifestation of the ways that Chicano nationalism assumed the neocolonial ideologies of cultural nationalism, which included particular notions of family, motherhood, and mythology, where definitions of womanhood and motherhood were limited (49). Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, most single-author Chicana plays:

were set in the present and dealt primarily with an individual's immediate, quotidian concerns. They were also, often, comedies, written in the tradition of the *actos* of El Teatro Campesino. Though they challenged traditional understandings of Chicana identity, they simultaneously reinforced the Chicana's support of the Chicano movement, presenting Chicana feminism as a constructive force in the movement, rather than an alternative to movement ideology.

Gradually, Chicana playwrights began to challenge more insistently both Chicano and white culture. Their plays began to move away from day-to-day concerns in order to look more pointedly to the past and the future; the changing perspective meant taking on *indigenismo/a* as both a theoretical approach and a cultural phenomenon.... From the early years of the movement, Chicana feminists used

indigeneity as a source of validation for their place in the Chicano movement. By claiming and emphasizing their connections to ancient Nahuatl peoples and goddesses, Chicanas refuted accusations that their feminism made them traitors to their race. (145-6)

I find it problematic that, in claiming an indigenous ancestry based on the most well-documented indigenous cultures (Maya and Aztecs) in Mexico, Chicanas like Moraga and Sahagun, were also validating a post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. In other words, Chicanas were claiming an indigenous ancestry in order to resist the Chicana/o nationalist movement but in doing so they were affirming *indigenismo* policies originating in Mexico that were part of a Mexican nationalist ideology. In other words, because the most prominent indigenous cultures to be documented as a means of affirming *indigenismo* were the Aztec and the Maya, in reifying cultural references from these indigenous groups, Chicanas are also reifying a Mexican post-revolutionary ideology. As I will elaborate later, the referencing of female deities from preexisting Aztec mythology is useful for Chicanas to reject gender roles associated with Roman Catholic perceptions of motherhood but these indigenous references are also complicated due to the implicit glorifying of another nationalist cultural agenda.

Both Sahagun and Moraga reference Mexican female archetypes and deities from Aztec mythology to break down dualities of indigenous and Spanish roots. They critique heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality through their Aztec references of Coatlicue and Cihuacoatl but in doing so, as I mentioned earlier, they are also affirming *indigenismo* ideologies. Other Chicanas who have provided similar feminist critiques include Gloria Anzaldúa, who is arguably one of the most influential Chicana feminist writers. Anzaldúa wrote about female transgressive indigenous deities in *Borderlands: La Frontera. Borderlands*

combines historiography, poetry, and autobiography with Chicana/o politics and indigeneity; it traces the history of Chicana/os in the U.S. from the Spanish Conquest in the sixteenth century, to the U.S.-Mexican War in 1846, to twentieth-century issues manifesting around the U.S.-Mexico border. Even as she contextualizes the emergence of a mestizo culture, Anzaldúa also traces the gendered issues within indigenous histories and contemporary Chicana/o politics. Anzaldúa refers to the Azteca-Mexica culture and critiques the replacement of female deities with male deities. She notes how female deities were attributed with dark and sinister aspects in such a manner that it disempowered them (49). Still, Anzaldúa chooses to identify with several female deities, especially the earth goddess, Coatlicue. For Anzaldúa, Coatlicue represents a synthesis of dualities. She is a “fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and earth, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (69). Anzaldúa also associates the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe with Tonantzin and Coatlicue (Costa-Malcolm 31). In bringing together Guadalupe, Tonantzin, and Coatlicue, Anzaldúa reframes these female figures within a history that is not solely within the Roman Catholic traditions, which limit them to markers of darkness or the grotesque (Lara 108). Anzaldúa insists that Guadalupe, Tonantzin, and Coatlicue are different names for the same divine serpent energy and that the act of unlearning the virgin/whore dichotomy, which separates and demonizes them “is nothing less than healing patriarchal and colonized constructions of female sexuality and spirituality” (110). Anzaldúa’s writing uses indigenous deities and Mexican female archetypes to provide a critique of the Chicana/o Catholic traditions that disempower these female figures. Moraga and Sahagun provide a similar critique except that they produce this critique on stage. This means that my analysis demands close attention to the ways that Moraga and Sahagun represent these cultural tensions on stage.

I am interested in an analysis of objects in performance because they play a role in the representation process by either extending or contradicting critiques the artists make on stage. I conduct my analysis by studying two props, corn and calavera masks, and I position these props in relation to various forms of indigenous mythology. Something to consider when studying indigeneity vis-à-vis props is that when indigenous cultures become materialized and represented on stage, this representation can conflate indigenous signifiers. That is not to say that there is a “correct” or “authentic” way of representing indigenous signifiers but rather that one must account for the ways that props become citations in theater and those citations will affect the way that indigeneity gets read on stage.

As I have mentioned, props used in Cherríe Moraga’s, *The Hungry Woman* performance, and Paulina Sahagun’s, “Calavereando” performance, animate certain female mythical figures over others, specifically the deities Coatlicue and Cihuacoatl. Moraga’s rewriting of the Greek Medea myth provides an explicit link to the Coatlicue deity vis-à-vis the title of the play since Coatlicue is also famously referred to as “The Hungry Woman.” Moraga’s play also stages the myth of Coatlicue by having its leading characters reenact the roles associated with this myth, with Luna (Medea’s lover) serving as Coyolxauhqui while Chac-Mool (Medea’s son) stands in as Huitzilopochtli. However, Moraga complicates the representation of this Aztec myth by bringing in the use of corn in the performance, hybridizing the Greek myth with the Aztec creation myth, which states that all humans were created from and in the shape of corn (a similar depiction is stated in the Maya creation story of the Popol Vuh). I argue that Moraga’s hybridizing of this popular Greek myth actually reframes the myth with an indigenous and holistic perspective that accounts for Medea’s positive and negative qualities. Alternately, Sahagun’s performance implicitly cites the myth of Cihuacoatl through her use of skull-masks.

As noted in most publicity ads for her “Calavereando” performances, this piece was inspired by the work of Jose Guadalupe Posada, a political printmaker and engraver from Mexico, most famous for his “Calavera Catrina,” a female skull dressed as a dandy satirizing the Mexican middle and upper classes. This Catrina image also circulates within Mexico under the names of Cihuacoatl and La Llorona, particularly because Cihuacoatl is the skull-faced fertility goddess who abandoned her son at a crossroads. Sahagun’s performance offers a different way of staging and representing indigenous female deities through her skull masks.

Mesoamerican indigenous rituals and Chicana/o theatrical traditions inspire Sahagun’s performances. Calavera masks, in particular, are a well-known signifier of the Día de los Muertos celebrations, which include other objects like candles, sugar skulls, and marigold flowers. Like the long history of corn, these calavera masks may have also predated colonial contact since masks in general were part of Mesoamerican cultures and were used for indigenous ceremonies and rituals.⁵⁰ With respect to the traditions of Chicana/o theater, calavera masks and costumes have been used to represent “ungendered” characters. During the early years of el Teatro Campesino, actress Socorro Valdez created the “ungendered” role of La Muerte (Broyles-140). Also influenced by the work of Jose Guadalupe Posada, Luis Valdez’s La Muerte character was a death figure that wore a black leotard with skull face and skeleton bones painted on it (140). The Muerte figure, which included calavera masks, became an iconic image of the Chicano theater movement and was the only prevalent “ungendered” character in Chicano plays, which opened up roles for women that did not follow stereotypical gender roles (140). In *Calavereando*, we see the manifestation of this practice—men and women playing the same calavera character— when both male and female performers don the same costumes and

⁵⁰ For example, elite Maya rulers like King Pakal donned masks made of jade or obsidian. They were used in performances and dances, as can be evidenced in Mayan codices and sculptures.

masks.⁵¹ Sahagun's use of calavera masks playfully references the Chicana/o theater movement in a time when women's roles were limited. The satire in her performance critiques the Chicana/o movement and simultaneously embraces the Día de los Muertos celebrations that were introduced by Chicana/os to the U.S.

In Moraga and Sahagun's performances, as well as most other theatrical performances, the objects the performers use retain new meaning when they are positioned in a theatrical performance. Any item used in theatrical performance automatically becomes a prop in practice. According to Andrew Sofer, props map spatial trajectories and mark temporal narratives in performance (Sofer 2). A prop, by definition, is "*a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance*" (11; emphasis in original). An object must participate in an action in order to *become* a prop. In other words, "[t]here is no such thing as a prop"; wherever a prop exists, an actor-object interaction exists. *Irrespective of its signifying function(s)*, a prop is something an object becomes, rather than something an object is" (12; emphasis in original). Sofer notes that a prop's defining feature is its motion and that when a prop is considered a static symbol, that motion is not accounted for. Rather than being static, a prop is in a continual dynamic relationship with the actor and audience. By taking into consideration the prop's motion on stage, Sofer claims one can recover the "stage life of props" (vi). I am not stating here that props do not come with their social, cultural, and ideological meanings. Indeed, my interest in Moraga and Sahagun's use of corn and mask props stems from the fact that these are objects that have been circulated and used since pre-Columbian times. I analyze references to indigenous, mostly Aztec female goddesses, which come with the use of prominent cultural objects like corn and calavera masks to claim that these objects are involved

⁵¹ However, something that I should mention is that this "genderlessness" character of La Muerte is actually portrayed in a gendered fashion given that Sahagun uses gendered accessories like tiaras and sneakers to adorn the otherwise bare skeleton costumes and skull masks .

in the transmission of Chicana/o cultural practices that challenge gender expectations associated with motherhood.

Gender and Motherhood in the Works of Moraga and Sahagun

Both Moraga's and Sahagun's performances stage female characters that defy Chicana gender roles. Moraga's play, for instance, offers a variety of motherly figures from indigenous and Greek mythology as well as from Catholicism and uses them to construct a space for the Chicana lesbian mother (Costa-Malcolm 167). According to Julie Anne Costa-Malcolm, Moraga's, *The Hungry Woman*, critiques both the Chicano culture and Western cultural norms, while at the same time engages with elements of each culture and form (167). She claims that as a fair-skinned Chicana with Anglo lineage, Moraga resorts to bridging these Aztec, Mexican, and Western backgrounds through writing about their mythology. Further, she argues that Medea embodies all of these motherly archetypes and that in representing them through a singular queer Chicana mother, Moraga illustrates how motherhood is externally constructed and the inability for motherhood to be defined in an essentialist way (171). Like Costa-Malcolm, I agree that Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* demonstrates how the concept of motherhood is constructed externally. However, it must also be mentioned that Moraga is not just demonstrating the social construction of motherhood but she is specifically resisting a Roman Catholic perception of motherhood that is prevalent in Chicana/o culture and Moraga accomplishes this through the materiality in her performance.

In addition to creating theatrical performances that stage female characters who defy Chicana gender roles and expectations of motherhood, Moraga in her personal life also defies these gender roles through her experiences as a Chicana lesbian mother. Moraga's sexual identity

impacts the way that she references and represents transgressive female deities. In her article “Queer Aztlán: The Reformation of Chicano Tribe,” Moraga admits that her:

... real politicization began, not through the Chicano movement, but through the bold recognition of my lesbianism. Coming to terms with that fact meant the radical restructuring of everything I thought I held sacred. It meant acting on my woman-centered desire and against anything that stood in its way, including my Church, my family and my ‘country.’ It meant acting in spite of that fact that I had learned from my Mexican culture and the dominant culture that my womanhood was, if not despised, certainly deficient and hardly worth the loving of another woman in bed. But act I did, because not acting would have meant my death by despair. (224)

For Moraga, it was in the wake of her coming to terms with her sexual identity that she found the impetus to work on and sustain her feminist writing. She acknowledged the strength in the Chicano nationalist movement’s commitment to sustaining the Chicano culture but also critiqued its machismo and homophobia (225). She also notes that some of the leading figures in the Chicana feminist movement—who have advanced issues of sexual abuse, domestic violence, immigrant rights and indigenous rights—have been lesbians such as Ana Castillo, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Naomi Littlebear Moreno (231-32). Tiffany Ana López notes that Moraga:

does not dismiss the importance of nationalism and the family because, in spite of inherent and often blatant sexism and homophobia, she finds them a powerful, albeit problematic, source of identity. Like other Chicana feminists, Moraga appropriates these assumed symbols of Chicana/o community building, [as homophobic as they may be,] in order to problematize them and, in the process, reformulates the terms of community by building bridges as well as demarcating

borders. (“Performing Aztlán” 182)

As a lesbian mother, Moraga’s writing reveals the ways that Chicana motherhood intersects with sexuality. In her experiences and in her writing, she challenges heteronormative assumptions of traditional Chicana/o families and provides another option for what Chicana motherhood looks like.

Similarly, in her essay, “La Güera,” Moraga shares personal stories about her and her mother’s experiences of internalized oppression. These stories are examples of how issues of gender and motherhood are inextricably linked to issues of race and class for Chicanas. When sharing a story about a lived example of what it felt like for her to be a Chicana feminist lesbian, Moraga states that “lesbianism is a poverty— as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. *The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression*” (29). She uses lesbianism as an avenue to begin to discuss intersectional identity issues. For her, it was her lesbianism that allowed her to empathize with her mother’s oppressions due to being a poor, uneducated Chicana (28). It was lesbianism that allowed her to sense her own privileges and internalized oppressions. She notes that as a feminist lesbian, she would ignore her own homophobia, the thoughts that led her to believe she was “not woman enough” or “not man enough” for her partner. Similarly, she experienced forms of internalized racism. She states that these feelings of internalized oppression are “always there, embodied in some one we least expect to rub up against.” Moraga’s feelings “rub up” against her, reminding her that her experiences of oppression are grounded in physical and embodied ways; she also acknowledges the way that materiality intersects with oppression by stating that the:

materialism in this book lives in the flesh of these women’s lives: the exhaustion we feel in our bones at the end of the day, the fire we feel in our hearts when we

are insulted, the knife we feel in our backs when we are betrayed, the nausea we feel in our bellies when we are afraid, even the hunger we feel between our hips when we long to be touched.” (xviii)

For Moraga, there are particular material manifestations of oppression that affect Chicanas’ bodies and it is necessary to further investigate the role that materiality plays in her performances in order to uncover ways that she uses props to work against these forms of oppression.

Unlike Moraga, the topic of motherhood is not specifically addressed in the narrative of Sahagun’s “Calavereando” performance nor has Sahagun written extensively about that topic elsewhere. Nevertheless, Sahagun’s “Calavereando” references Aztec deities or mother goddesses and her other performance work is also involved in playfully critiquing identity issues that intersect with gender. Both Laura G. Gutierrez and Scott L. Baugh have written on Sahagun solo performance work that focuses on her identification as a Chicana and Latina living in the U.S. Gutierrez’s article “Deconstructing the Mythical Homeland: Mexico in Contemporary Chicana Performance” focuses on Chicana autobiographical solo performance and states that this type of performance is a means for performers to voice their own gendered and sexualized identification and that for Sahagun, she uses solo-performance to self-fashion herself in a contradicting identity. Gutierrez narrows her study to solo performances that juxtapose a Mexican reality with a mythical past. Sahagun’s performance of *Náhuatl-Now What?* (1996) is one of those performances. *Náhuatl-Now What?*, which Sahagun has performed since 1995 at multiple venues, is an autobiographical monologue in which she questions her Aztec, Mexican, and American affiliations. As Gutierrez also notes in her article, “Performing Identities: Chicana and Mexicana Performance Art In The 90s,” Sahagun “temporarily and humorously positions herself as a ‘pocha’ who *imagines* herself as (or ‘hallucinates’ that she is) a ‘high tech Aztec’”

(151). She wears her hair in a long braid with a *rebozo* (Mexican shawl), a long A-line sequenced black skirt, a long-sleeved black shirt, and ankle-length red boots. While wearing articles of clothing heavily coded with gendered markers of stereotypical Latinidad, Sahagun self-identifies as a Chicana, Mexicana, and/or Latina who shares both indigenous and Spanish ancestry (160). She talks about her inability to make tortillas, yet she calls herself a “21st century Llorona⁵²” (“Nahuatl-Now What?”). She speaks Náhuatl, yet she code-switches to English. Sahagun’s self-representation and self-identification, as someone who speaks Náhuatl but cannot make tortillas, exceeds mainstream markers of Latinidad given that she speaks an indigenous language spoken in Mexico but does not know how to make a staple food from Mexico. For Gutierrez, Sahagun is constructing herself as a border crosser to position herself within this extensive lineage of border crossers (“Performing Identities” 64). In my reading of this performance, Sahagun is using humor to demonstrate the unattainable expectations for Chicanas to meet the gendered expectations of more than one culture and language. Through her playful costume and language, Sahagun is able to provide a hidden critique of the gendered rules and expectations placed on Chicanas.

Both Moraga and Sahagun critique gender roles in explicit and implicit ways. Moraga and Sahagun also depict identity as something material rather than intangible. In other words, they both emphasize the material, lived experiences of Chicana/os in the U.S. For example, in

⁵² *La Llorona* (The Weeping Woman) is a popular Mexican icon for a long-suffering mother. Though there are many versions, broadly, the story of *La Llorona* refers to a woman whose unrequited love for a man drives her to kill her children by drowning them in a river. Upon realizing what she has done, she kills herself. She is denied entry to heaven and her spirit is left to eternally wander and cry in search for her children. Alicia Arrizón asserts that *La Llorona*’s presence in Mexican and Chicano culture “dates back to prehispanic, pre-Columbian times.” As a result, she is often associated with *La Chingada*, *La Malinche*, or *Malintzín* and has persisted in the popular modern and postmodern imagination. Arrizón goes on to say that figures like *La Llorona* “glorify the power of the feminine body in Mexican culture, influencing the epistemology of feminism in contemporary Chicana literature, art, theatre, and performance.” For more on this, see Alicia Arrizón, “Mythical Performativity: Relocating Aztlán in Chicana Feminist Cultural Productions” in *Theatre Journal* 52 no.1 (2000), 48.

Sahagun's performance *Itty Bitty Identity* (2001), Sahagun plays the role of a woman who has lost her identity near the 405 freeway and resorts to rummaging through leaves and trash to find it (Baugh 61). *Itty Bitty Identity* is a fifty-five second short in which Sahagun collaborated with Chicano artist Harry Gamboa Jr. and Barry Shabaka Henley. Scott Baugh, in his article "Cinematic Dis-contents: Addressing a Latina/Latino Avant-Garde through the Browser Apparatus," argues that just as the character in *Itty Bitty Identity* goes through a loss of a singular identity, the cinema can also reflect this loss by representing a digitally mediated character (72). The clip begins with Sahagun addressing the spectator, saying, "I must have lost my identity somewhere around here. Where did I put it?" (Sahagun "Itty Bitty Identity"). She treats her identity as something concrete rather than intangible, as a material object rather than an immaterial quality. As she rummages through leaves, dirt and branches, she gets down on all fours and clears the debris with her hands and feet. The video ends with Sahagun in mid-action. Baugh aligns the loss of identity with a loss of individuality. He states that the spectator uses Sahagun's "gender and ethnic cues" to visually read her as a Latina and associate her with mainstream Latina/o stereotypes (Baugh 61). Even though Baugh mentions that this is an avant-garde performance, it is also an absurdist performance because she provides a nonsensical version of the type of identity struggles that many Chicanas face who straddle U.S. and Mexican cultures. Harry Gamboa Jr. is known for the absurdist and parodic approach in his writing and performance art, particularly in his collaboration within the Chicana/o art collective, Asco. Gamboa's work draws attention to a "male, urban, ethnic, and parodic critique of the postmodern condition, standing alongside (and in dialogue with) the underground cinema, conceptual art, and performance of the 1960s and 1970s" (Noriega 7). It is no surprise then that in Gamboa's

collaboration with Sahagun, they produced a short that uses humor to critique the condition of being a Chicana living in urban Los Angeles.

Influence of Post-revolutionary Mexican Nationalism on Chicana Production

I have addressed the efforts that Chicana writers have made towards resisting traditional gender roles informed by Roman Catholicism and Chicana/o culture. I have also addressed how both Moraga and Sahagun's performance work reframe the roles of indigenous deities in the service of providing a Chicana feminist critique; however, I am not implying that Chicana writings that reference indigeneity do not have their problematic aspects. Despite extensive scholarship on Chicana feminism and Chicana/o cultural productions, not enough research has been dedicated to critiquing the issues of representation that come with citing indigenous cultures in Chicana/o theater. One scholar who attempts to fill this gap is Sheila Marie Contreras; she identifies the links between Chicana/o indigenism—the Chicana/o reclamation of an indigenous ancestry—and the Mexican state's *indigenismo* policies that reclaim an Aztec patrimony (4). She notes that even while Chicana/os are indigenous to the Americas, the U.S.'s privileging of tribal affiliation and blood quantum—which may be unknown to Chicana/os—problematizes simple categories of Indian and Spanish (1). Contreras acknowledges the issue of appropriation in the Chicana/o reclamation of Aztec ceremonies and the homeland of Aztlán, especially when considering the complex racial *mestizaje* in Mexico, which makes it hard to break down ancestral ties to particular indigenous cultures. When asking why so many Chicana/os choose to identify with an Aztec ancestry without direct ancestral ties, Contreras notes that the Mexican state's *indigenismo* has been influential. The *indigenismo* policies, as I referenced in my "Introduction," are tied back to a Mexican governmental paradigm where the

central aim is to have indigenous peoples in Mexico assimilate in the national culture and thus the prototypical image of an “Indian” becomes both a national ideal and a social issue that needs to be resolved (Taylor 1-2). Contreras notes that as a result of this focus on reclaiming a form of ancestry through a national paradigm, “the glorification of the Aztecs is less about establishing a direct line of descent than it is about carefully crafting a national telos that moves from Teotihuacan to Tenochtitlan to present-day Mexico City” (6). Contreras also suggests that since the Aztecs were the most noted indigenous group to be colonized by Spaniards and their downfall was possibly the most well-documented, then this might be why Mexicana/os and Chicana/os reclaim this ancestry. Contreras helps to point out that Chicana cultural production, including the performance work of Sahagun and Moraga, can, in the process of providing a Chicana feminist critique, further glorify Maya and Aztec cultures in ways that support the Mexican nationalist project. The Mexican nationalist project aimed to celebrate indigenous figures from Mexico’s precolonial past but in the process little recognition or attention was given to existing indigenous peoples. I agree with Contreras’ argument and validate it by showing how rather than focusing on voicing the concerns of existing indigenous peoples and cultures, Moraga and Sahagun resort to glorifying indigenous deities to voice the concerns of Chicana/os in the U.S. Contreras, however, does not mention the role that materiality plays in reinforcing Mexican nationalist projects. My dissertation, and this chapter specifically, insists that materiality is implicated in discourses of indigeneity that are mentioned in Mexicana and Chicana performances.

For example, Cherríe Moraga’s *Hungry Woman* cites Mexican female archetypes and affiliates them with the indigenous ancestry of the Chicana/o characters in the performance. This performance acknowledges the *mestizaje*, or mixing of indigenous and European races, that is

part of Chicana/o ancestry but chooses to emphasize the indigenous, mostly Aztec, part of that ancestry. One archetype that Cherríe Moraga references in *The Hungry Woman* is La Llorona. Alicia Arrizón writes about this fact in her article, “Mythical Performativity: Relocating Aztlán in Chicana Feminist Cultural Productions” and book *Queering Mestizaje*. Arrizón considers *The Hungry Woman* as the retold story of La Llorona. She states that *The Hungry Woman* provides a construction of a queer Aztlán and can be seen as an example of the ways in which Chicana artists and scholars deal with the concept of mestizaje in relation to an intercultural body (“Mythical Performativity” 24). Furthermore, she states that the narrative of La Llorona, alongside other female Mexican and Chicano/a cultural icons (such as La Malinche and La Virgen de Guadalupe) reveal an “aesthetics of transgression that contests the colonial legacy” (48). Arrizón mentions the Spanish colonial legacy since she positions her work within a discourse of the Spanish postcolonial sites of the United States, the Hispanic Caribbean and the Philippines, where mestizaje is often defined as synonymous with hybridization; still, she uses mestizaje as an epistemology of colonization and imperialism. Even though Moraga’s theatrical performances prioritize the indigenous cultures that are part of the Chicana/os’ mestizo descent, the paradox in her work is that by doing so she is further reinforcing a Mexican post-revolutionary nationalism that also glorified precolonial indigenous cultures at the expense of eliding the present-day issues concerning indigenous peoples still living in Mexico.

A direct example from *Hungry Woman* where Moraga draws heavily from Aztec influences is through the character Chac-Mool. Patricia Ybarra’s writes about this in her article “The Revolution Fails Here: Cherríe Moraga’s *The Hungry Woman* as a Mexican Medea.” Ybarra focuses on *indigenismo* and the representation of a failed revolution. She argues that Moraga’s play contemplates the failure of the Queer Aztlán project initiated in 1993 within her

collection *The Last Generation*. Ybarra argues that this failure is productive because it is heuristic and offers the potential for liberation by rethinking social change (84-5). Ybarra claims that the failed revolution is portrayed through the characterization of Chac-Mool. Chac-Mool, who was named after a fallen warrior, has the ability to shift between the world of the living and the dead. Ybarra relates Chac-Mool's character with Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor who, although being tortured by Hernán Cortés, represents an Aztec leader and Mexican hero for not giving up and fighting the conquerors (66). Drawing a connection between Chac-Mool and Cuauhtémoc is important because the figure of Cuauhtémoc, or the last Aztec king, was widely used as a national, political, and cultural emblem representing unity and independence for Mexico during the post-revolutionary period, particularly after 1940 (Fulton 5). Following Mexico's revolutionary period, visual artists and muralists who were supporters of *indigenismo* began to develop a strong interest in depicting indigenous cultures and figures, including Cuauhtémoc, in their work. Prior to this period, *mestizaje* and depictions of a mixed identity were the signs of national progress. In choosing to portray a character inspired by the story of Cuauhtémoc, Moraga's performance can also be related to Mexico's post-revolutionary nationalist ideology.

Moraga's performance work simultaneously validates Mexico's *indigenismo* ideology by valorizing the Aztec empire and then challenges this ideology by queering the characterization of prominent Aztec figures. Sahagun's performance work, however, validates *indigenismo* through her Chicana/o theater influences. Sahagun's artistic trajectory included several collaborations with artists during the Chicana/o theater movement in the 1970s. For instance, when Sahagun was starting out in theater, she was involved in Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (TENAZ), Grupo Mascarones, and Chicano Arts: Resistance and Affirmation (CARA). She also collaborated with

El Teatro Campesino and Luis Valdez. TENAZ was the seminal organization of the Chicana/o Theatre movement that Luis Valdez founded (Ramos-García 42). TENAZ hosted festivals in locations like California, Texas, New York and Mexico where Chicana/o artists could come together to collaborate. Grupo Mascarones, also known as Los Mascarones, was a street theatre group from Mexico City that participated in TENAZ festivals (42). Finally, CARA was a traveling exhibition of Chicana/o art that included over 140 works of art and toured the United States in the early 1990s. Sahagun's collaboration with a wide range of artists in the 1970s and performances she produced in both U.S. and Mexico demonstrates how the ideologies of the Chicana/o theater movement have influenced and continue to influence Sahagun's performances. Sahagun even mentions that her performance work "draws from her Mexican and Chicano Theatre experience combined with her Physical Theatre [sic] training in styles such as Commedia del Arte, Melodrama, Clowning and Dance" ("A Slice of Rice"). This diverse training provides Sahagun with an approach that draws from Chicana/o cultural traditions that followed *indigenismo* ideologies as well as European comedic theater known for critiquing current events and politics.

Admittedly, this chapter makes the argument that Moraga and Sahagun's performances, specifically *The Hungry Woman* and "Calavereando," validate or glorify a post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism in their effort to provide a Chicana feminist critique against Chicana gender norms. This argument should not be conflated with the idea that Moraga and Sahagun themselves do not collaborate or work alongside existing indigenous peoples. In fact, much of Moraga's and Sahagun's artistic work have allowed them to be involved with indigenous groups in the regions they are located. Sahagun, for example, has worked with the Tongva people in the Southern California region. In one of her projects she interviewed people from University High

School in West Los Angeles. During this experience, Sahagun's investigation shifted towards earlier descendants of the Santa Monica region. Prior to the presence of Chicana/os, African-Americans and Japanese-Americans residing in Santa Monica, the Tongva people lived there. The Tongva people are California natives known to reside in the Los Angeles area who are central to the history of southern California. Due to Spanish, Mexican and "American" occupation, the Tongva population and culture started to dwindle. While indigenous populations are often neglected in the U.S. national imaginary, Sahagun makes it a point to contest this by interviewing Angie Behrns, a woman of Tongva ancestry. Sahagun has made use of her creative practice to shed light on the Tongva descendants who continue to reside in Southern California. Both Moraga and Sahagun's performance work and projects demonstrate an investment in addressing indigenous issues and prioritizing indigenous ways in their performances, however, in some performances, the Chicana feminist affirms a Mexican nationalist ideology which overshadows the critique for indigenous and feminist rights.

Corn and Coatlicue in Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*

I begin my analysis of Moraga and Sahagun's performances with Moraga's, *The Hungry Woman*, given that this performance incorporates a wide range of Mexican female archetypes that will be useful to mention before discussing Sahagun's performance. I also begin with Moraga's performance because I make the claim that the work of Moraga takes on different political meanings in different national contexts. Specifically, I demonstrate in both performances how from a Mexican context, Moraga and Sahagun's performances can be read as furthering Mexican nationalist ideologies; alternately, from a Chicana feminist perspective, their performances can be associated with a resistance to U.S. nationalist ideologies.

Since 1995, Cherrie Moraga's, *The Hungry Woman*, has been staged in venues across the U.S. from Los Angeles to San Francisco to Seattle. The play opens with Medea in a prison psychiatric hospital about to lose her relationship with her three loved ones, Jason (her husband), Chac-Mool (her son), and Luna (her lover). Seven years have passed and Medea now lives in Phoenix, Arizona, which she also refers to as Tamoanchan⁵³, the land of the *gringos* (or white men). Upon discovering that Medea and Luna were having a lesbian affair, Jason ensured that both Medea and Luna were exiled from Aztlán⁵⁴. Jason, who lives in Aztlán, an indigenous homeland, is about to marry a young bride who cannot have children. Jason wishes to have Chac-Mool in his legal custody given that he does not hold a sufficient amount of Indian blood; having a son will ensure his stay in Aztlán. Chac-Mool (whose real name is Adolfo) wishes to complete an initiation rite to become a man and live in Aztlán, which requires that he leave his mother. Meanwhile, Luna is having an affair with a younger African-American woman, Savannah. Medea, who refuses to lose her son, poisons him.

Throughout the play, corn serves as the unifying Mexican cultural motif that ties the play back to an Aztec ancestry. The play's varied references to corn are tied to a form of cultural preservation and sustenance by associating it with Aztec goddess and mother of corn, Tonantzin. For example, when Luna teaches Chac-mool how to harvest corn, she reminds him that when he finds "twin ears, one is kept for seed, the other offered to Tonantzin" (Moraga, "Hungry

⁵³ Tamoanchan is a Mesoamerican location of origin, arguably located on the Gulf Coast, where the Olmec civilization dispersed from (Delhalle and Lyukx 121).

⁵⁴ Aztlán is a mythical homeland located in the Southwestern parts of the United States. This is the space where Chicanos locate their cultural ancestors. The emergence of the glorification of Aztlán can be traced back to the foundational document for Chicano nationalism, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" (The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán). Adopted in 1969, this manifesto reads, "Aztlán belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops...Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people...Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlán" (López, "Bodily Inscriptions" 69-70). Aztlán here refers to the imagining and assertion of a new world prioritizing Chicanos, though marginalizing women.

Woman” 26). Tonantzín is a multifaceted term used among Nahuas to refer to any female deity but it is typically used to denote mother earth, mother of corn, and/or the Virgen de Guadalupe. In asking Chac-mool to offer corn to Tonantzín, Luna is teaching him that corn is not only used for nourishment and consumption; it should also be presented to pay respect, thank, and pray after a deity. Chac-mool serves as an example of someone with indigenous ancestry who has lost connection to maize stories as well as the signs, symbols, and imageries connecting maize to indigenous and maize-based cultures. Corn is again, referenced in this play when Medea creates an altar for her son. Medea creates an altar for Chac-Mool’s burial as an act of love. She “starts pulling up all the overgrown corn stalks in the field, piling them into a mound higher and higher. . . . The pile of blue corn stalks have formed a kind of altar” (103). Chac-Mool had planted this corn in their field after having learned from Mama-Sal that, “if you can grow corn. . . you’ll never be hungry” (26). In both references, corn is a symbol that represents life or death. Corn sustains Chac-Mool’s life by providing him with a form of sustenance and it also helps Chac-Mool depart from the life of the living by providing an altar for him. The holistic approach of incorporating corn in instances of life and death mirrors the dualism that is part of the Aztec female deity Coatlicue, and thus, corn becomes a reminder of the ways that objects can help to sustain indigenous practices.

Admittedly, the corn references in this play script are only directly tied to the Aztec motherly goddess Tonantzín, however, throughout the play, there are references to other motherly female figures from this Mexican and indigenous cultural framework. For instance, nearing the end of *Hungry Woman*, Chac-Mool aligns his mother with Malinche. While arguing over his choice to leave Phoenix and live with his father in Aztlán, Chac-Mool says, “You’re crazy. He’s right. He told me you were crazy... You fucked him, I didn’t. You fucked yourself.”

In this scene, Medea does not want Chac-Mool to part from her and refuses to bless him as he leaves her. In employing the multiple meanings of the term “fucked,” Chac-Mool implicitly accuses his mother of making the mistake of involving herself with Jason, aligning her with the negative depictions of La Malinche, also known as “La Chingada.” “La Chingada” is a colloquial phrase that has multiple meanings. La Malinche is commonly and problematically referred to as “La Chingada” or the fucked woman, given her status in Mexican history. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Malinche was Hernán Cortéz’s translator and cultural mediator; she was perceived to have treacherously schemed against her people to help Cortéz. She is also often acknowledged as the mother of Mexico’s mestizo race, however erroneous that claim may be. By associating his mother with the “fucked one,” Chac-Mool is reifying the patriarchal assumption that women must be passive and submissive and that any woman who takes the agency to get sexually involved with a man is at fault when issues arise.

Shortly after this scene, Medea realizes that she cannot prevent her son from leaving her and moving to Aztlán. Medea turns to address her mother, the only remaining kin that she can identify herself with, and says, “All the babies, they’re slipping through my fingers now. I can’t stop them. They’ve turned into the liquid of the river and are drowning in my hands” (Moraga, “Hungry Woman” 97). Medea is trapped within the roles of lover, mother or daughter. At this point, Luna, who is a generation younger than Medea, has also left her for another woman, Savannah. When her “babies,” Luna and Chac-Mool, decide to leave her, Medea sacrifices her son, like La Llorona, to refuse him the option to live under the rule of his father.

Medea is associated with La Malinche and La Llorona given that they both are Mexican figures that represent a transgressive sexuality and are mothers who have lost their children. They are bad mothers, roamers at night. La Malinche is tied to the betrayal of the Mexican

culture and since she is perceived as a “passive and feminine” figure of indigeneity for Chicana/os:

it became necessary to transgender the Indian inside them, to transform the root of their pride... into something aggressive and masculine like an Aztec emperor.... To this day, this iconography, over determined as it became in the imagery of Chicano Art Movement, continues to represent Chicano political beliefs and values. (Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman”* 69)

La Llorona, on the other hand, is not just tied to indigeneity but also has ties within Spanish legends. La Llorona can be linked to both the:

Spanish medieval notions of *animas en pena*, spirits in purgatory expiating their sins, and to the Medea myth. She was also closely identified with pre-Columbian Aztec cultural heroes such as *Mocihuaquetzque*, valiant women who died in childbirth (and who were the only Aztec women to achieve afterlife in the place of warriors).... However, when they [the *Mocihuaquetzque*] had achieved their afterlife, they were known as *Cihuapiltin*, or night ghosts, who lay in wait at crossroads, wished epilepsy on children, and incited men to lewdness. They were also vaguely connected to attributes of Coatlicue, who also at times roamed the crossroads. (Rebolledo 63)

Tey Diana Rebolledo reminds us that the creative and destructive forces of *animas en pena* and *Cihuapiltin* are the same for Tonantzín/Coatlicue; thus while it is evident that La Llorona, Malinche, and the Virgin Mary are distinct figures, they do have associations that render them similar.

There’s a strong influence of Roman Catholicism and Aztec indigeneity syncretized with

the myths of Malinche and La Llorona with which Medea is associated. For instance, Malinche and Llorona are often positioned in relation to Eve, the “temptress of man’s flesh and sexuality” (62). Rather than looking up to Malinche or Llorona, Chicana/os tend to value the Virgin Mary and her characteristics of passivity and purity, which stem back to Roman Catholicism and serves as a foil to the Catholic figure of Eve. As such, the Virgin Mary is considered the patron saint of Chicanos and her image has been used in a wide range of Chicano historical and cultural events (53). For instance, her image can be seen most notably in 1960s United Farm Worker (UFW) strike marches and 1970s Chicana feminist art by artists like Yolanda López. In doing so, they redefined her image to stand against systems of oppression and to represent female strength. Chicana/os also often correlate the image of the Virgin Mary with Coatlicue and/or Tonantzin. Guillermo Gómez-Peña mentions this trend of Chicana/os redefining religious and mythical figures; he states,

[w]hen I came to California in 1978, my relationship with what I saw as official Mexican iconography began to change. Suddenly the political and religious images that I used to question as icons of authority and as artificial generators of *mexicanidad* began to transform themselves into symbols of contestation against the dominant Anglo culture. I also discovered that my Chicano colleagues had a very different connection to Guadalupan imagery. They had expropriated it, reactivated it, recontextualized it, and turned it into a symbol of resistance, something that Mexicans have never been able to fully understand. (Gómez-Peña 180)

From the perspective of someone born and raised in Mexico, whose associations of Mexican iconography are entrenched with Mexican nationalist ideologies, the work of Moraga could be

perceived as furthering Mexican nationalist projects; however, from a Chicana feminist perspective, the use of Mexican iconography comes with the intent of reinterpreting these Mexican associations in order to contest or resist nationalist and patriarchal ideologies.

Medea, as the long-suffering sacrificing mother, is also coined as the “hungry woman” in this performance, tying her back to the Nahuatl myth of Coatlicue, also known as the “hungry woman.” In this Nahuatl myth, Coatlicue represents a female deity who is in a process of continual transformation and becoming. The myth goes as follows:

In the place where the spirits live, there was once a woman who cried constantly for food. She had mouths in her wrists, mouths in her elbows, and mouths in her ankles and knees. ‘She can’t even eat here,’ said the other spirits. ‘She will have to live somewhere else.’ / But up above, there was only the empty air, and to the right and to the left and in front and behind, it was just the same. In those days the world had not been created. Nevertheless, there was something underneath that seemed to be water. How it had got there nobody knew. ‘If we put her below,’ they thought, ‘then perhaps she will be able to satisfy her hunger.’ / No sooner had the thought occurred than the spirits Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca seized the woman and dragged her down to the water. When they saw that she floated, they changed into snakes, stretching over her in the form of a cross, from right arm to left leg and from left arm to right leg. Catching her hands and feet, they squeezed her from all four directions, pushing so hard that she snapped in half at the waist. / ‘Now look what we’ve done,’ they said, and not knowing what else to do, they carried the bottom half back to the spirit place. ‘Look,’ they cried. ‘What’s to be done with this?’ / ‘What a shame,’ said the other spirits. ‘But never mind. We’ll

use it to make the sky.’ Then, to comfort the poor woman, they all flew down and began to make grass and flowers out of her skin. From her hair they made forests, from her eyes, pools and springs, from her shoulders, mountains, and from her nose, valleys. At last she will be satisfied, they thought. But just as before, her mouths were everywhere, biting and moaning. And still she hasn’t changed. / When it rains, she drinks. When flowers shrivel, when trees fall, or when someone dies, she eats. When people are sacrificed or killed in battle, she drinks their blood. Her mouths are always opening and snapping shut, but they are never filled. Sometimes at night, when the wind blows, you can hear her crying for food. (Bierhorst 23-25)

In this passage, “The Hungry Woman” literally swallows the world. She is a woman that cannot be tamed by the male gods. Moraga’s *Hungry Woman* utilizes mythical and historical associations of Mexican female figures who hunger for a life outside the patriarchal expectations of how mothers should behave. Instead of behaving with the Roman Catholic qualities that value passivity, selflessness, asexuality, these female figures are active agents in their own right; female figures like Medea, who are reframed with Mexican associations, are like the hungry woman and like Coatlicue— untamed women who seek what they desire.

Moraga’s, *The Hungry Woman*, syncretizes the Chicana/o, Mexican, and Aztec mother figures of La Malinche, La Llorona, Tonantzín, and Coatlicue with figures from European traditions, like Eve, Mary and Medea. Within the Greek traditions, Moraga’s, *The Hungry Woman*, mostly follows Euripides’ version of the classic play *Medea*; this is considered one of the most popular versions of the Greek *Medea* stories. Euripides begins the play with Jason marrying another woman, Glauke, Creon’s daughter, leaving Medea with the urge to seek

revenge. Medea and her two sons have been banished from Corinth, and she pleads with Glauke to let her sons stay in Corinth. Jason and Glauke agree and Medea gives Jason some cursed gifts, a gossamer gown and golden crown. When Glauke puts on the gown and crown, her body catches fire and her corpse goes up in flames along with Creon, who attempts to save her. Medea's next form of revenge is to kill her two sons. She grapples with this decision until she finally kills them with a sword and when Jason arrives Medea leaves in a chariot with the son's body. It appears that Moraga borrows from the Euripidean Medea. In Moraga's version, the story also opens with Medea banished from the place that Jason lives in, which is Aztlán. Jason is also about to remarry another woman. In Moraga's version, rather than pleading Jason to allow her son Chac-Mool to stay in Aztlán, Jason is the one who wishes to have his son in his custody. Chac-Mool also wishes to live in Aztlán and must complete an initiation rite to do so. Moraga's version, while borrowing from Euripides, does differ from that version as well and perhaps also follows other Greek versions of Medea by providing an ambiguous perspective to Medea, who does indeed kill, specifically poison, her son.

Moraga's, *The Hungry Woman*, is influenced by a wide number of Medea mythologies—from the Colchian, to the Iolchian, Corinthian, Athenian and Median—but Moraga transforms these mythologies by portraying Medea as an empathetic character that defies Mexican and Chicana/o expectations of motherhood by sacrificing her son instead of allowing him to return to the land that exiled her. For instance, the Colchian story has Medea helping Jason to obtain a Golden Fleece and fleeing with Jason. The Iolcan story has Medea helping Jason in his revenge against Pelias and again, Medea flees with Jason. In the Corinthian story, Medea seeks revenge against Jason who abandons her by killing Glauke, Creon, and Medea's own children. In the Athenian story Medea serves King Aegeus' companion and almost kills Theseus, Aegeus' son.

Medea flees after this. Finally, in the Median story, Medea flees from Athens and ends up in the Iranian highlands alongside the Ariori (Clauss and Johnston 22). One of the constant actions that appears in most of these stories is Aphrodite's role in working with Medea to help Jason (30). Another unchanging aspect from most stories is that Medea is portrayed as an expert in drugs (31). She is also a foreigner, either by living outside the known world or outside the city she came from (38). Many versions of the story result in Medea's children dying and while some of them portray Medea as innocent of the deaths, Medea is most often recognized as a murderous mother, as someone who intentionally killed her children (44). In Moraga's Medea, she chooses to sacrifice Chac-Mool to prevent him from playing a part in "the oppression of women, queer folk, and other disenfranchised groups who reside in Tomoanchan" (Pérez, *There Was a Woman* 105). Medea's version incorporates the Greek stories but then adds to them the corn references that are directly tied to Aztec practices and deities.

For instance, in the scene where Medea sacrifices her son, she specifically provides a different perspective on Medea than the one frequently associated with Greek myths. Instead of being an evil villainous mother she is seen as a loving mother who sacrifices her son for a better future and humanity. After sacrificing him, Medea creates an altar with corn where she positions her son's body. This scene resembles the many sacrificial practices that the Aztecs or Mexicas would perform to honor their one of their corn goddesses, Chicomecoatl (105). As Domino Renee Pérez states:

The female aspect of corn, the goddess Chicomecoatl, along with the goddesses associated with water and salt, Chalchuihtlicue and Huixtocihuatl, respectively, were honored highly among the Mexicas. These natural resources were seen as "the livelihood of the people" for "through them [the people] can live" (Sahagun,

I:22). Each year the Mexicas sacrificed a young woman, who was also decapitated and flayed, to make a blood offering to the corn goddess to ensure fertility, renewal, and sustenance. The young woman's sacrificial blood, and its life-giving and sustaining qualities, ensured the continuation of the people. Medea replicates this ritual through her sacrifice, but in offering her male child, she interrupts a traditional renewal. The offering, made in this way, represents a violation of the ancient ritual, yet one powerful enough to create something new. (*There Was a Woman* 105)

The death of Chac-Mool in Moraga's Medea is portrayed as a sacrificial act rather than an act of revenge or brutality. Medea is willing to challenge the continuation of a patriarchal revolution at the expense of losing one of her loved ones.

Objects and Rituals of Remembrance in Sahagun's Calavereando

Both Moraga and Sahagun's performances include ceremonial acts that commemorate life and death. In Sahagun's performance, however, she focuses on the celebratory aspects of life and death by presenting a piece for el Día de los Muertos. Since 2010, Sahagun and Barbara Carrasco have been hosting workshops at the Highways Performance Space and Gallery in preparation for a Día de los Muertos ritual and "Calavereando" performance. Highways is a nonprofit alternative cultural center in Santa Monica, California that provides artists with a space to present socially involved and culturally diverse art and performance. At the workshops, participants learn to create and decorate paper cutouts, flowers, masks, and sugar skulls. Sahagun and Carrasco teach participants to build altars and perform the traditional ritual. These items, also known as *ofrendas*, are later placed on altars alongside food and refreshments that are

offered to the dead during the ritual. In the ritual ceremony, ancestors and the recently departed are honored with photographs, food, marigolds, and the gathering of their loved ones. Following the ritual, spectators are asked to find seating on the stage as “Calavereando” begins. Paulina Sahagun writes, directs and acts in this piece. Unlike Cherríe Moraga, whose work is influenced by Greek and Chicana/o cultural myths, Sahagun’s work is inspired by Mexican art, specifically, the work of Mexican artist, Jose Guadalupe Posada. This performance uses skull masks and skeleton costumes to comically celebrate Día de los Muertos.

In commemorating Día de Los Muertos, this workshop and the subsequent performance remember Mexico’s mestizaje. “Calavereando,” like in Mexico, is performed in early November. The performance I am analyzing was performed on November 2, 2012. The set for “Calavereando” was decorated with Marigolds, a traditional decorative flower. The strong scent of incense also enveloped the room and most performers wore *calaca* (skeleton) costumes. While Día de los Muertos often refers to All Saints Day—a Catholic rite honoring all saints and praying for the departed—rather than referring to a day of mourning, Día de los Muertos is meant to be a day of rejoicing and celebration of the memories of ancestors and loved ones who have passed (Fernández 73). On this day, it is understood that the souls of the departed momentarily visit the living. Día de los Muertos is a syncretic celebration from Mexico that incorporates indigenous—Toltecs, Maya, Zapotecs, Mixtec, Aztec— and Catholic traditions (73). For instance, the Aztec celebration was held during the month of Miccailhuitontli, which corresponds with the timing of Día de los Muertos, where they commemorated children and the dead (73). During the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the 16th century, when the Spanish were working to convert indigenous people to Catholicism, Día de los Muertos was amalgamated with All Saints Day (73). Within Día de los Muertos, the skeleton stands in for life rather than death given that they imitate the

living. In the same manner, before any actors entered the stage, an emphasis on joy, liveliness, and celebration is conveyed via the *mise en scène*.

Día de los Muertos is a highly syncretic celebration blending aspects of Roman Catholicism with indigenous ritual and ceremony. It is often also referred to as the “Days of the Dead,” to indicate that the celebration follows the Roman Catholic holiday dates for “All Saints’ Day” as well as “All Souls’ Day,” which fall on November 1 and 2 (Marchi 45). Even though both celebrations occur across two days, they are treated as one holiday in Mexico and Latin America. In Mexico and the U.S., the celebration is most often referred to as the “Día de los Muertos” or Day of the Dead (45). In Mexico, Día de los Muertos celebrations include cleaning and repairing gravesites, creating altars for deceased relatives, offering special foods and drinks for spirits of loved ones, and attending Catholic mass (45). In southern Mexican states, with larger indigenous populations, the holiday also includes unofficial Catholic folk customs and indigenous rituals to honor ancestors (45). The syncretic interweaving of indigenous and Roman Catholic traditions date back to the Conquest when:

to facilitate conversion to Christianity, indigenous rituals of communicating with the dead (such as the preparation of elaborate offerings of food, flowers, incense, and ornaments (*ofrendas*), ceremonial drinking, ritual dancing and the use of native incense), were consolidated and moved to the Roman Catholic liturgical dates of November 1 and 2. (45-46)

Rather than focusing on the Catholic emphasis on punishment, suffering, and mourning that comes with the Day of the Dead celebrations, the indigenous customs emphasize the joyous aspect of life and death (48).

Arguably, the most recognizable international marker of Day of the Dead celebrations is the amusing calavera image, the ubiquitous skull and skeleton found on figurines, statues, toys, candy, paintings, posters, and masks (55). These calaveras are adorned with clothing and accessories and take on gestures that mimic the living (55). One artist that helped popularize the calavera imagery in the nineteenth century was Jose Guadalupe Posada. Posada produced graphic images for a living and is recognized for creating the image of La Calavera Catrina, a female skeleton satirizing the Mexican elite by donning a plumed hat that upper class Mexican women wore during the Porfiriato regime (60-61). During the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910), Díaz's efforts for economic and industrial progress led to a rise in foreign investment and the foreign control of Mexican agricultural land (Jackson 35). The transformation of Mexico into a modern industrial state served in the interests of foreign investors and the Mexican elite and only further oppressed the Mexican poor and working class. This was the period when revolutionary figures like Emiliano Zapata and Francisco "Pancho" Villa began to fight for basic rights (Jackson 36). The work of Posada was part of the Mexican art movement that followed and critiqued the Porfiriato.

In the U.S., Chicano scholars, artists, and activists introduced the Day of the Dead. Day of the Dead activities in California can be traced back to the 1970s by Chicano artists from Self Help Graphics, the community-based visual arts center in Los Angeles and La Galería de la Raza, the nonprofit art gallery and artist collective in San Francisco (Marchi 93). U.S. Day of the Dead activities, while still sustaining many syncretic elements, often prioritize the indigenous Mesoamerican aspects of the celebrations, such as creating altars, performing cemetery rituals, and holding candlelight processions (90-91). U.S. Day of the Dead activities differ from Mexican Day of the Dead due to the number of workshops and lectures that they hold to educate the

community (e.g. workshops on how to make sugar skulls, masks, paper decorations). U.S. Day of the Dead activities also include performances, art installations, and poetry events honoring loved ones (90-91). In many cases, U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations are treated as public performances rather than private religious rituals and Chicano artists have made use of the holiday's emphasis on death to create works that draw attention to sociopolitical issues affecting the Latina/o community (92-93). Regina M. Marchi argues that just as Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations inspired Chicano artists, so too, U.S. Day of the Dead celebrations are now influencing Mexican artists (96-97). Paulina Sahagun's work can be associated as a continuation of this trend of celebrating Day of the Dead in the U.S. Sahagun's references to cultural practices from southern Mexican states, which have a heavier indigenous population, and her emphasis on the joyous aspect of the holiday, aligns her work with other Chicano artists who seek to privilege the indigenous over the Roman Catholic traditions of Day of the Dead.

Sahagun performed "Calavereando" in a relatively small venue, seating roughly forty people. Her performance begins with a person walking on stage dressed as a calaca. The calaca picks up an instrument and starts to play a tune. After a change of scene, the light shines on three orange candles lit near marigold flower arrangements on an otherwise bare stage. Four calacas enter, one of them adorned with a folklorico skirt while the others don flower headpieces. All four calacas hold marigolds and baskets. At one point, a man dances with the person donning the calaca mask as she waves her skirt and they exit. The calaca's image and movement serve to animate the myth of the goddess Cihuacoatl. Cihuacoatl comes from the Postclassic period (900/1000–1521 A.D.) belonging to the cultural group of the Nahuas in Central Mexico (Read and González 147). As a goddess, she is referred to as a "Snake Woman" or "Skull-faced Woman" and takes on multiple roles; she is considered a patroness of war, agriculture,

childbirth, and creator of human beings (147-49). She is a strategist who helps with military battles. Within agriculture, she watches over agricultural beings. In childbirth, she helps childbearing women and midwives deliver their babies. Even though sixteenth-century Spanish references, such as the *Florentine Codex*, describe Cihuacoatl in a derogatory manner, as a “beast” or the “devil” (quoted in Read 56), she actually stands as a goddess of both creation and destruction. She is both matron and warrior and inhabits both the sky and the underworld. Rather than treating her solely as a self-sacrificing mother figure in Paulina Sahagun’s performance, her contradictory associations show that she is a figure with holistic and dualistic qualities who balances equal yet opposing characteristics.

Debra J. Blake compares the creative and destructive qualities of Cihuacoatl to La Llorona. Both Cihuacoatl and La Llorona are connected given that Cihuacoatl was the goddess of women who died in childbirth and thus was thought of as fatal to children, while La Llorona sacrificed her children, arguably for reasons of unrequited love or sacrifice. La Llorona then, can be considered the reincarnated version of Cihuacoatl who haunts children and men at night near waterways and ditches (Blake 64). Blake also argues that one of the reasons why figures like Cihuacoatl and La Llorona are so prominent in Chicana literary works [as well as performance] is because they bridge dualities. Mesoamerican cosmology affirms concepts of complementary dualities or paired oppositions. Mother-earth goddesses such as Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue are known for their ability to create and destroy and known to defy gender binaries by presenting themselves in an ambiguous manner. Blake states that these mother-earth goddesses are:

[s]ymbols of life and death (womb and tomb), growth and decline, martiality and domesticity, carnality and repentance ... [and are also] associated with the earth, water, corn, maguey, weaving and other art forms, childbirth, snakes, sexual sin,

human sacrifice, the night, the moon and the underworld to name a few of the most significant aspects. (69)

Both Cihuacoatl and Coatlicue are mother-earth deities who are associated with the serpent-snake. The serpent-snake too signifies rebirth and transformation. Both goddesses are complex and powerful figures who, unlike western patriarchal versions of motherhood, have “complex, powerful, and plural subjectivities” (54).

Grisel Gómez Cano (2011) also mentions how Cihuacoatl, the serpent woman, is associated with other Mesoamerican goddesses. She is especially recognized as the daughter of Coatlicue and sister of Huitzilopochtli, who killed Coatlicue. She has been associated with the *cihuateteo* and *tzizimime*, the spirits of mothers who died at childbirth. Because of her associations with the underworld, Cihuacoatl is also linked with the modern “Day of the Dead” festivities in Mexico (Gómez Cano 222). In her work, Gómez Cano places the goddess, Cihuacoatl, in conversation with the image of La Catrina. Similarly, in Sahagun’s performance she cites both the works of Posada and the Cihuacoatl myth.

I argue that the varied use of the skull mask in Sahagun’s performance helps to associate the mask with multiple references, including Posada’s La Catrina image, the myth of Cihuacoatl, and La Llorona. In doing so, this performance critiques gender roles while relying on post-revolutionary art and indigenous figures to do so. For instance, in every scene the mask is used in a playful way. The actors don the masks while wearing flamboyantly gendered articles of clothing, such as crowns, hats, and feathers. Much like Posada’s art, these masks are representing skeleton figures who mimic the quotidian habits of living humans. In one scene from the performance, a calaca enters the scene playing music with three musicians following the lead. They play and sing to the Mexican tune of “La Sandunga.” La Sandunga is a Oaxacan song that

blends indigenous and mestizo musical characteristics. La Sandunga is also a regional dance from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region in Mexico (Gould 242). The word “sandunga” has multiple meanings. In Spanish it refers to “gracefulness, allurement, elegance, winsomeness, fascination,” while in Zapotec it means “music that is complete” and “that holy satisfaction” (243). The exceedingly gendered clothing the actors wore along with the excessive amount of gestures they made worked to contradict the lyrics of the song that emphasize gracefulness. The men keep playing “La Sandunga” even after a boy named Zack and the calacas leave to eat tamales. Suddenly, another calaca enters wearing a shiny beaded skirt with a rebozo. This feminine calaca briefly sings and dances to the tune before running off. The musicians now sing the song “La Llorona,” another Oaxacan song from the musical style, Son Istmeño. During this song, the lights dim which prompts the four calacas and Zack to bring lit candles. The piece ends with a woman and young boy wearing calaca costumes with their faces exposed who bring flowers and invite the audience to join the celebration. In each of the examples, the bodies of the actors animate the costumes in a way that contradicts the message of either gracefulness or sadness in the songs. The skull-masks, which remain a constant image throughout the performance, serve to enhance the *mise-en-scene* and comedic vibe of the performance.

Día de los Muertos is a holiday that can, at least figuratively, bring the dead back to life through the movement and participation of a group of people. I would argue that the woman and boy who wear skull-masks at the end of the scene resemble a mother and son relationship. Since Cihuacoatl is known as the “Serpent Woman,” “Skull-Faced Woman,” and is among other roles, a mother, a relationship can be made between the woman and son wearing the masks, and the myth of Cihuacoatl and La Llorona. Both myths also share similarities to one another. Like La Llorona, Cihuacoatl was dressed in white and is described as having skull-like characteristics

(Pérez, “Revitalizing the Legend” 79). Cihuacoatl also has skull features and crossbones decorating her skirt (Klein 33). According to Mesoamerican beliefs, skulls and bones do not merely represent death but are also associated with plant seeds as a form of regeneration (Izeki 29). Symbols like skulls and crossbones are meant to portray the idea that “new life requires death or sacrifice” (29). Likewise, Sahagun’s performance emphasizes the joy and liveliness of the Día de Los Muertos celebrations.

Moraga and Sahagun’s work differ in terms of style and content but both employ indigenous cultures and practices to reference a preexisting Aztec mythology, reject Chicana gender roles associated with Catholic perceptions of women and/or motherhood, and affirm a post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism. Specifically, both Moraga and Sahagun shed light on Aztec female goddesses associated with transgression and motherhood. Sahagun does this by offering a representation of masks along with musical lyrics that primarily cite the myth of Cihuacoatl, the “Skull-Faced Woman” as well as La Llorona. Moraga accomplishes this by utilizing corn and textual references to cite the myth of Coatlicue, as well as Tonantzín and La Llorona. Each citation of the myth prioritizes Aztec deities and Mexican female archetypes who defy Roman Catholic notions of kinship. Even though there are paradoxical elements to these performances, namely the fact that only indigenous deities that come from a post-revolutionary Mexican *indigenismo* ideologies are mentioned, Sahagun and Moraga still take on these issues as a means of stirring a productive dialogue within the contemporary Chicana/o community and mainstream U.S. based theater audiences. In doing so, both performances function to critique patriarchal ideologies rooted in the expectations of motherhood as something that cannot deviate from markers of passivity, submissiveness, and asexuality.

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Chapter Four: Intimate Acts of Healing: Surrogate Glass Candles in U.S. Botánicas

Intimacy builds worlds.

--Lauren Berlant

The arrangement of objects of the botánica, when employed in patterns of devotion— with flowers, candles, foods, prayers, and the mental state of egoless intention practitioners call faith— does something. The correct mixture of these elements produces or can produce the transformations of social and physical state that the patron seeks.

-- Joseph Murphy

As a child, I was raised in the northeast San Fernando Valley by Mexican immigrant parents who worked in the service industry—my mother as a *librarian* (bookstore) clerk and my father as a dishwasher and waiter. It was in this local *librarian* that my mother learned about botánica products. She noticed how many people would walk in and rather than buying books or magazines, they opted to purchase a protection amulet, bracelet, or candle. Learning from the desire others had to take action against their struggles, my mother decided to start her own botánica business in the 1980s. Growing up in an indoor and outdoor swap meet environment, I observed my mom working during the week in her store and setting up shop in deserted parking lots on the weekends. Back then, she sold a variety of religious products, some pertaining to Catholicism like *recuerdos* (souvenirs), bibles, saint statues and other syncretic and Santería-based items like amulets, oils, and glass candles. I noticed how most of my mother's patrons were middle-aged immigrant women from Mexico and Central America. They came to my mother with quotidian concerns. In the process of finding a product to best suit their needs, these women would recount very personal stories related to relationship, financial and health problems. Whenever my mother was away and my father took over (or became the surrogate) for her, these women would leave and return when my mom was present. As they later confessed to

my mother, regardless of my father's knowledge of the products on sale, his masculine presence prevented the women from feeling secure enough to confide in him and/or purchase products.

In this chapter I analyze the function of glass candles, the ubiquitous ceremonial and quotidian objects found in contemporary botánicas. While my overall dissertation looks at different theatrical performances, this chapter treats cultural practices as performances to uncover how objects are also used in non-theatrical spaces as a means for empowerment through healing. Rather than investigating multiple venues/locations, I shift away from this towards performances that occur in one botánica. This botánica serves as a case study and example of the ways that many botánicas function in the U.S. Through one site-specific example of object-centered performances in botánicas, which takes into account their theatrical qualities (actors, spectators, and spect-actors), this chapter claims that practices occurring in contemporary U.S. botánicas are involved in processes of “surrogation”—Joseph Roach's term that refers to the process where death or other forms of departure call for a substitution to fulfill that deficit (2). By looking closely at how surrogation and intimacy function in a botánica with a predominantly immigrant Latina clientele, I find that these practitioners in the U.S. resignify Santería practices to meet their social, cultural and economic needs. Roach's work is applicable since cultures reproduce and recreate themselves through substitutions that come when there is a loss or death that provides a cavity that needs to be filled socially or culturally (2). As I demonstrate in each of my chapters, objects—in this case glass candles—offer multiple forms of representation, which debunk myths of stability and neutrality, which larger structures of power tend to produce. Rather than thinking of the botánica as a stable and neutral space, instead, it is an ever-changing space that is affected by the circulation of objects that cite African, European and indigenous qualities. In uncovering the syncretic and hybrid layers of candle-use, this chapter sheds new

light on ways that Latina immigrant women in the U.S., specifically in Southern California, develop forms of community-formation through shared acts of healing.

My argument rests on the notion that the images and glass candles are surrogated to allow for the continuity of multiple religious and cultural genealogies (including saints, gods and deities). These images are problematic though because in the process of surrogation they also become gendered and commodified. Therefore, one of my sections (there are three sections) in this chapter analyzes the heteronormative and hyper-gendered iconography of love candles; another section analyzes the syncretic (Catholic, indigenous, and Yoruba) elements of candles, and the last section will focus on the consumerist and commodifying quality of these candles. My analysis accounts for the acts that occur before, during and after lighting a candle. In focusing on three candle-use forms, I note how each object (while all materially similar) signifies differently according to the context through which they are bought.

As Rosi's daughter, I am positioned in proximity to both performers and objects, allowing me to witness my mother and father's experiences in the botánica setting but also functioning as a critic of these practices. Using the example of women distancing themselves from my father, one can see that intimacy and trust is a primary quality of the way that many botánicas function. A loss of trust in this example led to a temporary loss of clientele. This means that part of the labor involved in establishing intimacy and trust in botánicas involves having casual conversations between owner and customer and the desires they project onto the products that they purchase. I associate my mother's botánica with qualities of intimacy as Lauren Berlant defines it. In "Intimacy: A Special Issue" Berlant offers a definition of intimacy where she notes that:

[t]o intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures and at its

root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. People consent to trust their desire for “a life” to institutions of intimacy. (281)

If, as Berlant notes, “intimacy builds worlds,” then so too the desires of these immigrant women help to construct the commercial need for spaces like botánicas. When that intimacy is disrupted (e.g. my father stands in for my mother who is the owner), the objects on sale become worthless and lose their commercial function (e.g. the women refuse to purchase items). Thus, while botánicas rely on the loyalty of its customers, this means that the customers are also putting themselves in a position of vulnerability that can work two-fold. In making one’s intimate thoughts public, customers put themselves at risk (since these practices are shunned in many cultures), however, if they do not express these stories and choose not to buy anything, the botánica itself becomes vulnerable (due to loss of profits). In other words, Rosi’s botánica depends on the mutual trust and loyalty of its customers in order for the business to function and for the practices to continue.

This chapter explores the intimate cultural performances found within the confines of Rosi’s botánica. My primary objects of study are glass candles as well as the practices surrounding their purchase. I have chosen this object of study because as objects of devotion, candles facilitate performativity. Here I employ Judith Butler’s definition of performativity, which she refers to as the repetition and enactment of norms, which create an effect of

uniformity. Butler defines performativity from a gendered perspective to claim that the seeming stability of gender is an effect produced by the division, hierarchization, and constraint of gender differences, which are then reified and normalized (20). Like Butler, I use the term performativity to refer to the repetition of acts by which norms are constituted. In my case, the acts I refer to are those practices surrounding glass candles. The practitioner's ability to resignify the product to suit his or her belief system and memories is an example of performativity. But since objects, while seemingly stable, often degrade or lose value, they are often surrogated. I am not implying that the object's material degradation always leads to surrogation but rather that the objects, like candles, that are involved in culturally-specific practices of worship, are surrogated through the continuation of those practices. While each bodily engagement with objects changes over time, it still cites a genealogy of gestures that come before it.

Background and Justification

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor notes that:

in the United States, Latino/as often turn to traditional ritual remedies from home to deal with current problems of cultural and physical displacement. Is it magical thinking to hope that a can of "Stay Away Law" will keep the NYPD in check?

Can magic powders free modern subjects from scrutiny and surveillance? (114)

Similarly, I ask, how can the glass candle play a role in producing survival acts—acts that aid in getting through difficult experiences? First, the candles present themselves in myriad forms; when entering a botánica, one will notice these candles come in multiple colors, shapes, sizes, and waxes. Second, they are adorned with varied iconography, text, and scents. Lastly, depending on the combination of the above-mentioned options, each candle will have a focused

purpose. Glass candles help patrons find solutions to their problems, but in attracting a particular population of immigrant women in one location (Rosi's botánica), glass candles can also aid in producing spaces of female solidarity and empowerment.

This chapter analyzes candles and their respective performances that occur in one botánica: Rosi's botánica. Rosi is the nickname for my mother, Rosaura Serratos. Much of the material I have gathered comes from my *pláticas* (conversations) with her and from observations I made growing up in her shop. Generally, in botánicas, one can find an array of syncretic products but some objects will *matter* more than others. From the moment one walks into the botánica space, the prominence and prevalence of certain objects becomes self-evident. For instance, when walking into Rosi's botánica, one of the first observations one might make are the multiple rows and stacks of candles surrounding the space (see fig. 4.1), which triggers the question, why might the candle be more prominent than other products like oils or incense? If syncretism and spirituality is fashioned via commodification, what qualities about the candle account for its popularity? While much of the literature written about candles and botánicas focuses on analysis through an ethnographic or historiographical lens (Polk and Cosentino; Murphy), I use a visual and performance studies method given that it accounts for both the visual and oral aspects of this practice. Similarly, rather than studying the candles within places like altars and churches, I am focusing on their presence in the botánica (business/economic) setting not only to highlight the consumerist qualities of the production and use of candles but also to refashion the botánica as a space where intimate relationships can form.



Fig. 4.1. Rows of religious, syncretic and multicolored candles, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

Historically, botánicas emerged as spaces of continuation and surrogation of Santería practices. Santería is a West African religion that emerged from the Caribbean as a result of slave trade (Holliday 13). This practice:

developed because Catholic slave masters would not allow slaves to overtly practice their Yoruba based religion because worship of the *orishas* (deities) was considered sacrilegious In response, slaves drew relations between their *orishas* and Catholic saints and Santería was born. (Holliday 11-2)

Diana Taylor discusses a similar scenario where indigenous populations in Mexico would “kneel . . . before the Virgen de Guadalupe to direct their attentions to Tonantzín [an Aztec goddess]” (Taylor 44). She calls this process a “performance shift and doubling” or a kind of “multiplication and simultaneity rather than surrogation or absencing” (46). The distinction between Roach and Taylor’s perspective on surrogation becomes apparent in their application of

this concept. While Roach applies his theory of surrogation to bodies aiming to fulfill specific roles (e.g. the king and mardi gras performers), Taylor applies surrogation to social behaviors. She states that when friars imposed new social behaviors on their native population, their intent could be said to have aimed towards surrogation—to forget or erase former behaviors—but in actuality, the native population could have embraced these new behaviors to reject surrogation and “continue their cultural and religious practices in a less recognizable form” (46). While Roach argues that the process of surrogation often erases or forgets the memories of those that have departed, I agree with Taylor that those memories continue to reappear but I am interested in acknowledging how those memories manifest in a different material form. Instead of focusing on bodies that surrogate particular roles, I connect Taylor’s work with Roach’s by focusing on surrogated objects—objects that become a material manifestation of the displacement of cultural practices that become resignified in practice. To refer back to Santería, in practicing their religion, slaves substituted images of *orishas* with those of Catholic saints. What was surrogated then were the objects themselves (e.g. the printed images on candles, which now appear like saints) rather than the roles (the images may visually appear like saints but they now represent *orishas*).

Objects and/in Performance within Botánicas in the U.S.

This section provides a literature review that details the history behind the emergence of botánicas in the U.S.—namely due to the rise of Santería practices. Santería practices did not merely disappear with the emancipation of African slaves, but instead reappeared via material surrogated objects. Objects and practices found in botánicas can be considered displaced remnants of the slave trade, however, capital and value is now attributed to objects of devotion

and their related practices. Therefore, I claim that what a consumer is buys is not only the object but also the experience that they or a storeowner can perform.

Botánicas are small stores normally located in urban or suburban neighborhoods. These are typically small-scale locally owned stores packed with shelves and vitrines full of vivid candles, oils, body washes, and aerosol sprays with a variety of printed images tailored to address a predicament. Since the healing traditions found within botánicas date back to the slave trade in the Americas, botánica shops can be found in several countries across the hemisphere. For the purposes of this study though, I will solely focus on botánicas in the U.S. in relation to their displaced Latina/o patrons. Botánicas sell goods to a largely Latino clientele and often serve as spaces of healing. There are plenty of devotional objects sold in these stores. Many objects can be added to personal shrines or altars. Some of the objects include:

Amulets, herbs, candles, soaps, magic powders, charts, scents, incense, and economy-size cans of spray [that] help keep evil forces at bay. Tarot cards, statues of Catholic saints, *eleguas* from Santería and Vodun dolls [also] rub up against each other on the shelves of these ecumenical botánicas. Like the Latino populations they appeal to, these spiritual practices also share a cultural space more or less peacefully. (Taylor 115)

Within botánicas, one can find products with Christian or Catholic iconography mixed with non-Christian or secular symbols. Products can be mixed and matched to tailor a person's particular concern. To a foreigner, botánica spaces may appear as “esoteric bazaars, where religious icons from multiple traditions are piled up in apparent disarray amidst a cornucopia of Buda and Hinduist drawings, sculptures of Catholic Saints, and Santería necklaces” (Viladrich 409). However, the seeming disorganization and mixing reflects first and foremost a center of

commercial activity and also cites a longer history of syncretic practices in the U.S. Most botánicas offer formal and informal transactions related to healing via spiritual and religious means.

Each person involved in these transactions (owner, healer, psychic, or worker) has a role that involves more than simply selling a product to a consumer (409). As Anahí Viladrich reminds us, botánicas:

welcome religious and commercial networks where patrons and providers share knowledge about new products as well as gossip. In fact, botánicas' success greatly depends on the informal webs of those who visit them to buy and sell products, on chatting with patrons and neighbors, and on participating in religious ceremonies taking place in the religious houses and temples erected in their basements and backrooms. (409)

The botánica is an atypical public place of religion and commerce where intimate acts occur. Unlike the church—which is also a place of religious and monetary transaction (e.g. practices of worship and donation) but which conceals its capital—botánicas are not typically associated with markers of intimacy and devotion due to the overtly visible financial transactions. By devotion, I am referring to practices of worship and reverence towards something; these practices include prayer, praise, and/or ceremonies. To worship something requires an intimate relationship between the practitioner and who or what she or he worships given that a level of closeness, familiarity and knowledge is necessary to sustain the practice. However, I claim that botánicas function much like the institution of the Catholic Church in the sense of providing the space where patrons can express their devotion, share their cultural knowledge and tell their personal stories, with the intent to help each other. A marked difference, however, between the

Catholic Church and botánicas is that while they both provide support, the former is male-dominated while the latter is female-dominated; the former is a place to worship one religion while the latter is inclusive of multiple belief systems; and the former is an official and established institution of worship while the latter is foremost a business.

Many products on sale in botánicas are objects of devotion. These objects carry with them symbolic value. Since most botánica patrons are women, the products appeal to a feminine female gaze. For instance, several patrons enter botánicas seeking a product or object that will protect them from physical harm. Though glass candles are popularly used for this, there are also other objects that can provide this function. One form of protection is via items of adornment. Some customers will carry amulets, key chains, and *oraciones* (prayer-books) to keep them safe. Others collect statues, which they keep on their home-based altars. Still, some will purchase protective jewelry like bracelets, necklaces, and rosaries, more commonly worn by women. The popular jewelry include the *mal de ojo* (“evil eye”) bracelets that protect against others’ negative energy. Many of these items are small and lightweight, making them easily accessible, portable, and affordable. These objects lend well for daily use, making them properties that can be easily surrogated and aid in the repetition and enactment of cultural practices, such as practices of healing. One of the ways that Rosi’s clientele—a group of mostly Latina/o immigrants, sustain their religions and cultural beliefs while away from their native countries is by relying on the surrogation of objects. Objects of adornment, while mass-produced and commodified, also allow for the transmission of memory and performance of religious acts necessary for Latina/o immigrants in the U.S. to sustain their cultural and religious practices.

Other surrogate objects in botánicas that promote corporeal forms of healing include fragrance oils, incense, perfumes, body washes, and *limpias*. These items, instead of being used

over the body as adornments, are used over and within the body as a form of personal care. *Limpias*, for example, are a form of spiritual cleansing where a *curandero* (healer) or other knowledgeable practitioner will use a variety of items such as eggs, crucifixes, smoke, lemons, and herbs to remove negativity from the body. Like the practices surrounding candles where a person reveals their intimate social problems to the practitioner, so too, the person receiving the *limpia* must reveal and therefore release her or his negative energy in order for the cleanse to work. Also part of a practice commonly known as aromatherapy, many of these items are said to have a therapeutic potential due to their scent's ability to target and alter a person's mood. Additionally, these items are also meant to offer a phenomenological engagement with the person using it to the extent that they can engage a body's sense of vision, smell and touch. The fragrance oil, for instance, comes in different colors, scents, and can be applied onto one's skin. It includes a label with images and text that indicate that once a person applies this oil, it will help her or him with issues of money, love or health.

While some products used for holistic practices focus on present-day issues, other products are oriented towards issues that might arise in the future, especially items used in psychic readings. Psychic readings include palm (hand), tarot card, or candle-soot reading. Psychics offer confidential *consultas* (consultations) in private back rooms, where they use objects like a card or candle to produce information based on the results or traces of each performance. For instance, depending on the arrangement of cards or the amount and pigmentation of soot left on a candle, the psychic will render information about the patron. During these *consultas*, the psychic, store owner, or worker⁵⁵ will offer a reading to patrons and

⁵⁵ Not all botánicas' owners are healers or herb specialists, therefore, the owners usually employ practitioners on their premises (Viladrich 411). In the case of Rosi's botánica, she hires two women to offer readings, a woman named Rosalinda (also nicknamed Rosi) and Guadalupe (known as Lupita) who provide candle soot and tarot card readings.

recommend particular items for purchase to help them resolve their problems or concerns.

Specifically, *consultas* are:

aimed at providing clients with emotional strength and social support regarding financial and family problems as well as with life-threatening conditions, such as cancer and AIDS. Practitioners usually perform as *curanderos*, diviners, religious priests, and informal mental health providers all at once, by listening and providing advice about a myriad of personal and family matters. Without forms to fill out, identification cards to present, or long-waiting times to get an appointment, immigrants easily get into street-level botánicas seeking expedited responses to a pressing physical or emotional issue.... [T]he act of cure through herbs is not as relevant as the act of “caring” that healers impart, and which provide a more holistic meaning to their herb-therapy treatments (e.g., preparation, application, follow up). (Viladrich 412)

Rather than purchasing the surrogated object, in this case, the patron also purchases an act of care. They are seeking information and guidance related to social relationships rather than a product.

The form of treatment that targets a person’s social concerns is called *sociosoma*— the treatment of a social issue that takes into account causation of negative energies and aims to remove them with healing acts, like *limpias* (408). Etymologically, “socio” comes from the Latin term *socius*, meaning “companion” or “with reference to society” while “soma” is a Greek term meaning “body” (OED). Within *sociosoma*, the emphasis is placed on the social relationships, which may have caused illness; it takes into account the intersectional and interconnected relationship between one’s social circumstances and well being. Viladrich notes, “[t]he

underlying hypothesis supporting this notion is that Latino healers' conceptualization of the physical body is essentially intertwined with both the physical and the social environment that prevent, as well as sustain, the sufferer's pain" (408). Thus, when patrons go to botánicas they are not only seeking to purchase any commercial product; they are seeking particular surrogated objects that cite a syncretic genealogy of practices that will fulfill their needs.

Just as there are varying forms of objects one can purchase and use within botánicas, there are also varying forms of devotion or acts of worship, each with their respective objects. While there are multiple acts of devotion in botánicas, the primary belief-system affiliated with these acts is Santería.⁵⁶ In the self-titled book, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion*, Mary Ann Clark notes how some practitioners are born into the traditions through families or community members who have taught them these customs (8). Other practitioners learn in classrooms that teach about African cultures (9). In the U.S., practitioners who became disillusioned with the religions with which they were raised sought to explore alternate practices and discovered Santería (9). In uncovering Orisha worship, inexperienced learners must go through a series of initiations (9). Orisha worship is hierarchical and secretive, therefore those that are new to the practice must defer to those with a higher rank despite their own sociocultural position (age, race, sex, class, or education) (9). Clark notes that "[t]hrough participation and initiation one can move through the ranks of the tradition, but there will always be those who are your senior, to whom you must defer" (9). Within Santería, there is

⁵⁶ Santería is derived from the spiritual traditions of the Yoruba. Santería includes the worshipping of orishas (divinities) or saints. Within this belief system, "mortals cannot have direct contact with the Supreme Being (Olodumare), [therefore] they must rely on and interact with the *orishas*" (Polk 31). Although there are numerous orishas, only a select few are regularly honored and invoked. Each orisha will have their chant, song, drum pattern, offerings, colors and symbols (Polk 32). Their visual representations are often a combination of African and European (especially Catholic) sources (32). Some of the more common orishas include: Babalú Ayé, Changó, Eleguá, Obatalá, Ochosi, Ogún, Ochún, Oyá, Osain, Los Ibeyi, Orunmila, and Yemayá (33-4).

a common distrust towards those who come prepared with an abundance of text-based knowledge (9). This is because Santería is a practice passed on orally and through embodied rather than textual knowledge. Also, since many books inaccurately portray these customs or include misleading information, textual knowledge is distrusted (9). A priest, in this situation, must agree to teach and train a seeker (9). Due to the secretive and protective nature of this religion, Santería is often conflated with *brujería*, or devil-worship. Even though botánica products are highly syncretic, their objects often become affiliated with Santería, and as a result they also attain negative associations because of *brujería*. Nevertheless, this is a praxis-oriented tradition and the initiations that take place are meant to form close life-long relationships (11).

Rise of Santería in the U.S.

In this next section, I describe the history behind the presence of botánicas in the U.S., tying it back to Santería and other belief-systems, which will lead to a discussion of Rosi's botánica and the candle-oriented practices made available to consumers that help women deal with quotidian social concerns. Botánicas emerged from the amalgamation of Santería practices with Catholic iconography. Santería⁵⁷ is a West African religion that stems from the Caribbean as a result of the slave trade (Holliday 13). In 1511, decades following Christopher Columbus' "discovery"⁵⁸ of Cuba, Spaniards began to import African slaves to meet labor needs (Lefever 319). Arguably, Santería practices can be dated back as early as the late fifteenth and early

⁵⁷ While using the term "Santería," I understand that it may conflate the specificities of myriad African-based traditions, which influence syncretic practices in a botánica. Also, for many botánica owners (including Rosi) rather than associating their products and practices with Santería, they call their services *trabajos* and are part of the broader term *creencias* (beliefs). I choose to highlight the contested term Santería since it is the most frequently used (both accurately and inaccurately) to refer to these practices.

⁵⁸ By "discovery" here I refer to the numerous decolonial and postcolonial scholarship that reframes discussion of "discovery" in terms of the actual events of genocide and colonization that occurred in the sixteenth century U.S. One such study is Jesse Aleman's "The Other Country: Mexico, the United States, and the Gothic History of Conquest" (2006).

sixteenth century. However, these practices became widespread in the nineteenth century when slaves from Yoruba cultures in Nigeria and the Congo carried their religious beliefs in the Americas to sustain their practices (320). Since Catholic slave masters did not allow slaves to practice their Yoruba-based religion, slaves hid their religion through the names of Christian saints—an intentional failed surrogation— thinking about the similarities between them and Yoruba gods (Blanco 8). This, I claim, is a failed surrogation because slaves “drew relations between their *orishas* (deities) and Catholic saints” (Holliday 11-2) instead of forgetting them.⁵⁹ Karen Holliday claims that Santería’s presence in the U.S. “can be traced back to the Cuban Revolution when Cubans sought refuge from Castro’s government [. . .] Prior to that, Santería was developed in Cuba by free and enslaved Africans in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (14). Secrecy and intimacy was a required element of this vulnerable practice for fear of extinction. Given its secretive qualities, many signs and symbols were intentionally conflated. European and Catholic iconography became associated with indigenous and African meaning. What this practice provided for immigrants to the U.S. is likened to what it provided to the slaves who created it: “a support system for newcomers, flexible enough because of the very nature in which it was conceived” (14). In Rosi’s botánica, one can find a similar amalgamation of religious practices and iconography; however, since the store attracts a predominantly Latina/o Catholic clientele, most of the products highlight that religion over others. In general, I contend that while Catholic traditions are stressed in Rosi’s botánica, African and indigenous traditions still remain.

There were a significant number of migratory waves that led up to the establishment of botánicas in the U.S. Two dominant waves that brought Santería from Cuba to the U.S. were the

⁵⁹ For example, in the Catholic-Lucumy syncretism Saint Christopher is associated with the deity Agayu, Saint Lazarus with Babalu-Aye, Our Lady of Charity with Ochun, Saint Francis of Assisi with Orula or Orumila, and Jesus Christ with Olofi. For more information, see Celia Blanco’s *Santería Yoruba*, 1995.

Cuban Revolution in the 1960s and the Marielitos who escaped Cuba in the 1980s (Clark 2). Before this, the first documented Santería practitioner to reside in the U.S. was Francisco (Pancho) Mora in 1946 (Brandon 106). During the Cuban Revolution, a large number of affluent Cubans entered the U.S. and other Latin American countries for refuge (105). Some Cuban immigrants came to the U.S. already following alternative Santería-based belief systems, however, others, frustrated by experiences of linguistic and racialized discrimination within the church, sought help in non-institutionalized religious sectors like Espiritismo and Santería (106). While Cuban immigrants in the 1960s came to the U.S. with a different set of classed circumstances, both experienced some form of discrimination due to their immigrant status. Marielitos—the hundreds of thousands of Cuban immigrants who were boatlifted to the U.S. in 1980s— for example, were denied refugee status and stigmatized for being convicts, mental health patients, and homosexuals (523). This population was younger, poorer, and generally more racially diverse and with less formal education than the migrants that came before them (Burke 523). Since many Marielitos were Santería practitioners, the period of their migration (1980s and 1990s) is characterized by a rise of Santería-based economies via storefronts like botánicas (Beliso-De Jesus 48).⁶⁰

In Southern California, botánicas started to surface in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Polk and Cosentino 31). Cubans, Cuban Americans and Puerto Ricans were among the first to open shops. Nina Pérez is one of the pioneers in Los Angeles who opened Botánica Nina Religion. Another was Gil Orta who owned Botánica Santa Barbara. There was also Ray Pizarro who opened the Seven Powers Garden Temple Store. I mention these names because it attests to the strong presence of Latina/os in Southern California. By the 1960s and 1970s, Mexican

⁶⁰ Botánicas during this time became integrated within the larger “New Age” religions that included other African and indigenous practices (Beliso-De Jesus 48).

owners became more prevalent. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Central American storeowners emerged. Botánica storeowner trends matched immigration patterns in Southern California. More recently, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and European-Americans have opened their own stores.⁶¹ The demographic shifts found among botánica owners in the U.S. is suggestive of the ways in which religion becomes commodified and is involved with histories of migration into the U.S.

Despite efforts to demystify practices found in botánicas, these spaces continue to have strong negative undercurrents due to their affiliation with Santería. Early efforts at distancing African-based syncretic practices from stigmatized views happened in the 1930s when the Afro-Cuban scholar, Rómula Lachatañeré, replaced *brujería* (witchcraft), the term then used, with Santería (Clark 3). *Brujería* refers to practices associated with witches, those who follow the devil and evil spirits (“Witchcraft”). *Santera/o*, on the other hand, is a word that more specifically implies a person who lives her or his life dedicated to maintaining the worshipping of certain saints (Clark 3). Even though Santería as a term was meant to replace the former derogatory associations of *brujería*, it still bears the same negative connotations as an evil practice. Thus, a big part of sustaining this religion is via praxis, including the careful oral transmission of knowledge.

Within Santería, learning is passed from person-to-person through embodied practice (9). Practitioners such as “[c]uranderos, psychics, and espiricistas equate certain kinds of cultural archives and repertoires (herbs, stones, cards, cosmic signs) with cultural competence that involves knowledge and understanding rather than belief” (Taylor 124). The sharing of this knowledge only happens after a priest or initiated person has agreed to teach and train the

⁶¹ Botánicas are so widespread that in 2004, Patrick A. Polk curated the exhibition “Botánica Los Angeles” at UCLA’s Fowler Museum, which aimed at clarifying “misunderstood and unfamiliar vernacular religious practices” (Polk and Cosentino 7).

interested person. Also, due to the vulnerability of the religion, this practice has remained secretive, only available to those that are considered trustworthy— who have signed an informal oral contract and have been initiated in some form. In *Dancing with the Saints: An Exploration of Santería's Sacred Tools*, Miguel F. Santiago notes that there are “things . . . not mentioned in many books” regarding Santería practices (1). He notes that among practitioners of Santería, it is forbidden to reveal secrets of the practice. Therefore, not much has been written detailing the mechanics of Santería (1). Santiago indicates that many santera/os believe that the mystery of Santería stems from the ongoing persecution African slaves dealt with in the New World. Centuries later, as if facing persecution and religious extinction, these practices sustain their privacy (2); In Santería, the act of remaining secretive and private has become embedded within this belief system for issues of security because initially for African slaves in the New World, to disclose their religion meant to become susceptible to misunderstanding or harm.

Aside from Santería in the U.S., the practice of seeking advice and healing through divination and other forms of embodied knowledge also existed in Latin America in the fifteenth century. Since the fifteenth-century, practitioners like oracle workers have and continue to maintain religious authority in Latin America. For instance:

Moctezuma [(the ninth ruler of the Aztec empire). . .] relied on *presagios* (foretelling) and soothsayers to foresee the damages wrought by the foreign invaders. In [. . .] Mesoamerica, the soothsayer was the ‘wise one, in whose hands lay the books, the paintings; who preserved the writings, who possessed the knowledge, the tradition, the wisdom which hath been uttered.’ The secret lay not only in the books [. . .] but as important, in the interpretation and performance of the utterances [. . .]. (Taylor 114)

In “nonwestern” (African and indigenous) cultures, the “utterance” is just as important as the “books” since their knowledge production and transmission depends on items from the archive as mnemonic aids to retain information from the repertoire. For example, while the Aztecs, Mayas, and Incas practiced writing before, during and after the Conquest, this system never replaced performed utterances (17).⁶² Colonial powers like Spain and Portugal may have intended to sustain control over colonized populations through writing (since it was easier to navigate) but they were not able to remove embodied practices like ritual and dance.

Among botánica patrons in Southern California are Mexicans and Chicana/os who, instead of practicing Santería, may also follow cosmic belief systems like those derived from their ancestors, the Nahua cultures, to reinterpret past traditions that cater to their present needs (Segovia 252). Within the Mexican healing traditions of Nahuatlismo the body is comprised of dichotomous qualities and energies, which are key organizing factors for Aztec culture (León 101). In Nahua cultures:

the cosmos was divided into various levels of heaven and earth, delineated by complementary dualities: mother and father (corresponding to earth and heavens), female and male, cold and hot, down and up, underworld and heavens, wet and dry, dark and light, night and day, water and fire, and life and death. (101)

The body, then, serves as a microcosm of the cosmos and any ailment it may have originates

⁶² For an example of this, see the article “Transformation of Time and Space: Oaxaca Mexico, circa 1500-1700,” where Arthur Miller describes indigenous memorial practices of the Zapotecs in south central Mexico that incorporate elements of the archive and the repertoire. He says that to record calendrical information Zapotecs used a pictographic system. Their calendars were carved in stone or painted on walls as well as molded, carved or painted on pottery. In order to read their calendars, the presence of a knowledgeable person was required. This person would then read the calendar in order to help others understand how the date or dates in question fit their system. For Zapotecs, Miller suggests that there might not have been a complete calendar since a calendar for them was a fluid changing concept that was carried in living memory. The calendar was not seen as a document but as a *discourse*. For more information, see Arthur G. Miller, 1991.

from external forces that disrupt the cosmos' equilibrium (101). Healing practices found in contemporary U.S. botánicas, for instance, are holistic and meant to restore cosmic balance by addressing one's social circumstances, not just one's physical ailment. These healing practices include the use of ancient medicinal plants like sage, which refers back to the etymology of the term botánica, from the Latin term *botanius*, meaning "the science of plants" (OED).

Like Santería and Nahuatlismo, botánicas—spatial manifestations for these practices—often carry with them negative associations, due to the mixing of these religious traditions that influence the stores. As a result, many botánica storeowners, including Rosi, dissociate themselves from Santería and other Afro-Cuban (or indigenous) religions (Leon 111). Rosi often mentions how her customers enter her shop in hiding; she says, "para mucha gente lo que vendemos es brujería" (for many people, what we sell is witchcraft). For her mostly-female patrons, neither their spouses nor relatives know that they frequent the store given that "seeking the aid of a curandera generally violated the laws of the Catholic church" (106). Therefore, not only are the practices in these spaces still vulnerable to public and religious shame but the patrons are also making themselves vulnerable by seeking help for personal issues. Instead of following practices accepted by the Catholic Church, patrons seek additional forms of support. What separates these botánica products and practices from Mexican American popular Catholicism is the "cosmogony and the function of saints" (113)—saints within Catholicism are ordained by the institution of the church while saints within botánicas reflect a variety of hybrid belief systems and religions (like Curanderismo, Espiritismo, Santería, Candomblé, and so on) that can simultaneously target multiple issues. Broadly, I claim that in most U.S. botánicas, one can find that some traditions are avowed while others are suppressed but they all are syncretic spaces. In Rosi's botánica in particular, I am arguing that Catholic traditions are avowed while

African and indigenous traditions are suppressed.

Rosi's Botánica

Because I concentrate my study in one site and contextualization is central for understanding the analysis of any botánicas, I provide a description of Rosi and her botánica. When visiting Rosi's botánica, it becomes apparent that Rosi's personal background, as well as the geographic location and layout of the shop, reveal a focus on and concern for working-class issues. Rosi's botánica⁶³ is currently located in a small shopping center in Sylmar, California in the northeastern part of the San Fernando Valley—an area populated by mostly Mexican and Latina/o immigrants. For instance, 90.8 percent of the population in San Fernando City is of Hispanic or Latina/o origin, according to 2008-2012 U.S. Census; 83.6 percent out of that 90.8 percent of San Fernando's population is of Mexican origin (U.S. Census).⁶⁴

Rosi officially started her business in 1990 after having learned about these practices while working at *Libreria Mexico*. Born in Jalisco, Mexico, Rosi moved to the United States at the age of fourteen due to financial hardships. After completing her first year of high school, Rosi continued to have financial difficulties and dropped out at sixteen to start working full-time. This was when she started her employment at *Libreria Mexico*, a bookstore that was popular for their section on syncretic religious products. Rosi worked there for twelve years until she decided to leave and start her own business. In its first years, Rosi's business was divided between indoor and outdoor swap meets—indoor during weekdays and outdoor during weekends. From her early years as owner, Rosi developed a business that used, but did not rely,

⁶³ While I have chosen to call my mother's store a botánica, I should clarify that her business sign and public listings refer to it as a "Religious Articles" store. Only a customer who has frequented the store would identify this space as a botánica as opposed to a thrift shop.

⁶⁴ For additional details on Southern California demographics, please see <http://www.census.gov> or <http://factfinder2.census.gov>.

on formal monetary transactions because she also participated in informal bartering where the focus is on exchange of products rather than money. In 1998, Rosi moved her business permanently into a local shopping center. With the help of her longtime loyal customers, it took her close to ten years to gain the knowledge and skill sets to sell products and practices that are valuable. She sources her products from local manufacturers and distributors such as: Indio Products Inc. from Commerce, CA; Casa Esoterica from Los Angeles, CA; and Clover Candles from Los Angeles, CA. Since Rosi started her businesses, she has been able to establish relationships with wholesale businesses, who send representatives to her store to market their products. These products include items that cater to the social, cultural, and economic concerns of her customers—a “come to me” oil, “good luck” candle, and “evil eye” security bracelet. I mention this because it is only after several years of experience working with and for immigrant Latinas that Rosi has acquired enough skill and credibility for patrons to feel comfortable enough to confide in her. The business’ structure and success depends on modes of attachment between owner and patrons—the mutual trust each must have for the other.

Even though it is a public space of commerce, Rosi’s botánica is also an intimate relational place that appeals to a Latina/o immigrant clientele, as can be evidenced in the layout of the store. Currently, Rosi’s botánica is located parallel to a railroad track on a busy street with multiple apartments and motels. Inside the shopping center, the botánica is next to a Laundromat, Mexican restaurant, Natural and Herbal Remedies shop, liquor store, and beauty salon. The entrance is located on left side of the store. Immediately in front of the shop, one can find a worn-down wooden counter parallel to the left wall. Surrounding the counter is a series of bamboo plants. The counter also holds a small shrine for the *Virgen de Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity), a patroness of Cuba who is known to attract customers and stimulate

businesses (see fig. 4.2). This statue holds flowers made of dollar bills, which neighbors and oversees the cash register, both (statue and register) which hide behind the bamboo plants. Also behind the counter one can find Rosi and her assistant Rosalinda (who also goes by the nickname “Rosi”). On this counter they prepare candles for customers. Behind the counter is the left wall, which is adorned with rosaries, jewelry, amulets, and framed images of Saint Martín Caballero, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Jesus Christ. To the right side of the store are three stalls of products, such as candles, sprays, oils, bath herbs, incense, and so on. On the right wall are three rows with saint statues lined up including the Holy Child of Atocha, Saint Lazarus, Saint Christopher, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Saint Death. Disclosed from public view are a series of back rooms. Near the back wall on the left and right side are two walkways. The left walkway leads to the restroom, storage room, and a Saint Death shrine. The right walkway leads to a room for tarot card reading. Only trusted customers are allowed to enter these spaces with comfort and ease. The layout of the space makes it so that some traditions are avowed and others are suppressed; specifically, markers of Catholicism are highly visible while markers of African and indigenous religions are not as prominent. The layout also reflects the religious and spiritual interests of Rosi’s Latina/o clientele, most of whom identify as Catholic. Additionally, the Catholic shrines’ condition—they are neither spotless nor easily seen from a customer’s gaze—indicates that they have been used for the practice by people in the store. I view the presence of these shrines as an example of Rosi’s loyalty to her practice and business. She genuinely believes in the integrity of the products she sells, as proved by the fact that she too uses them. Rosi’s store layout and use of her products helps her gain the trust of her customers, given that she not only understands the trade but the practice as well.



Fig. 4.2. Our Lady of Charity Statue, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

There are layers of intimacy and trust established, not only amongst owner and patron, but within the layout of the business itself. The first layer of trust comes from understanding that this space is a botánica. Unlike many other botánicas, the name of the store itself is not “Rosi’s botánica” but rather “Rosi’s Decoración y Artículos Religiosos” (Rosi’s Decorations and Religious Goods). The name for the store itself is a misnomer, façade, or surrogate for the actual products and services one can purchase there. “Decorations” and “Religious Goods” are broad enough terms to render the shop socially acceptable at least from an onlooker’s perspective. Another layer of trust comes from the placement of goods within the store. Magazines and snacks are at the front of the store, an overwhelming stack of candles are located within the mid-section, and finally the altar, shrine, and consultation room are located in the back. During one of my many *pláticas* with Rosi she told me, “if you weren’t my daughter and you came in and asked me questions I wouldn’t answer them or at least not in a proper way because I wouldn’t trust you.” She said that the moment someone walks in the door, she can tell if they are a

believer. One has to be part of this network of loyal female customers in order to attain an insider status and once that is established, the store functions like a support system. The ritual of playing “hide and seek”⁶⁵ (as Diana Taylor would call it) involves many layers of hiding and uncovering goods and practices according to the level of mutual trust both owner and patron have for each other, as manifested in Rosi’s store layout. Likewise, the amount of knowledge one can obtain on using glass candles (How to use them? What to use them for? What prayer to include?) is a selective process of disclosure, where Rosi gets to choose what and how much information to provide her patrons, especially since this knowledge is not always found on the candles themselves.

The Glass Candle

Glass candles in botánicas attain social, cultural and economic value through interactions that people (owner or customer) have with them. These interactions are a form of bodily engagement similar to what Christopher Pinney (2001) terms “corpothetics.” In “Piercing the Skin of the Idol,” Pinney argues that image-worshipping practices in central India involve a process of corpothetics where images are embraced sensorially. He claims that a religious image’s power stems from the devotee’s visual and bodily performances, which include “breaking coconuts, lighting incense sticks, folding hands, shaking small bells, [and] the utterance of *mantras*” (167). I extend this definition to note that the sensorial embrace represents both an optical and tactical experience and via this experience, glass candles attain value. Candles sustain value through the gestural performances enacted by the product itself, the producer, and the consumer, which transforms the materiality of the object. In Rosi’s botánica

⁶⁵ In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor uses “hide-and-seek” as a phrase to describe a Latin American survival strategy where colonized native peoples would learn imposed colonial cultural norms but then coding them with their own practices, becoming a double- and multi-coded spectacle (228).

while there is a strict producer/consumer relationship, either producer or consumer can perform the act of lighting a candle. Once it is lit, the candle does the performing by burning while the person who lit it becomes the spectator who waits for the candle to finish burning. The lighting of the candle elicits a kind of cultural memory given that it cites a longer history of Santería worship. According to this belief system, the candle must burn to the point where there is little to no wax left for its function to take full effect. This is because in order to read or interpret the success of a candle burning, one must wait for the burning wax to form into soot. The amount, pigmentation, and density of the soot is meaningful and can be read by a knowledgeable practitioner to determine the effect of the candle. Without this knowledge—or without the memory behind the purpose of these practices—the candle and the images attached to it would be rendered useless and might not be burned in its entirety.

The use of candles can elicit memories not only through practice but also with the images they carry. As Marianne Hirsch (2012) reminds us, objects can give rise to an affective experience through the act of looking. For instance, in seeing the image of a saint, one can identify with that image as part of a religious belief system, which will then produce a feeling associated with the memory one has that is associated with that saint. Each object contains a performative index—no one object will produce the exact same meaning for each customer. Hirsch refers to a performative index in relation to photography; however, the same can be said about the images found on glass candles. The performative index of the candle is shaped by the customer's affect, need and desire. Thus, there is a relation between performance (practice and use of the candle), memory (resignification of the object due to past experiences), and surrogation (the substitution and transformation of the object's purpose) that is revealed when analyzing candle use.

If candles sustain a performatively indexical quality according to how they are used, what belief systems, other than Santería, get associated with candle-use in botánicas? Mary Ann Clark's work on Santería acknowledges that candles in botánicas are not always used for Santería work. People who have not been initiated into Santería but follow an *Espiritista* tradition may use candles. Upon asking Rosi whom her patrons are that use candles, she responds, "anyone." She goes on to explain that anyone with a problem or concern can learn about saints and deities that specialize in alleviating those matters and then purchase those respective candles. While Rosi is not an *espiritista*, per se, she does serve as a spiritual advisor for her patrons. In Clark's work, while she does not focus on detailing the use of candles for spirit work, she does mention that in some botánicas, candles are used for *espiritismo*.

Espiritismo refers to a spiritual doctrine that stems from a European Spiritist tradition from the early nineteenth century (Polk 37). *Espiritistas* believe in a Judeo-Christian hierarchy where the creator is at the top, followed by beings, spirits, angels, and spirit guides. It is via the use of mediums or spirit guides that one can interact with spirits who will then offer a solution to an economic, emotional or medical need (38). Another use for candles that is less popular is for *brujería*. *Brujería* refers to an occult system of belief that is often associated with evil or malignant forces that go against the institution of the Catholic Church. As I have mentioned, many botánicas while dissociating themselves from *brujería*, continue to be burdened with this label.

Despite candles' long history of use in the U.S., they continue to sustain meaning; instead of becoming obsolete objects, they have attained new use. Made of wax, tallow, spermaceti and fat, prior to the invention of incandescent light in the nineteenth century, candles were primarily used in the U.S. as a source of light ("History of Candles"). In the mid-twentieth century ingredients like paraffin and stearic acid became readily available due to the proliferation of oil

and meatpacking industries, making candle use more widespread and favorable (“History of Candles”). In the 1980s, there was less of an interest in candles as light sources and more appeal in them as decorations or markers of domestic aesthetics (“History of Candles”). Candles not only came in a wide range of forms but also varied colors, sizes, and scents. In the 1990s, again there was a growth in the popularity of candles due to the invention of different candle waxes like soybean and palm wax. Nevertheless, across the span of candles’ existence in the U.S. its use is modified in order for the object to sustain use-value. Or as Appadurai notes, “even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (quoted in Brown 6). Examining subject-object relations proves that a candle’s flexibility in use (from light source to decoration) has not only allowed it to remain intelligible and useful for people across centuries, but also to become a recognizable household item. It is the candles’ quotidian and discernible quality that make them objects that can be easily surrogated to aid in sustaining and transmitting cultural and religious practices.

Performances of Glass Candles

To better understand the role that surrogation and intimacy play in relation to glass candles, I turn to a discussion of their performance qualities. In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton claims that “present factors tend to influence [. . .] our recollections of the past [. . . and] past factors tend to influence [. . .] the present” (2). By calling attention to the multiple facets of the glass candle (image, text, and color), I claim that objects found in botánicas resist privileging a static meaning. For instance, in Rosi’s botánica, her customers have the potential to resignify the object they buy. They can purchase a glass candle and identify with it via its image,

text, prayer, color, etc. However, even while each candle has a purpose (the “Road Opener” candle is meant to open possibilities), that purpose is flexible enough to adapt it to a particular person’s circumstances (a customer might want to open the road towards a possible love object). Saint candles are also used for myriad purposes. For example, Saint Death candles, depending on their color, can be used for money, peace, love, or good health (see fig. 4.3). Also, each candle can be prepared with oil that serves a different purpose (such as adding an “I’ll Forget You” oil to the “Road Opener” candle). This is because a person’s past and present factors add meaning to the candle. Each interaction a consumer has with the candle will be different depending on their context or circumstances.



Fig. 4.3. Saint Death Shrine, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

In tailoring the product for the specific needs of the consumer, the object is resignified and transformed in practice. In other words, the product itself also transforms. Lighting a candle is a transformative act because as one lights it they are changing the form while deteriorating it; it goes from solid to liquid to vapor. To reiterate, I claim that glass candles sustain value through

the forms of performances that they generate. I use the term “performance” here broadly to refer to actions, behaviors, and gestures. What I refer to as candle performances are the acts that happen before, during and after lighting a candle, which includes candle preparation, candle burning, and candle soot readings. Rather than studying a framed theatrical performance, I am studying objects in botánicas through a performance studies framework. As Richard Schechner notes:

Performances [. . .] occur in many different instances and kinds. Performance must be construed as a “broad” continuum of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music) and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and social class roles, and on to healing (from shamanism to surgery), the media and the internet. (2)

Much like the performing arts are framed, staged, reveal and conceal, so too everyday spaces of ritual and healing can be theatrical. In using performance as the lens to study Rosi’s botánica, one can discern that this is a space where the performer and spectator distinctions are blurred. For instance, the consumer does not always light the candle, even though they purchase it. Some consumers buy the candle, take it with them and light it in the comfort of their own home. Others, however, have the owner burn the candle for them. Rosi mentions that many of her customers are Latinas whose family members are Catholic practitioners. According to the Catholic faith, lighting a candle outside of the church is associated with *Santería* and *brujería*, therefore deemed a sin. Since a candle is not something that a person can easily hide (they must be tended for), consumers who privately seek these practices must have someone light the candles on their behalf. This means the candle can be lit in multiple environments. As a result,

both the owner and patron can perform the act of lighting a candle. Over time, the object may be used, trashed, and substituted but the cultural memory of this practice remains.

Performances occur before, during and after lighting the candle. Prior to lighting it, a candle can be prepared. Candle preparation is a process where a storeowner or divinator will write a person's name and wish on paper that is burned onto the candle. In many cases oils are added to the candle as well. This process is believed to strengthen the power of the candle, thus increasing its value. Consumers can also prepare the candles at home. Rosi claims that her patrons often prefer for her to prepare the candle for them because they believe she has a "greater force" or "power." If that is so, what grants my mother this power? I contend that Rosi's "power" is actually a gradually-developed quotidian technique. Just as a skilled dancer develops her or his technique through daily practice, so too, practitioners of syncretic beliefs produce a tradition through everyday acts. The botánica mirrors a domestic space in that Rosi and her female colleagues repeatedly rehearse a series of codes that carry and transmit cultural meaning. They must decide which candle to recommend, which oil to use, what wish to write, as well as how and in what order to burn this on the candle (see fig. 4.4 and 4.5). These gestures require the consideration of past traditions (traditions Rosi has learned from her patrons), present situations (she adapts her skills to suit a particular person's circumstances), and future plans (Rosi must modify her skills to benefit and secure her business). The act of preparing a candle for my mother means more than simply pouring oil and burning a paper on a candle. Instead, it is a series of carefully calculated gestures.



Fig. 4.4. “Vence y Amarra” (Surrender and Tie) candle, “Precipitando” (Precipitate) and “Buscame” (Find Me) oils, and pencil writing on brown paper, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 4.5. Candle preparation in Rosi’s botánica, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

Burning a candle is a performance of its changing materiality (wax to soot), which relies on the proximity between subject (person lighting the candle) and object (the candle). On the center of each candle is a wick. Once a match is in contact with the wick, light and heat is produced. As the wax melts to form a liquid, it slowly starts to vaporize and the candle grows shorter. The person lighting the candle must be in close proximity because the candle is a fragile object; it must be observed and cannot be left alone. The candle's temporary materiality is evidenced when seeing the empty glass. The need for someone to oversee the burning of the candle makes them a spectator. The person who lights the candle must also oversee its transformation from solid to liquid to vapor.

Once the candle finishes burning, the possibility for another performance, a candle reading, emerges. Candle reading is another component of the business of botánicas where a knowledgeable person's performance is required to read the wax and soot remaining in a candle. Candle reading is a form of divination or a form of problem-solving through memory (Roberts et al. 177). Divination is type of prediction, a practice of demonstrating "what might be meaningful and useful in the future [. . . by] reconstructing the past to discern the causes of present misfortune" (178). Patrons get their candle soot interpreted based on the way the wax burned, shapes of the remaining wax, traces of the smoke, and how pigmented the glass appears after the burning. The reader (divinator) must analyze the traces of the performance—the smoke, soot, and wax left on the candle after it finishes burning. For example, a lit candle can leave white or black smoke and a clear or dark glass. In some cases the glass may break or burn. Whatever the outcome, the state of the glass holds semiotic weight.⁶⁶ If the remaining soot is dark and covers most of the glass, the outcome of the candle is negative and needs further assistance while if the soot is white or the glass is clear then the purpose of the candle was successful.

⁶⁶ There are also cases where the flame itself is read for signs or meaning.

After the candle reading, the object is rendered obsolete, without value, and becomes trash. Since the candle has reached its purpose and finished burning, this calls for the substitution of the candle. The business depends on cyclical interactions between individuals and candles. If a consumer has a misfortune, she or he can buy a candle meant to solve the problem. As the number of practitioners rises, the need to mass-produce candles also increases. Once the candle has burned, the consumer's need is fulfilled. So long as consumers continue seeking forms of healing through syncretic practices, the need for this business will continue.

Oppositional Gendered Power Dynamics Among Love Candles

The strong female presence in Rosi's botánica is depictive of the larger trend in U.S. botánicas having majority women owners and patrons.⁶⁷ Rosi has two other colleagues that she works with, Rosalinda and Guadalupe, both who like her, are Mexican immigrants. Guadalupe reads tarot cards and offers consultations while Rosalinda reads the soot found on used glass candles. Most of Rosi's customers are also working-class Latin-American immigrant women ranging from countries like Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. The demographics of Rosi's patrons highlight broader implications about what types of resources botánica spaces can offer. On the one hand it can offer resources flexible enough to cater to a wide range of minoritarian people (working-class, Latina/o, women). The belief systems that are associated within botánicas (Espiritismo, Santería, Catholicism) are not just flexible but also portable, as evidenced when tracing Santería's emergence in the Caribbean and then spreading into Latin America. On the other hand, it is more common for botánicas to cater to women and concerns they may have related to gender. In Joseph Murphy's work on "Objects That Speak Creole:

⁶⁷ Scholarship investigating botánicas in the U.S. (Murphy; Holliday; Leon; Cosentino and Polk; Viladrich) shows that there is a tendency to have women owners, workers, and participants in botánicas, however, not enough research is available to determine if this is the case in other countries.

Juxtapositions of shrine devotions at botánicas in Washington, DC,” he interviews a worker named Marissa who shares her experience working with women:

“I’ve heard hundreds of stories,” says Marissa and nearly every one of them involved the problems of women. And women are both seekers and consultants. Of the eighteen botánicas surveyed, fifteen were staffed, if not owned, by women. From our observation the clientele were overwhelmingly women and the problems addressed were typically those of women: unfaithful or wayward men; children in trouble; malicious gossip; domestic strife. Women can find sympathetic and knowledgeable peers at botánicas, who speak their language and share many of the issues that they are faced with... The botánica is a site of power that can enable women to live as equals with men and perhaps, in Marissa’s words [and the words of glass candles], “dominate” them. (93)

Not only is the botánica a space that caters to women’s concerns but as Murphy stresses, it is also a space often run by women. In Rosi’s botánica specifically, there is a collective obligation amongst all workers and patrons to sustain confidentiality in order to develop a sense of trust and community.

The botánica is an unusually female-oriented business practice due to the intimate communion that is established between owner and patrons. Many of Rosi’s customers frequent the shop not only for products but also for a sense of community. Since Latina women come to botánicas with shared immigration experiences, many of them form long-lasting bonds. For instance, both Rosalinda and Guadalupe have been working alongside Rosi for over a decade and as a result they have developed a strong friendship. Rosi also considers many customers loyal friends and they demonstrate this affinity by frequenting her store, staying at the store for hours,

and engaging in *pláticas*. Even though patrons in most botánicas must disclose intimate experiences in order to receive personalized consultations, these communal acts of bonding are particular to Rosi's botánica and rely on an informal code of confidentiality and trust.

Not only is Rosi's botánica a female-oriented business, but a lot of the products she sells are gendered, including images and text that affirm normative notions of happiness and love. With the exception of the saint iconography, most products have labels with bright, vivid images of heterosexual couples bordered by heart symbols (see fig. 4.6 and 4.7). The images are gendered feminine given the range of colors, which include bright red and pink shades or deep purple and maroon shades. Diana Taylor asserts that diviners also often perform “a normalizing, regulatory function. [. . . They enact] a notion of some pure, authentic tradition still untouched on the margins of society” (118). Similarly, these images while referencing their artifice, continue to perpetuate notions of authenticity, by avowing white male-female relationships. In perpetuating white heterosexual norms, these images also work to disavow the economy and mass-production of the products.



Fig. 4.6. Bath herbs displayed on a wall, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 4.7. Vitrine with scented oils, 8 June 2012; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

Many glass candles intended to resolve issues of love have visual markers of intimacy between heterosexual partners that target a female audience. For instance, when looking at the “You’ll Be Mine Only” and “Domination” candles (see fig. 4.8 and 4.9), it appears that one candle is representing a traditional heteronormative union between a man and woman while the other represents a more nonnormative sadomasochistic relationship between a man and woman where the woman is seducing the man via a leash. The former has an image of a woman in a white dress holding hands with a man in a black suit walking down a seemingly endless road. The gesture and dress of the couple resembles an image of a prototypical heteronormative marital union between a man and woman. The latter has an image of a woman in a tight black leather dress holding a man by the neck with a whip. These can be considered candles of empowerment given that they propose to help women “dominate” men. However, in seeking to dominate men, the images also reify the patriarchal idea that heterosexual relationships are always already male-dominated. These candles also normalize whiteness given that few, if any, images depict black or brown bodies. Visuality, as it functions here, is contingent on particular structures of power. While these candles are intended to help women, the images are still embedded in patriarchy. Patriarchy here serves as an ocular institution that scripts certain

relationships as the norm (heterosexual rather than homosexual; male-dominated rather than female-dominated). By ocular institution, I am referring to the ways that visibility participates as a structure of power that places hierarchies on visible material manifestations, and in this case normalizes heterosexual relationships over others. These candles also offer a visual performance or as I show in the images below, they offer a desire to experience nonnormative intimate relationships which is productive and generative for practitioners.



Fig. 4.8. “You’ll Be Mine Only” candle, 8 April 2014; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 4.9. “Domination” candle, 8 April 2014; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

Just as Rosi’s botánica caters to a feminine, female and heterosexual gaze while also offering objects for the opposite sex, likewise, it is a public space that caters to people’s very private and intimate needs. Some of these female patrons pay Rosi to light a candle for them. Rosi then takes these candles home with her to light them in her home. Her patrons trust that she will light the candle on their behalf; thereafter, Rosi incorporates these objects into the private space of her home. In botánicas, intimacy becomes evident among the informal conversations between female owner and patron, among the desires these women project onto the glass candles, and among the sense of community they form with one another. Just as intimacy has to do with brevity and secrecy, it also has to do with vulnerability given that to intimate requires acting or uttering in public. The constant need to act out on one’s hopes and desires make one’s intimate thoughts available to others, which puts those individuals in a vulnerable position and subject to judgment by the surrounding Catholic community.

Performative Syncretic Candles

If intimacy functions according to a collective obligation to follow a certain set of informal cultural rules of confidentiality, what happens when these rules are broken or destabilized? Berlant notes that:

when the normative relays between personal and collective ethics become frayed and exposed; and when traditional sites of pleasure and profit seem to get ‘taken away’ by the political actions of subordinated groups, a sense of anxiety will be pervasively felt about how to determine responsibility for the disruption of hegemonic comfort. (287)

The phrase “hegemonic comfort” here is important because, within intimate spaces, there are worlds that participants seek to sustain and contain. Whenever threats are posed to the image of this world, then the intimate becomes an issue that produces panic because its instability is revealed. Rosi’s botánica remains an intimate space, not only because of the close affinities shared between patrons and owner, but also due to the stigma associated with syncretic practices.

Syncretic practices refer to the merging of categories. As a convergence, those practices become less identifiable, more mystified, and thus, stigmatized since they represent a transgression of the boundaries of religion. Likewise, botánica objects and practices are considered syncretistic in that they combine two or more different practices into a single belief system (Clark 7). Orisha worship is considered syncretistic because it combines West African beliefs with those of the Spanish colonial Catholic religion (7). Rosi’s botánica prioritizes objects of folk Catholicism since Rosi’s patrons are largely composed of a Latina/o and Mexican Catholic population. Neither my mother nor her colleagues are santeros, espiritistas, or curanderas. They never participated in initiation rites nor do they claim to know Santería, Spiritist or Curanderismo healing traditions. Thus, while her store supplies oils and

candles for orisha worship, more prominent, however, are the number of products, including candles, that are based on Catholic saints. This does not mean that West African belief systems do not influence Rosi's botánica. Instead, regardless of the fact that some of Rosi's patrons—who are largely composed of a Latina/o and Mexican Catholic population—may disregard West African traditions, they remain legible on the objects through visual or textual markers.

Within the confines of Rosi's botánica, patrons can openly practice their religion, and yet, many come in hiding given that religious worship outside of the church is condemned. Some women admit that their relatives do not know they go to botánicas. Often, botánicas receive negative attention for delivering “sinful” or “controversial” practices. In fact, the term “Santería” is often referenced in derogative ways due to its ongoing association with witchcraft.

Consequently, some patrons must closet their practices to avoid a shaming interpellation within the Catholic Church.⁶⁸ It also bears mentioning that the Catholic Church is also a highly patriarchal institution run by men. The patriarchy of Catholicism makes it hard for women to attain leadership roles, let alone have their concerns acknowledged. The predominant female frequenting in botánicas can be tied to the inability of the Catholic Church to meet women's gender-specific needs. Rosi's botánica could be said to provide similar resources as the Catholic Church but rather than having a male priest serve as a guide or advisor, Rosi, as the business owner, takes on this role.

Nevertheless, even while most of Rosi's patrons identify as Catholic and may go to her to fulfill a religious need, one of the more popular syncretic items sold in Rosi's botánica is the

⁶⁸ Familiar Christian practices are used as a model that stands in as the antithesis of Santería. For example, as Clark notes, if a group of people gather in a church to pray for the health of someone, it is considered an act of Christian faith. However, if the same group of people meet outside the church to pray, this is not considered an act of Christian faith (Clark, *Santería*). Thus, when botánica practices are associated as a form of witchcraft, this is merely a reflection of the ways these marginalized practices are misunderstood within a larger mainstream norm.

“Seven African Powers” candle. This glass candle is an example of the mixing of African and European iconography (Clark). “Seven African Powers” candle is available in all colors, measures eight inches in height and two and half inches in diameter, and can be purchased for three U.S. dollars. On the center of the candle is an image of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ with the word “Olofi” below it. Surrounding this image are seven medallions with images of different Catholic saints also with the names of Santería-based African deities on the top or bottom of the image (see fig. 4.10 and 4.11).⁶⁹ As Mary Ann Clark points out, the crucified Jesus Christ with a group of objects surrounding him is most prominent image on the candle; the objects include a cross, hammer, nails, pliers and a sponge (“Seven African Powers”). This arrangement of objects is called the Arma Christi (Arms of Christ)—a series of objects associated with Christ’s suffering, death and burial (Clark, “Seven African Powers”). Clark notes that the image of these objects “focuses attention on one of the most important events in Christian mythology and places the candle squarely within a Christian milieu” (“Seven African Powers”). Alternately, she goes on to say that the Yoruba words below each image indicate otherwise. Specifically, the term Olofi or Olofin is:

a title of Olodumare the Supreme Being of the Yoruba pantheon. The title Olofin means "supreme ruler" and among the Yoruba is often combined with Orun (heaven) or Aiye (earth) to designate Olodumare as the sovereign of those planes (Ìdòwú 1994, 36-37). Among Santería practitioners, Olofi is often associated with Jesus Christ as the personal God of mankind. Thus the image and caption suggests that not only is this an image of the crucified Christ but also of the Yoruba deity

⁶⁹ Other saints depicted on this image include the Virgin of Mercy (associated with the Obatalla deity), the Virgin of Regla (Yemalla), the Virgin of Cobre (Ochum), Saint Barbara (Chango), Saint Francis (Orula), John the Baptist (Ogun), and Saint Anthony (Elegua). For more information, see Clark’s work on “Seven African Powers: Hybridity and Appropriation” (1999).

Olofi. (Clark “Seven African Powers”)

This crucifixion image is but one example of the many hybridized syncretic images found on this candle. Due to the number of saints and deities represented on this object, the use of this candle is popularized to attract prosperity, serenity or love. What is productive about this particular set of cultural mixing is that even though images of Catholic saints— like Santa Barbara, Our Lady of Regla, and Saint Anthony—remain as the primary visual marker on this candle, I assert that these other African religious traditions influence the candle as well.



Fig. 4.10. “Seven African Powers” candle with image of Olofi deity, 8 April 2014; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.



Fig. 4.11. “Seven African Powers” candle with a medallion image of Saint Barbara associated with the Chango deity, 8 April 2014; photograph by Yvette Martínez-Vu.

While there is a visual and textual script to follow (the “Seven African Powers” candle also comes with a prayer on the back), this candle functions in a performative manner since it influences but does not predetermine what the patron chooses to use it for. In this candle, we find that religion (via Catholic and African iconography) functions as an ocular institution. Even while existing within this institution, patrons who use this candle can enact agency through their engagement and response to the candle (e.g. choosing to identify with a particular saint or deity). For example, Rosi has a customer who frequently purchases this candle for success in her business. It is ultimately up to her to decide which saint or deity she will pray to as well as what desire she will ask for their help on. Some customers follow a well-known spell of Santería to get or sustain a job, which requires the use of the “Seven African Powers” candle. In this case, the practitioner will prepare her candle with *triumfo*, *dinero*, and *vencedor* (triumph, money, and winner) oils as well as a piece of paper with a petitioner’s name on it. Both oils and paper are

placed inside the glass with the wax. The candle is then ready to be lit, which will last for approximately nine days (González-Wippler 167). In either case, it is up to the practitioner to decide how and for what purpose they will use the candle, meaning that the candle is surrogated to fill a gap. The candle, with its tactile qualities, is a tangible property that provides the material presence necessary to perform these acts. But the candle in and of itself is not culturally valuable; it is the practice surrounding it that makes it valuable.

Candles as Cultural Capital and Commodified Spirituality

Keeping in mind that glass candles are not made by botánica owners or practitioners, what grants them value? And what forms of value do they have? In “Forms of Capital,” Pierre Bourdieu asserts that capital can present itself in three ways: as economic, cultural and social capital. Economic capital can convert into money and may be institutionalized as property rights. Cultural capital may also convert itself into economic capital and can be institutionalized as an educational qualification. Finally, social capital refers to social obligations that can be converted into economic capital and institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility (Bourdieu). Candles are a form of cultural capital in an objectified state that can be exchanged for money. The act of preparing or reading a candle is what I refer to as embodied capital that unlike money cannot be easily exchanged. Embodied capital is a convergence of cultural and social capital, which relies on the physical gestures and acts surrounding an object that produce its value. Embodied capital grants and strengthens the candle’s cultural capital and symbolic value. With regards to their value, part of my argument is to reveal the ways that glass candles are involved in intimate systems of support formed among owner and patrons and one of those support systems occurs economically via the informal exchanges of capital found in these stores. As I will demonstrate

in this section, it is not merely that products like candles support patrons, or that patrons financially support the botánica. Rather, there are also informal exchanges more easily facilitated in smaller businesses that complicate the capitalistic structure of the botánica.

While the botánica is involved in a strong cultural and religious economy, the labor and means of exchange mark it as fundamentally a business. Rosi and her employees work full-time hours on Monday through Saturday. Rosi gets her merchandise from multiple sources, but primarily Indio Products Inc. Indio Products Inc. is a growing company located in California and Texas that has been supplying products to botánicas in the U.S. since 1987 (Zamora). With little competition, this company produces and supplies thousands of different candles depending on consumer demands. After purchasing products in bulk, Rosi decides on the price for each product depending on its profitability. The multi-purpose, multi-colored, scented, palm-wax candles, for instance, are more popular than the unscented paraffin wax candles. Not only do the multi-purpose candles aid several problems simultaneously but they come prepared with added benefits like scents, glitter, spells or prayers typed on rolled-up paper. They also last longer since palm wax will burn for a greater duration of time than paraffin. Looking “behind the scenes” at the processes involved in sustaining a business like a botánica reveals that despite the altruistic and healing nature of botánica practices, profit does motivate the exchanges made between owner and patron. Like other botánicas, the work performed in Rosi’s botánica “is consistent with corporate United States, since it supports a distinctly capitalist religious sensibility: money buys happiness” (Leon 115). More broadly, products sold in Rosi’s botánica are mass-produced and part of a global capitalist system since they cater to a wide range of belief systems that have circulated from Africa, to the Caribbean, and now Latin America and the U.S. According to journalist Rocío Zamora, “When botánicas first opened in Los Angeles in the 1950s, products

were mostly geared toward people of African and Cuban ancestry. Now African saints with names like Elegua and Oshun sit alongside Latin American folk saints like Mexico's Santísima Muerte, and Jesus Malverde, as well as Guatemala's San Simon” (Zamora). While Rosi’s botánica participates in a larger U.S.-based capitalistic economy, it also unlike this system of capitalism given the bartering that Rosi allows from trusted clients. Regardless of one’s particular religious identification or cultural background, the botánica is a space that renders itself flexible enough to cater to populations outside its primary clientele of Latina immigrants.

Unlike other botánicas that are owned by a group of investors, Rosi is the private owner of this botánica, who hires other immigrant women to help her manage and operate her business. There is a marked difference in the ways that economic practices run in Rosi’s botánica due to Rosi’s identity as the sole owner. Rosi makes all decisions regarding formal and informal economic exchanges that are allowed in her store. And since she, too, is a working-class immigrant woman, her perspective blurs the distinction between owner and patron, since she can empathize with the financial and cultural adjustment problems her patrons and friends are dealing with. One of the ways that Rosi resists formal structures of capitalism is by allowing her customers to pay by credit. I am not referring to credit cards here, but to *cundinas*. A *cundina* is a monetary practice based on rotating credit, which is a popular practice in Mexico. There are several participants who contribute a set amount of money each week. On any given week a different member will hold on to the money. Based on an honor system, the participant keeps providing their weekly contribution until it is their turn to hold the money, in which case they can use it to pay for emergency expenses, monthly bills, or outstanding credit card charges. These are informal rotating credit associations that depend on the participants’ mutual trust in one another. Rosi, who also participates in *cundinas*, allows her customers to pay by credit by

paying her back later. In many cases, personal relationships with people are viewed as separate from commerce, and it is true that not all of Rosi's customers are considered close friends or allowed to pay on credit. And yet, for several people who have been loyal patrons for years, they are provided with an alternative payment option to fit their needs.

One of the ways that Latina/o patrons negotiate the contradiction of identifying as Catholic and purchasing religious products that are shunned by the Catholic Church is by treating religion as separate from commerce. These patrons do not consider churches, for instance, as stores. Religious practice, for them, is not usually associated with money. Many of Rosi's patrons consider themselves devout Catholics—they attend mass and are involved in community religious events. After conducting an interview of Hortencia, a curandera working for a botánica in East Los Angeles, Luis D. Leon notes:

It is of no small significance that all the believers in this study who were asked about their faith replied with no uncertainty that they were indeed Catholic. And yet they also confessed that visiting the Sagrado Corazón botánica (which is how the question was phrased) was contrary to the teachings of Catholic doctrine. But the seekers nonetheless persisted in their visits to see Hortencia. When asked about this seeming contradiction, Hortencia's answer was clear and utterly pragmatic, articulating the perspective of the patrons of Sagrado Corazón: these are matters of personal conscience. And as long as one is convinced that he or she is doing good work in the world, there is no need to be burdened by sin in spite of perceived Catholic teachings. (117)

Many of the Sagrado Corazón patrons as well as those of Rosi's botánica are Latina/o immigrants who due to financial strain and lack of resources (educational and other) came to the

U.S. Thus, in their scenarios, both immigration and religion are closely connected to capital. As noted on the images and text found on glass candles, a limited amount of resources is often the reason for their migration into the U.S. and this practice of commodified spirituality is but another mechanism to negotiate these issues.

If religiosity and spirituality is commodified in botánicas, the glass candles are one example of their material manifestation. Glass candles are mass-produced by companies like Indio Inc. to make a profit from religious and spiritual communities who use these candles. To reiterate, it is not the object per se that is culturally valuable, but rather the acts surrounding the object that inscribe it with meaning. Specifically, the acts I am referring to are followed in preparation for lighting the candle. I have pointed out that there are at least three types of purchases occurring in Rosi's botánicas: 1) the patron can purchase the candle and take it home, 2) the patron can purchase the candle, purchase the preparation of the candle, and take it home, and 3) the patron can purchase the candle, prepared or not, and have the owner light the candle on their behalf without taking it home. Candles are rendered useless or obsolete unless they can be lit up until they have finished burning. Agreeing with Taylor, I note how these practices are a form of "cultural capital rooted in the disappearing past" (Taylor 119) and that in the case of glass candles, their capital is associated with their very literal material disappearance (the candle wax burning). The usefulness of candles is two-fold—they work only as long as they will burn and as long as the patron will continue having a need to keep repurchasing them.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ In noting how botánicas can become spaces of community and support for Latina immigrants, I should also mention that not all patrons are invested in the healing nature of this business. For some customers, the objects are not a spiritual purchase, per se, but rather a decorative purchase. In this case the products are valued for its kitsch factor. Glass candles have attained a kitschy and popular quality since they are mass-produced, are small enough to be portable and affordable, come in a wide-range of colors, and have images and texts for a wide-range of problems.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated how women of color, namely immigrant Mexican and Central American working class women, use candles to negotiate an environment (the U.S.) that marginalizes them. I note how the botánica provides a space to form bonds through shared acts of healing. With limited financial and formal educational resources, rather than do nothing, immigrant women resort to taking action against their problems through the material mean of lighting candles. Lighting a candle, then becomes both an act of healing and a source of hope. Because when all other measures have been depleted or used, women still have agency to take control of their situation by (not so much buying products but) using objects in a meaningful way. Thus, agency lies in these spaces where working class immigrant woman can gather and practice their beliefs.

Even while botánica products enable healing, I also noted how their products and gestures exist in a context of commerce. If Rosi's botánica is a space where cultural and religious practices are performed and sold to a consumer, then what the consumer is buying is not only the object but also the experience that they or a storeowner can perform. Patrons rely on botánicas for products like syncretic glass candles that will help them heal their issues of love, religion, and/or money and in doing so, they resignify these products in relation to their current problems. Thus, the objects become surrogated—involved in a three-sided relationship of substitution, memory and performance—where the candles stand in for cultural practices that have a longer syncretic genealogy (rooting back to indigenous, African, and European cultures)—which fill the particular needs of a client. Broadly, botánicas can become places for displaced populations to come together, particularly because religion and *creencias* are often imagined as separate from commerce.

While botánicas may construct spaces of community among women, its ties to immigrant populations show that economic capital, or lack thereof, are the reason for migration and displacement of cultural practices. A sense of community comes after establishing intimacy, often in the form of a shared feeling of displacement, among patrons and owners. Rosi's botánica is part of a reciprocal support system where the consumers depend on Rosi. Rosi's botánica, like many others:

actually enact their belonging to religious-healing webs that lie beneath the city's informal economy of healing [. . .] Botánicas' success greatly depends on the informal webs of those who visit them to buy and sell products, on chatting with patrons and neighbors, and on participating in religious ceremonies taking place in the religious houses and temples erected in their basements and backrooms.

(Viladrich 409)

The need for objects like glass candles to become surrogated in botánicas is produced by the necessity for minoritarian populations to find ways to deal with their problems; as a result, objects themselves, in enabling performance, play a role in promoting solidarity and empowerment for populations like working-class Latinas.

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