

CARMEN RIVERA: THEATRE OF LATINIDAD

by

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Abstract

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by

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This dissertation explores the “latinization” of the Latino as dramatized in the plays of OBIE Award-winning playwright, Carmen Rivera. For nineteen years, Rivera has been at the forefront of Latino/a theatre in the United States, both as a critical and artistic success. This author chooses to analyze Rivera’s texts as socio-cultural documents which represent *latinidad* on the stage. To pursue this course of examination, *latinidad* will be defined and theorized in relation to the academic work of noted sociologists including Agustín Laó-Montes’ ideologies of *latinidad* and *latinization*,¹ Suzanne Oboler’s arguments against ethnic labels in the media and representation,² Edward Said’s theories of orientalism,³ and other socio-political and socio-economic explorations of *latinidad*,⁴ which I will use as I address Rivera’s plays, not solely as dramatic texts, but rather, as living documentation of Latinos and their place in twenty-first century.

The scholarship of Arlene Dávila, Jon Rossini and Juan Flores provides a landscape for analyzing the characters as post-modern reconstructions of a Latino past,

¹ See Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

² See Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

³ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁴ See Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, eds. *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997).

building on Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's, *José Can You See? Latinos On and Off-Broadway*.⁵ In-depth interviews with Rivera as well as accounts regarding playwrights and practitioners from the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, Repertorio Español, INTAR, and L.E.F.T. will document the impact that Rivera has had on the Latina/o theatre community and its audience base. Finally I will analyze current trends in the Latino theatre to develop a perspective on where the theatre is re-creating itself as well as positioning Carmen Rivera's role in that evolution.

⁵ See Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's *José, Can You See? Latinos On and Off-Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

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Introduction

“Look around you: do you have a community? Do you feel a community around you? Are your neighbors pulling together to build a stronger, better community?”¹ These words, originally written in a 1990 editorial in the premiere Spanish language periodical, *El Diario/La Prensa*, served as the rallying cry for a piece entitled “Nourishing a Community.” In the article, the editor sought to illuminate what was occurring on the streets of 116th Street in New York City, a neighborhood that for years had become an economic blight. Crime had been up, police presence and effectiveness down. Spanish Harlem was a mirror image of the Bedford Stuyvesant neighborhood so explosively captured by Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing*. Federal monies had become scarce while candlelight vigils for murdered innocents and murals for reputed drug dealers had become old hat. The same editorial sought to shed light on recent happenings in the community which attempted to have its members build from the inside. El Barrio, a term of degradation for some and celebration for others, had also become home to a new theatre company which sought to accomplish this very task of community nourishment.

The company was called the Shaman Repertory Theatre and one of its new members, Carmen Rivera was about to begin a love affair with the Latino theatre community which continues to flourish nearly twenty years after her matriculation at NYU’s MA Writing Program. Her double major of Latin American Studies and Playwriting would help her garner the attention of critics and audiences, Anglo and Latino alike. Carmen however would do so in a very quiet way. She was a student of those who came before her in the Nuyorican Poet and Theatre Movement, constantly reading Bimbo Rivas, Pedro Pietri and Miguel Piñero. She would also be influenced by

¹ Fernando Moreno, “Construyendo una comunidad,” *El Diario/La Prensa*, 20 October 1990, 20.

Latin American playwrights such as Griselda Gambaro, as well as the European masters who dominated the literary canon espoused by her school; Pinter, Ionesco and Beckett. She would move freely within the Latino community as writer, actress and producer, and in a short period of time, become one of its major figures. Rivera would do all this while promoting her political and spiritual beliefs, and integrating them into her strong dramaturgical and sociological plays, which I have chosen to call, her “Theatre of Latinidad.” Though Rivera’s work can be approached in a multitude of ways, my chapters will follow a chronological format, covering the plays beginning in 1990 through *Under the Mango Tree*, written in 2005.

Ironically the title of the previously mentioned *El Diario/La Prensa* article, “Construyendo una comunidad,” begs the question, what exactly does *comunidad* mean within the Latino community? Is it different from our understanding of the English equivalent “community?” Juan Flores, discussing this word and its signified meaning, proposes an interesting bridge between the word itself, its significance for Latinos, and the work of Carmen Rivera:

It is becoming clear that any discussion of the “American community” must be inclusive of Latinos and cognizant of the existence of a “Latino community” intrinsic to any historical discourse about U.S. culture. The real challenge, though, is that the Latino presence makes it necessary to recognize that the very meaning of the word, the concept “community” itself, is relative according to the perspective or position of the group in question: there is both a “Latino community” and a “community” in the Latino sense of the word. “Comunidad,” “común” – “unidad”: the Spanish word, even more clearly than the English, calls to mind two of the key terms in the conceptualization of this notoriously elusive idea. What do we have in “common,” and what “unites” us, what are our commonalities and what makes for our unity? It is important to note that though the two terms point in the same direction they are not synonymous, and their apparent coupling in the same word, “comunidad,” is not a redundancy. For while “común” refers to sharing those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap, the sense of “unidad” is that which binds the groups above

and beyond the diverse particular commonalities. The point I am making with this rather willful deconstruction is, once again, that the Latino “experience,” the group’s demonstrable reality and existence, includes but is not co-terminous with its self-consciousness: “común” stands for the community in itself, while “unidad” refers to the community for itself, the way that it thinks, conceives of, imagines itself.²

In this dissertation, I propose to examine the career of playwright Carmen Rivera, successful theatre practitioner, both commercially and aesthetically, and mentor to Latina/o playwrights, actors, directors and producers, outstanding contributor to Latina/o theatre in New York, regional theatre and Latin American theatre. A teacher of dramaturgy and playwriting, Rivera continues to influence the work of emerging playwrights through her courses at The City College of New York, New York Theatre Workshop, HERE and most notably at artistic community organizations housed at the Julia de Burgos Latino Cultural Center in Spanish Harlem.

I will describe Rivera’s background, her close ties to the arts in New York and her concept of “Nuyorican-ness.” I will also highlight Rivera’s study and early use of Guillermo Gentile’s theories of “*fantastic theatre*,” and how her insistence on “the first hand stories and personal accounts” of Latina/o representation on stage led to the development of her play, *La Gringa*. I first became acquainted with Rivera’s plays while a graduate student in Gloria Waldman’s Latino Theatre course. At that time, Rivera was beginning her career as a professional playwright and most of the attention paid to her had been as the new “Latina” playwright. Rivera had been compared to Josefina Lopez,³ one of a handful of West Coast playwrights creating a feminist theatre movement which centered on borderlands theory and followed in the footsteps of Chicana poet and

² Juan Flores, “The Latino Imaginary: Dimensions of Community and Identity” in *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman eds. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), 184-85.

³ Most known for her play and subsequent film, *Real Women Have Curves*.

playwright, Cherrie Moraga.⁴ Rivera had also been described as writing in the style of María Irene Fornés and Dolores Prida, Cuban-American playwrights whose theatre depicted the ideology of the “theatre of exile.”⁵

Rivera’s work is also compared thematically and stylistically with the Nuyorican Poets’ Movement, which includes playwright/poets Miguel Piñero, Pedro Pietri, Lucky Cienfuegos and Tato Laviera.⁶ I propose to examine how Carmen Rivera’s theatre reconstructs those earlier movements as well as creates a new hybrid which she continues to redefine today. I will analyze her texts through the lens of cultural studies theories, with a particular emphasis on the adaptation and celebration of *latinidad* and its sociological depiction on stage and off. I will employ the scholarship of Juan Flores, Suzanne Oboler, Arlene Dávila, Charles Ramírez Berg, and Frances Aparicio to examine her theatre, and in particular her hyphenated characters, which for the most part can be observed as being “not quite American yet not quite Latino.”⁷

⁴ Cherrie Moraga worked with Brava and the Eureka Theatre Company in San Francisco where she produced the play *Shadow of a Man*, as well as multiple writings on feminist performance and theory. She and Gloria Anzaldúa served as co-editors of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981). Rivera expresses her opinion on her place as a feminist writer as follows: “I don’t know if I belong to any specific thought or school of feminism. It is important for women who write or create. I believe my protagonists claim empowerment. One thing I won’t do is trash men. Fuck anybody who is intolerant. In Gambaro, everybody is a victim. Men are as well. We have to work together. I feel that I take away more from Latino culture I guess. In America there is a problem. In Chile there is a female President. In America they say that Latinos are sexist. But they have more room to thrive over there. People have a problem with me being married. Yeah I am. He’s a feminist too. It’s more like being a humanist.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2008.

⁵ The “theatre of exile” is elaborated in the scholarship of Beatriz Rizk and Judith Weiss. The characters in these plays, often Cuban exiles, were in search of a new life in the United States, but unable to free themselves from their re-collective past in Cuba. Most recently, Camilla Stevens has written about this type of theatre as has Bonnie Reynolds in her discussion of the plays of Puerto Rican icon René Marqués, a major influence on Rivera’s work. Nilo Cruz, a contemporary of Rivera’s, won the 2003 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Anna in the Tropics*, a play that can be classified as “theatre of exile.”

⁶ For a description of the Nuyorican movement see Miguel Algarín and Bob Holman’s *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (New York: Holt and Company, 1994). Some of these plays can be read in the collections, *Illusions of a Revolving Door: Plays Teatro* (San Juan: La Editorial de Puerto Rico, 1993); *La Carreta Made a U-Turn* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1981); *Short Eyes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975); *The Sun Always Shines for the Cool, A Midnight Moon at the Greasy Spoon, Eulogy for a Small Time Thief* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1984); *La Bodega Sold Dreams* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1985); and *Outrageous One Act Plays* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1986).

⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 18 January 2006.

Rivera was educated in New York City's public schools of the 1970s, within the bleak urban landscape that the bankrupt city offered students at that time. Rivera's desire to create art within this setting shaped the dramatist that she would later become, borrowing not only from the Nuyorican movement that preceded her, but also from the dramatists that were re-creating a new Latina/o theatre at INTAR's *New Play Labs* and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre's Professional Playwright's Unit. I will create a linear timeline, demonstrating how Rivera's awakening as a young Latina feminist led her to create the vivid, dynamic and often complex characters that spring to life in her texts. Furthermore, by integrating and interpreting Gentile's theories of the "*fantastic*," I argue that Rivera's plays offer a theoretical and structural skeleton reflecting an overarching Latino, as well as Latin American, dramatic structure.

To analyze Rivera's work I will argue for her place in the established canon of Latino theatre, most of which immediately preceded her. Rivera's plays are sociological documents of representation, illuminating ideologies of both *latinidad* and *latinization* for Latinos in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.⁸ Recent scholars have defined *latinidad* and its place in understanding how Latinos help create community. For my purposes I will look at *latinidad* as a way to define authentic representation on stage. In the collection of essays entitled *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, Agustín Laó-Montes points out how scholars differ in their definition of *latinidad* and often build upon each other in constructing a Latin aesthetic. Laó-Montes discusses the various definitions in his introduction to the book.

⁸ See Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila, *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

Latinidad is now a keyword in the emerging field of Latino Studies; it is an analytical concept that signifies a category of identification, familiarity, and affinity. In this sense, *latinidad* is a noun that identifies a subject position (the state of being Latino/a) in a given discursive space. Latino/a identity refers to the specific positioning of peoples of Latin American and Caribbean descent living in the United States, a historical location with particular historical foundations, hemispheric linkages, and global projections. I contend that for *latinidad* to be a “useful category for historical analysis,” it should be conceptualized as a domain of discursive formations.⁹

In this brief summation, Laó-Montes refers to many of the differing views and applications of *latinidad*. Scholars like Raymond Williams, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, Chon Noriega, Alicia Arrizón, Frances Aparicio, Susana Chávez-Silverman, Román de la Campa and Juan Flores, who Laó-Montes credits with having “some of the most historically grounded and imaginative contributions to a genealogical analysis of Latino identity,”¹⁰ are used to support the subjective lens of *latinidad* as a systematic gaze upon which to view Latinos within the larger diaspora of post-colonial, second and third-generation Latino culture.¹¹ Laó-Montes also expands on the close and often contested relationship between *latinidad* and *latinization*. He states that:

⁹ Laó-Montes and Dávila, *Mambo Montage*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

¹¹ See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, José, *Can You See? Latinos On and Off-Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); Chon Noriega, “El Hilo Latino: Representation, Identity and National Culture,” *Jump Cut* 38 (1993): 45-50; Alicia Arrizón, *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman, eds. *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997); Flores, “The Latino Imaginary” in *Tropicalizations*, 183-93 and *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Román de la Campa, “Latinos and the Crossover Aesthetic,” Forward to *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Re-invent the Big City* by Mike Davis. (New York: Verso Books, 2000).

Latinidad, however, does not denote a single, discursive formation but rather a multiplicity of intersecting discourses enabling different types of subjects and identities and deploying specific kinds of knowledge and power relations. In these terms, it is not only possible to distinguish between governmental, corporate, and academic discourses of *latinidad* but also to analyze how *latinidad* is produced through the work of Latino community institutions and by means of aesthetic practices and social movements. This overall process of production of discourses of *latinidad* is what we call *latinization*.¹²

Laó-Montes proposes here that it is a process that creates this machine which we may call *latinization*. The communities themselves are as apt to promote the cause of the Latino in part to self-promote themselves with the larger cultural, economic and popular culture strata. How many times have Latino themed theatrical productions failed as commercial ventures? One can now vividly see that the representation of *latinidad* has been commodified in the hope that the Latino dollar may begin to flow into Off-Broadway and Broadway theatres. Nilo Cruz's *Anna in the Tropics*, a Pulitzer Prize winner in 2003 both opened and closed on Broadway within the span of three months. Immediately following that, the scheduled release of *The Mambo Kings* musical was due to open at the Broadway Theatre with a cast that included Esai Morales. This show, based on another Pulitzer Prize winner, *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love* by Oscar Hijuelos once again proved that the interest in Latino performance on Broadway is in place, but possibly the organization or economics necessary to take on these projects is not.

These two productions are only the most recent examples of Latino themed productions failing on Broadway, as 1997 saw the failure of Paul Simon's *The Capeman*. Seventeen years earlier *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez opened at Broadway's Wintergarden

¹² Laó-Montes and Dávila, *Mambo Montage*, 4.

Theatre in 1980 and quickly closed as well.¹³ While the Latino as commodity is viable in New York's theatre community as it is on television with the success of both *The George Lopez Show* and *Ugly Betty*, or in films with celebrities including like Salma Hayek or Jennifer Lopez, I question how Broadway, Hollywood, radio stations or other mass marketed identifying markers for *latinidad* perform in the current pop cultural landscape. I also wish to examine *what* is produced on stage and moreover, *why* it is produced. Was Nilo Cruz more Latino than other plays and therefore chosen to represent *latinidad* on Broadway or instead was it that his *latinidad* was allowed to play in this cultural space as a representation of what the mainstream believed a Latino play should be. Are some plays allowed in this space because they are accepted as being "generic Latino?"

Rivera's work plays to a universal audience while maintaining a Latino "feel." The playwright's inspiration seems to be in line with the pulse of her audience, and at times ingrained in basic Latino themes treated by other writers of her generation. As she explains:

I am aware that I am in show business. That there is a demographic and market research that happens that determines what plays get done. But I don't sit down and try to write about being Latino. Rather, I am Latina and therefore that's what comes out...I think in terms of commodification. I do not believe that I have to say that I am a commodity because I am Latina. The girl spending her summer in Puerto Rico isn't to fit a niche but rather it was my experience. It has nothing to do with questioning who the characters are. They know who they are.¹⁴

Laó-Montes argues that in the collection of essays from *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, "Latinization is first and foremost a power process of social

¹³ For an examination of *The Capeman* see Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, "Paul Simon's *The Capeman*: The Staging of Puerto Rican National Identity as Spectacle and Commodity on Broadway" in *Latino/a Popular Culture*, Michelle Habell-Pallán and Mary Romero, eds. (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 147-161 and Jason Ramírez, "The Case of *The Capeman*: Appropriation of the Authentic," *Aztlan Journal of Chicano Studies* 30/1 (2005): 179-94.

¹⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

differentiation and cultural production. *Latinization* signifies the emergence of a space for discursive formations. *Latinization* is a process of both subjection and subjugation.”¹⁵

Latino marketing strategists are as culpable as those from other cultures who perpetrate the Latino stereotype. In the book, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People*, Arlene Dávila fomenta a discourse on the commodification of the Latino. Dávila addresses a peculiar duality of media acknowledgment and purposeful disavowing which resonates with the problem that many Latino/a playwrights and producers have in securing both “backing” and audience for their shows. In relation to Latino “alternatives to Anglo-generated images” Dávila notes that Latino marketers:

Have adopted this “politically correct” outlook by marketing themselves and their productions as more aware, informed, and sensitive than those generated by their mainstream counterparts. However, behind such lavish portrayal of Latinos lies a complex industry that stands at the forefront of contemporary Latino cultural politics and that points to the complex dynamics affecting both their public recognition and continued invisibility in U.S. society. I suggest that this industry’s political economy, history, and composition are directly implicated in the global processes and transnational bases that sustain commonplace understandings of Latinos as a “people” and a “culture.” The production of Latinos as easily digestible and marketable within the larger structures of corporate America is therefore revealing of the global bases of contemporary processes of identity formation and of how notions of place, nation, and race that are at play in the United States and in Latin America come to bear on these representations.¹⁶

In addition, Laó-Montes’ thesis moves towards the explanation that *latinization* is a production of *latinidad*, created by those who wish to place it as a fetishized object, which can ultimately be controlled either by a ruling class or from the actual community that creates it, through what they view as an authentic rendering of their own culture. For example, a complex symbol used to draw audiences into Repertorio Español’s production

¹⁵ Laó-Montes and Dávila, *Mambo Montage*, 17.

¹⁶ Arlene Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.: The Marketing and Making of a People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 3-4.

of *La Gringa* is the Puerto Rican flag jacket that María wears when she arrives in Puerto Rico at the start of the play. The press for the show highlights the actress (at one point Carmen Rivera herself) posing with this jacket while her aunt and uncle look on in disbelief. This constructed symbol provides a peculiar authenticity for audience reception as the flag itself is at first posited as a “false idol” for María and later discarded when she discovers the symbolic nature of Puerto Rico as a mere commonwealth of the United States.¹⁷ What the theatrical producing communities allow to “pass” as Latino for mass consumption is originated in a culturally elevated space or location, while the work of playwrights like Carmen Rivera comes to us from the community that attempts to represent itself in a subjugated space. As noted by Laó-Montes:

Thus, *latinidad* can be produced around different axes of identification: at one end, in relationship to markers of identity/difference such as language, race, culture, or immigration resulting in self-identification by Latinos and, at the other end, as a result of practices of “othering” racialized and ethnicized populations by governmental, corporative, and intellectual discourses. In this sense, what I will call *latinization from above* refers to a process by which discourses of *latinidad* are produced as part of the organization of hegemony by dominant institutions. In contrast, *latinization from below* refers to the processes of Latino self-fashioning that arise from resistances against marginality and discrimination and as expressions of a desire for a definition of self and an affirmative search for collective memory and community.¹⁸

The production of *latinization* pervades the work of Carmen Rivera as she notes that “in *La Gringa* a character questions who they are...or what they believe they are. However as a minority we often have to commodify in this business. Whether we’re

¹⁷ “The jacket in *La Gringa* is a symbol of the skin that we put on. It’s not a commodity but a symbol. María feels she has to belong to something. People join gangs. They do all kinds of things to find a sense of belonging. Find a place. I know that the marketing of *La Gringa* involves a prominent picture of this jacket but...you have to get people in the theatre. People are so used to the condition of the American theatre. They need to know what they are going to get. They are often pre-conditioned.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

¹⁸ Laó-Montes and Dávila, *Mambo Montage*, 17-18.

black, gay or Latino.”¹⁹ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez writes from the perspective of viewing the commercial theatre space as one that allows Latinos a certain amount of authenticity but only within the parameters of making the characters either “foreign others” or “domestic ethnic and racial others.”²⁰ Sandoval-Sánchez, discussing the commercial theatre work of celebrities like Desi Arnaz and Carmen Miranda notes that:

Self-categorization of “Latins” is imposed upon these constituencies by Anglo-American systems of power. Within the Anglo-American cultural imaginary, all ways of conceiving, perceiving, and representing the “Latin other” constitute a discursive web that I call “Latinness.” A major constituent of “Latinness” is what the mainstream calls “*Latinization*.” I in turn see “*Latinization*” as a process of cultural appropriation. The dominant Anglo-American system of power accepts Latinos/as and their cultural productions and social interaction, as long as Latinos/as accommodate Anglo-American ways of seeing and cultural discursive models of the other.²¹

Rivera’s plays capture the excitement and linguistic precision of the plays of earlier Nuyorican playwrights including Miguel Piñero, and Pedro Pietri while also building a bridge to the work of current Latinas, represented by playwrights Cyn Rossi, Noemi de la Puente, and Alba Sánchez. For Rivera, this concept of “Nuyorican,” is best explained by poet and Nuyorican Poet’s Café founder Miguel Algarín, who defines the term as an “originally Puerto Rican epithet for those of Puerto Rican heritage born in New York; their Spanish was different (Spanglish), their way of dress and look were different. They were a stateless people until the [Nuyorican] Café became their

¹⁹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

²⁰ I will explore this in Chapters 2 and 3. See Sandoval-Sánchez’s, *José, Can You See?*, 1999.

²¹ *Ibid*, 14-15.

homeland.²² The evolving canon of Latino/a plays often seem to be hyper-sensitized and unwilling to posit Latinos as constructs of a foreign past, or more often, a complex relative future, as defined by Sandoval-Sánchez.²³ The sociological work being done by the current crop of Latino authors create Latinos as products of a larger Anglo/Latino marketplace. The Latino character in our new theatre is commodified,²⁴ or made to fit in as an exotic fetishized object or, to use the terminology of Laó-Montes, “latinized” while attempting to distance themselves from this very same image.

To a large extent, the further we try to pull away from stereotypes, the more we play to them, including the often gratuitous salsa or meringue dance sequence or the good brother/bad brother scenarios. Or worse, the popularity of Latino minstrelsy that includes plays like *Plátanos and Collard Greens*. The Latino theatre is at a crossroads. How do Latino characters, and the Latino actors that play them, represent *latinidad*? Is there, as was the case for the Latino theatre of the 1970s and early 80s, a re-collective past that all Latinos pull from? As Rivera notes:

I write. I have a place as a voice that’s trying to be heard. When people go see a Carmen Rivera play they sometimes will see places, for example, between life and death. Whatever realm that it is...the play will take place there. Maria in *La Gringa* gets a baptism from Atabey. From the dry rain in El Yunque. There are things that happen that do not involve the other world. Or in this current world. And at the same time...it’s very realistic.²⁵

²² Rivera describes the importance of the Nuyorican Movement and its impact on her writing in the following way: “Puerto Ricans, by and large, were one of the first groups that wrote about our poor people. *La Carreta* by Marqués. We opened up a classless society. Pedro Pietri’s *The Masses are Asses*. When we came to this country and began writing our political situation it became dangerous. That informed us having to write stuff like Papo Marquez’s *Puerto Rican Schizophrenia*. We wrote plays that were very steeped in identity, in violence, in our polarization. Artists are supposed to write about their political background. It’s all politics. It’s life. *Puerto Rican Obituary* by Pietri was about me. The first thing I saw with our people in the title. It was about my dad. Who worked in a factory. My mother worked many jobs to get me through school. That wave, whether it was poetry or theatre, expressed the survival, this tenacity. If one of us collapsed ok...but someone else can’t collapse. I’ve been influenced by these things. I’m not sure to what level...but it formed me. What colonization has brought us to. But I’m still learning to be a playwright.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

²³ For example, the work of John Leguizamo or Rick Najera’s *Latinologues*.

²⁴ See Dávila, *Latinos, Inc.*, 2001.

²⁵ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

Rivera's theatre argues for a *latinidad* that is a creation of the theatre of this earlier period but also supersedes what we have now. Her characters are not "generic" representations. In fact many of her plays need not be defined as Latino-themed at all. The *latinidad* in her plays stems from the communal experience of watching the works as well as performing them. The plays are created by the community, often times through the author's own archival research, and also with careful attention paid to the three-dimensional representation of the characters. An example of this type of creation is the play *XY Stories*.²⁶ The play was conceived by Rivera and her husband, playwright Cándido Tirado, and dramatizes the stories of six characters' sexual awakenings. As an audience member, we are unsure of cultural identity at first, since most of the characters do not "play" Latino. Rather, their *latinidad* becomes a part of their embodiment on stage. As she did with *La Gringa*, the plays are Latino in feeling but not emblematic of a purely Latino story. Rivera's theatre is created in a location of culture that is *tri-brid* in nature. Her characters rise from their hyphenated status in the United States, their colonized status at home, and further their attempt to either fit in or break free from the constructs of Latino stereotypes:

We are colonized. Cándido believes that every Puerto Rican story is about breaking out. Last year all these Latino labs closed. I told other writers, "What are you so shocked about?" What makes you think that these companies wanted us before? Maybe Puerto Ricans already know that. That's part of my filter. How I see it. Not only don't they want us...they never did. As Puerto Ricans we already know, sociologically, and being aware that I have been colonized, I am better aware. I am a post-colonial writer. We cannot go to post-colonial until we accept that we are colonized.²⁷

²⁶ *XY Stories* is not analyzed in this dissertation since it is a co-written piece. The playwrights involved all submitted their individual answers to questions posed by Rivera and Tirado. The two constructed a dramatic piece around these stories which was then staged in 2003.

²⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

The multiple layers of Latino representation in her work cross-pollinate themselves through gender, language, religion, homeland and memory, as well as through Rivera's ability to position them in varied dramatic genres, including musicals, feminist plays, historical plays, well-made plays and solo performance. One of the chief examples of this cross-pollination is Rivera's formal attempt at unifying the theories of Guillermo Gentile's *Fantastic Realism* workshops and disputing the often simplistic categorization that all Latino plays are filled with moments of "magic realism."²⁸ I refer here to the argument that all plays written by a Latin surnamed author must contain moments of *magic realism*, often characterized by the work of Gabriel García Márquez. In a similar way, Guillermo Gómez-Peña describes this issue in relation to Mexican artists and their exploration of hybridization and trans-identity. As Gómez-Peña believes, "The problem is that the impresarios of 'Free Trade Art' are more interested in *magical realism* than they are in a true intercultural dialogue."²⁹

For most critics, three plays define Rivera and her place in Latino theatre, namely *La Gringa*, *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino* and *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water*. These three plays had great commercial success and are responsible for Rivera's fame, both in the United States and abroad. I will trace the trajectory of Rivera's growth as an artist and provide the progression of how these plays represent the ever-changing Latina/o community, both pre and post-Millennium. I will analyze through the lens of traditional literary criticism as well as for their socio-cultural significance for audiences, particularly the often-forgotten lower socio-economic members of the New York diaspora. These groups, which include new enclaves of Central American immigrants, as well as the more

²⁸The term, though often attributed to Alejo Carpentier's novel *The Harp and the Shadow* was originally coined in 1925 by the German art critic Franz Roh, in his book *Nach-Expressionismus, Magischer Realismus*. The book was eventually translated into Spanish and published in 1927 under the title *Realismo Mágico*.

²⁹ Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1995), 165.

traditional Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Chicanos, continue to provide Latina/o audiences for Rivera's thought-provoking theatre, which remains focused on theoretical discourses of "otherness" and "occidentalism."

Rivera considers herself an "other" in a world of "others." Her social position remains outside of the fold and her characters need a post-colonial lens for interpretation: linguistically, psychologically and sociologically. Orientalism concentrates its attention on both the characters in Rivera's plays as well as the community which is represented in her work. To this point, theorist Edward Said proposes that:

Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions...but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with political power (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do). Indeed my real argument is that Orientalism is - and does not simply represent - a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world.³⁰

I will reconstruct Rivera's theatre, both from the subjected gaze of "other" as well as through her attempt to create a communal authenticity, or as ethnographic scholar Bill Nichols notes, an "aura of authenticity."³¹ Rivera's plays place themselves within various Pan-Latino communities. Her work is received both critically and aesthetically by members of the Puerto Rican community as well as Dominicans, Chicanos, South Americans and Caribeños. The creation of communal "auras," where members of each of these groups feel that Rivera is telling "their" story, is what makes her work a socio-

³⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 12.

³¹ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1998). Nichols argues that though authenticity is impossible, through the interjection of communal voices, an artist helps to build an "aura" which helps the individual identify themselves through the representation of the whole.

historical document as well as a cultural artifact. This anthropological approach to culture provides for an “authentic” representation, whether it be in the South Bronx or Bolivia.³²

To have the characters speak for themselves, within the confines of their own barrios, gives an “aura of authenticity” based on ethnographic representation of actualized communities. To accentuate Bill Nichol’s work in documentary filmmaking and the subjective view of “otherness,” Coco Fusco stresses that, “[t]he representation of the ‘reality’ of the Other’s life, on which ethnographic documentary was based and still is grounded, is this fictional narrative of Western culture ‘discovering’ the negation of itself in something authentically and radically distinct.”³³ This urban “space” where authenticity and cultures meet, can be a place for African-American and Latino Hip-Hop collaborations, which have become a popular arena for recent Nuyorican theatre, as well as for recently theorized Pan and Trans-Latino negotiations. In his article, “Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.,” Juan Flores discusses a visit by a Chicano friend to New York:

Francisco also began to make note of differences, ways in which the Nuyorican position in the U.S. society diverges from that of his fellow Chicanos. The most obvious of these, in his view was the closeness between Puerto Ricans and Blacks. Of course Chicanos and African-Americans have long shared a common cause as victims of racism and exploitation and comprise natural allies in political and social movements. Culturally, too, there has been ample interaction, but nothing resembling the intensity and extent of influence between Black and Puerto Rican cultures in New York...He [Francisco] even took in the movie *Wild Style* and was amazed at the integral participation of both groups in forms of contemporary street art and performance like graffiti, rap music and break dancing.³⁴

³² In Chapter Two I will describe a situation where a native Bolivian *jibaro* exclaims to Rivera, “I am La Gringa!”

³³ Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 49.

³⁴ Juan Flores, “Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.” in *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring Latina and Latino Lives in the U.S.*, Mary Romero, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Vilma Ortiz eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 176.

Wild Style, the film that Flores refers to, creates within its narrative both an authentic aura of Latino and African-American culture as well as a document of its characters within the structure of an urban folk musical. This will be important to note in the development of Rivera's dramaturgy as she creates *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino* for the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre as well as both *The Palladium*, based on the Latin dance club of the 1950s and *Celia: Her Life and Music*, based on the life of the Queen of Salsa Music, Celia Cruz.³⁵ As musical theorist Rick Altman explains, "[i]n the familiar context created by the folk musical, even the world's largest city can be tamed and made to appear no more than a slightly bigger version of one's hometown."³⁶ As noted by Fusco, this use of authenticity in film "carried over from documentary, (and) these paradigms also became the basis of Hollywood filmmaking in the 1950s and 1960s that dealt with other parts of the world in which the United States had strategic military and economic interests, especially in Latin America and the South Pacific."³⁷

Rivera's "early" plays follow the development of the artist and feminist, as the characters in *The Universe*, *A State of Bliss*, *Elena*, *To Catch the Lightning* and *Julia*, struggle with both Latina identity as well as their place in society as educated women. Rivera's early themes run deep with the emotion of hope, as her main characters try to create a *niche* for themselves in a patriarchal society. Rivera's protagonists are marginalized by society because of their skin color and gender, while also experiencing

³⁵ I will analyze Rivera's work on *La Lupe: Mi Vida Mi Destino* through the theoretical lens of a folk musical. As Rivera notes, "*La Lupe* is a play with music, not a musical. No original songs composed to advance the story. I studied her music very carefully. Each song covers a moment in her emotional life. At the top of the play I start with a song *La Tirana*, where she states, 'According to your point of view, I am the bad one.' I end with *Todo*, with the line, 'I've lived it all.' What I love about the American Musical Theatre is the story. I was commissioned to do *La Lupe*. I was afraid to take it on. I loved her music. I stopped being an adolescent and became an adult playwright. People came up to me and told me I was a whore. I sold out. It was a story I wanted to tell. Shakespeare writes about historical figures and I wanted to document one of ours." Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

³⁶ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 275-277.

³⁷ Fusco, *English is Broken Here*, 49.

subjugation within their own families and communities. This dissertation chronologically documents Rivera's creative output in three chapters, beginning with her earliest work, *The Universe*, which ultimately serves as the basis for her longest running play, *La Gringa* and moving to the present. I will examine Rivera's early work, created for the Shaman Repertory Theatre and for the "community" while paying attention to the complexities of Rivera's unique storytelling ability, as her career flourishes through the late 1990s to the present day.

La Gringa has been performed at Repertorio Español for fourteen years, a notable feat for a modern playwright at that institution, which relies heavily on student audiences and generally offers classic Spanish theatre, concentrating on Cervantes, Lorca and contemporary plays, chiefly produced through the sponsorship of Met Life's Nuestras Voces Series. *La Gringa* was part of the New Voices Series and received an OBIE Award in 1996. The Brooklyn Academy of Music integrated this modern story of Puerto Rican renewal and location of culture³⁸ as part of their Spanish Voices Series. *La Gringa* has also achieved international success, featured in theatre festivals in Bolivia and in Colombia, where Rivera was also an invited keynote speaker, discussing issues of theatrical *latinidad*, as well as American, Caribbean, and feminist theatre. In 2007, *La Gringa* was one of three Nuyorican plays invited to be part of the International Puerto Rican Theatre Festival, produced by one of the island's best known cultural institutions, El Ateneo Puertorriqueño.

Her second major work, *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water*, produced at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre in 1999, highlights Rivera's dramaturgical precision and lyrical dialogue. This touching and spiritual piece allowed Rivera to weave both an historical

³⁸ See Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

narrative and the poetry of Puerto Rican literary legend Julia de Burgos (1914 – 1953), through a multi-dimensional, multi-interactive theatrical event. The play has become a part of the curriculum of many charter schools throughout the country which concentrate their studies on interdisciplinary approaches to cultural understanding. *Julia de Burgos* has also been utilized to “teach teachers” how to assist students in creating poetry and theatre, and to tell the stories of their own cultures and families.

In 2001 Rivera received acclaim for her historiographic play, *La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny*, which also opened at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. The play, depicting the life and music of legendary Cuban singer La Lupe, received an ACE Award (Association of Journalists and Writers) for Best Production. The play remains Rivera’s most critically acclaimed work, lauded by the New York press for its blending of culture and biographic theatre. *La Lupe* established Rivera’s movement into the viable non-Latino theatre as well, with the play selling out through advance ticket sales. As described by Allen Davis III, Literary Manager of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre’s Playwriting Unit, “the play packed in both white and Hispanic audiences in equal numbers, night after night.”³⁹

Rivera’s theatre merits closer examination for its socio-cultural representation of the Latina/o both pre and post-Millennium. Her plays reflect *latinidad* as a spontaneous hybrid, or as I have described it, “tri-brid,” since its creation is dependent on the two, three or more communities that nurture it. As I will demonstrate, Latina/o plays can no longer be called Nuyorican or Cuban, Latin American or Chicano. Rather, they are created by Latinos who have reconstructed their borders, racially, sexually, linguistically and culturally. As Rivera explains, “I’m not sure which stories audiences are going to

³⁹ Personal correspondence with Allen Davis III, 22 January 2006

like. It's really weird. You never know what is going to click with an audience. I can only go through the experiences of my plays. People went to see *La Lupe* more than others. They go to *La Gringa* often.”⁴⁰

The music and pulse that creates this theatre has become a commodity, not just for Latinos but also for the audiences that support it, many of whom cannot be defined as second or third generation Latino or African-American but rather as hybrids of a new world. Rivera acknowledges the fact that the reception of her work, as well as the plays that she creates, are interdependent on a complex sociology of Latino representation and self-determination. Rivera exposes this representation through victimization when describing her early memories of childhood:

There was something that happened to me when I was in camp when I was eleven years old. I used to go the Girl Scout camp and I would have exposure to American Indians. There was this girl in my cabin whose grandfather owned the General Store where we got candy. And he was a full-blooded Native American. He wore jeans, and a shirt and a beautiful necklace. I just remember that I would look at him and think that my stereotype of what an Indian was...was blown. We also used to have visitors who would come and they were dressed in loincloths and we would think “Oh my God, look at these guys.” They taught us about paint and what it meant. What feathers meant. How to read a sundial. That experience opened me up to say that you can't listen to people and what they say about other people. Everything goes back to victimization.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Rivera's theatre is one of cultural convergence. It is a new locus where Latinos share culture while creating new stories, new histories and new reconstructions of their past, or to introduce the concept, an "imagined community."⁴² In his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*,⁴³ theorist and scholar Benedict Anderson notes that from an anthropological stance, his definition of a nation entails "...an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." This idea, further developed to define Latina/os own self-identification or to coin a popular television program, *LatiNation*, will form a dramatic spine for the work of Rivera, as well as the work of most Latino post migration playwrights.

The methodologies needed to examine Rivera's work are as varied as Latino self-identification itself, and therefore, I shall examine her theatre as a sociological construct of intellect, corpus and soul. I will contextualize her role within the tradition of American, European, Latin American and post-colonial playwrights of different ideological and sociological backgrounds. To attend one of her playwriting courses is to pay homage to the work of Oedipus, Shakespeare, Moliere, Cervantes, and García Lorca

⁴² Suzanne Oboler, whose scholarship on Latino (mis)representation analyzes these types of "imagined" communities in the following way: "A key component of the specificity of the populations identified as Latinos in the United States is the fact that they have always been and continue to be constructed by themselves and others in the context of both international and U.S. historical referents. Certainly, sectors of the populations of Latin American descent have lived in what is now the Southwest, California, Florida, and other parts of the country for centuries. Like many Latinos today, they too forged their own real and 'imagined' communities in the United States, with clear recognition of their ties to specific Latin American regions...What has changed in the past two decades, then, is not Latinos' sense of ourselves as communities bound by language, by cultural heritage, by an acknowledgment of our Latin American heritage, by the common goal of expanding and protecting Latinos' rights, but by the aim of improving our lives and the communities' standards of living." Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xiv-xv.

⁴³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

as well as Albee, Pinter, Fornés, Beckett and Kushner. Her intimate knowledge of dramatic structure and characterization prove her to be a multi-dimensional educator of playwriting as well as a socio-cultural investigator.

Rivera's early play, *To Catch the Lightning*, is a true marriage of collective creation and Rivera's use of "fantastic theatre" which she learned from its creator, Argentine Guillermo Gentile. This form of theatrical presentation and exploration, integrating healing rituals, collective creation, Boalian political action exercises and other explorations of the body onstage will be discussed, as I highlight its re-envisioning in specific plays. It was with Gentile that Rivera determined that the "irrational" process of the human condition would help her create a socio-dramatic document that defined her Latino characters. Rivera believes that she "gravitate[s] towards things like the *Twilight Zone*. For my writing that's natural, that's normal. What is not normal would be people trying to find rational explanations on stage."⁴⁴

To Catch the Lightning was produced at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre in the spring of 1997 and was nominated for an ACE Award for Best Production. This play dramatizes the lives of four family members who hold dark secrets about their past and directly confronts issues prevalent in Rivera's early work regarding the image of the Latino male. The play's abusive father, controlling and domineering throughout the play, is transformed into a child by the conclusion, nursing at the breast of his lover. Rivera's complex male characters meld well with David Abalos's interpretation of the theory of transformation, delineated in his book, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*.

As Abalos notes, this theory "is indebted to Jung and his understanding of archetypes, it fundamentally disagrees with his work. Jung had almost nothing to say

⁴⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

about the process of transformation. He was silent on the political and historical faces of our being and wrote nothing at all about archetypal ways of life in which we enact the relationships and stories of our lives and from which we draw the deeper meaning and value of what we enact.”⁴⁵ Abalos ponders many of the questions that influence the image of *latinidad* for Latino men, both those images placed upon them by society, as well as those that they wish to “buy into” based on their own pre-conditioning.⁴⁶ The transformative questions that Abalos interjects including, “What happened that brought about the wounding of the personal, political, historical, and sacred faces of the Latino male?” or “What aspects of Latino culture and the wider U.S. culture have been detrimental to our journeys?” are in juxtaposition to the transformative and spiritual path in which Rivera constructs her socio-cultural texts.

Abalos and Rivera both warn their readers of the dangers of perpetuating the Latino myth, as it can only destroy any semblance of strong male *latinidad*. What I have come to call the “Scarface Myth,” based on the Brian DePalma film and starring Al Pacino, can support the imagined communities described by Juan Flores, through a lens postulated by Benedict Anderson,⁴⁷ but also implode chaos and violence among Latinas and Latinos. Men selling drugs, owning women, living hard and dying young; all these things are sold to the mass market consumer as “Latino *normal*.” As Rivera explains regarding her own work:

⁴⁵ See David T. Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2002), 2-3.

⁴⁶ As Abalos notes, “Presently many Latino men live desperate lives. Too often they romanticize the past by re-creating the fantasy of male power that dominates their lives. They live the story of the disappointed male. They hang on to this fragment of life, a wounded masculinity, in order to have a sense of power and find ways to get even with a society that daily turns them into objects...Often unable to overcome their sense of loss by asserting themselves, some Latino men fall into despair...I am useless, I am nobody.” Abalos, *The Latino Male*, 2002, 3.

⁴⁷ Though this theory will be discussed throughout the dissertation, I want to point out that Anderson’s work on “nation” prompts the integral analysis of Juan Flores and his use of the term “imagined community,” necessary to accentuate Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans re-imagining of community. Flores’s work will serve as a basis for the identification of dramatic themes in the plays of Carmen Rivera.

My father was always saying that he was the man. Men in my plays are dimensional. I can't play the Latino male stereotype. Writers give voice to the voiceless. Every one of my stories tries to do this. I don't want to go see a play in which I see a one-dimensional man. I've known many abusive men in my life and none of them are one-dimensional. The reason women often stay with them is that they also give some form of love. The men are misguided. I'm proud that I don't have these men in my plays. I'm conscious of that. And I consider myself a feminist.⁴⁸

To Catch the Lightning is closest to what Rivera seems to admire most in other playwrights, namely the irrational and the absurd. The work of two major influences, Eugene Ionesco and Griselda Gambaro⁴⁹ shadow the play, which is centered around a claustrophobic household and a tyrannical father intent on maintaining a stable family in a post-apocalyptic world. As Rivera explains, "*To Catch the Lightning* was the first play I ever started to work on. It came at a time where I was having a lot of problems while I was working on the play and then I saw a story about a baby that was found in a garbage can on television and I thought, 'that was the daughter.'"⁵⁰ Thus the combining of disparate forms of expression, absurdism, surrealism and even media controlled imagery quickly became a part of the process by which Rivera created her plays, though these early works tried to unify the basic structural elements of director Guillermo Gentile.

Gentile's basic argument deals with the irrational as part of the human being. He stresses that playwrights must not judge their characters. Rivera attempted this with *To Catch the Lightning*, where the audience attempts to comprehend multiple situations

⁴⁸ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁴⁹ "I am most influenced by absurdism. Particularly the work of Griselda Gambaro, Eugene Ionesco. *Rhinoceros*. The play can be translated to the current Bush administration. He (Ionesco) reminds me of the dreams that I used to have when I was 20 and 21. I enjoy Adamov. I read Borges. I never had the need to be violent in my plays. *State of Bliss*, and *To Catch the Lightning* might be the most violent plays I have written. I loved *Pillowman* (by Martin McDonagh). It was one of my top theatre experiences. The brothers were Irish and colonized. The oppression is what drives me. Being locked up. Seeing that play made me so happy. They surrender to the aesthetic of the play. I'm inspired by reading Gambaro's work but I don't write like that." Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 10 December 2006.

⁵⁰ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 10 December 2006.

which they cannot rationalize.⁵¹ What we believe to be true is not and characters talk irrationally because they are not held to the constructs of a rational world. This play is Rivera's earliest attempt at integrating the *fantastic theatre* and possibly her strongest. Gentile's *fantastic theatre*, expressed in Rivera's plays, proposes a search for dramatic truth through an investigation of the irrational. Scenarios, that for most would seem far-fetched or foreign, are investigated through linguistically divergent dialogue. In an attempt to explain how she believes *fantastic realism* is envisioned in the 20th century, Rivera cited an example often used by conspiracy theorists in regard to the deaths of Branch Davidian cult members in Waco, Texas:

David Koresh said that he is the incarnation of Jesus and that he and his followers would die in an apocalyptic fire. The FBI said, "He's crazy" because they have a very narrow definition of what is reason." What is rational? But the objective of the FBI was to get those kids out of that house because they didn't make the conscious choice to follow David Koresh, the parents did. If someone in the FBI had called him and said, "I know you're Jesus and I've been reading the Bible here and it says that you love children." If someone had just accepted his fantasy they might have gotten a lot more kids out alive. Instead what they did was blast Tibetan chanting and rock music and that just made him stronger, and made the followers stronger. Irrational thought and humanity have to be a part of behavior. It is not only the rational.⁵²

After her initial success with *La Gringa*, Rivera saw her first success outside the traditional New York Latino theatre with *The Next Stop*, performed at New York Theatre Workshop under the direction of James Nicola and Michael John Garcés, both of whom have commented on Rivera's dramaturgy as "sharp and brilliant," as well as "incredibly

⁵¹ Rivera has mixed feelings regarding this early play. In my estimation the play serves as Rivera's earliest experience with the commodification of her work. As she notes, "This is a piece of me that has come out in some plays. I started to get produced. I had two other pieces that are like these. But unfortunately these types of plays are not very commercial. However, this play did have a six week run. Some nights there weren't many people in the audience." Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁵² Ibid.

beautiful and poetic.”⁵³ Eventually INTAR, under the direction of Founder and Artistic Director Max Ferra, produced the play, while Repertorio Español simultaneously commissioned a Spanish version of the play, producing it under the title, *La Próxima Parada*.

Rivera’s later plays, which include *Ghosts in Brooklyn*, *Betty’s Garage*, and *Caravan of Death*, all developed from her acknowledgment that the creation of theatre should be shared with the audience, allowing them to participate in the process of documentary storytelling. Rivera created these “communal” works to highlight the conscience of her audience and their individual stories within the tapestry of *latinidad*. Rivera began to write collective works, as she became influenced by the Latin American style of Colombian Enrique Buenaventura, considered the father of the Popular Theater Movement in Latin America. As Elena De Costa explains in her book, *Collaborative Latin American Popular Theatre: From Theory to Form, From Text to Stage*:

It is the domain of the Buenaventura method not only to acknowledge the audience as co-participants but also to concentrate on the presentation of a textual content that can speak appropriately, authoritatively, and controversially to that audience. The subject matter must be able to communicate directly and humanely with a varied public, learning its customs, linguistic and cultural uniqueness, if necessary, appropriating itself to its dramatic co-authors. The performance text must draw on the direct experiences of those who create them, carefully researching the validity of historical events and regional concerns as an “authoritative” work. Yet, the context of the liberating text must remain controversial in the sense that it subjects events to careful scrutiny, putting the spectator in a position to choose action with respect to the real source of the conflict – that is, toward the social structures. This polemical stance between the performance text and audience determines the success or failure of a liberating dramatic discourse.⁵⁴

⁵³ Personal correspondence during rehearsals (in author’s possession).

⁵⁴ Elena De Costa, *Collaborative Latin American Popular Theatre: From Theory to Form, From Text to Stage* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992), 64-65.

Rivera began working with women in shelters, at-risk children, and dislocated homemakers to create texts that represented their lives. Rivera began to redefine her plays as she attempted to create pieces that showed the “verse of the underprivileged class.”⁵⁵ Her characters began to evolve from real people she meets during the classes and workshops she taught in Spanish Harlem, East New York and Washington Heights. Rivera’s attempt at creating collective works, or what I have called socio-cultural dramatic documents, are best described by De Costa in reference to the work of Enrique Buenaventura:

Theatre must be at the service of cultural development and national reconstruction, contributing to the people so that by taking more and more history into their own hands, they feel empowered to shape their history. To shape their history, the people must be present in it, not merely represented in it; to derive meaning from the theatrical experience, the voices of the people must be heard on the stage and not merely given a dramatist’s personal utterance. Such is the philosophy behind the Buenaventura collective approach to creativity, the redefinition of culture as “la conciencia que un pueblo tiene de ser dueño de su destino.”⁵⁶

Rivera also began teaching playwriting at The City College of New York in 2000. Her pieces now depicted the struggles of the “haves and have nots,” focusing her attention on social issues, the Guiliani administration, class conflict and AIDS. She also began teaching playwriting to a new generation of dramatists at the Shaman Repertory Theatre, and later at the Latin Experimental Fantastic Theatre, which she founded with her husband, playwright Cándido Tirado.

In the final chapter of this dissertation I will examine Rivera’s professional trajectory, documenting the experience of *La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny* at the Puerto

⁵⁵ Personal interview with Alicia Kaplan, Artistic Director of Danisarte Latino Theatre Collective, 6 March 2006.

⁵⁶ De Costa, *Collaborative Latin American Popular Theatre*, 62.

Rican Traveling Theatre. I will discuss the issues entailed in the lawsuit by the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre against Rivera, and the far-reaching implications of the case. In dispute was the attempt to strip a playwright of her copyright for a work that was in question due to its “collective process of creation.”⁵⁷ During this time Rivera continued writing and completed work on the collaborative piece, *XY Stories*. Co-written as a dramaturgical production, it features the work of many of the best-known Latina/o playwrights of the contemporary theatre, including Migdalia Cruz, Cándido Tirado, and Edwin Sánchez.

Rivera’s plays become a part of the repertoire of Soho Rep, New Perspectives Theatre and Ballet Hispanico of New York, who create a dance piece from some of her original prose. National Public Radio produces a night of her short monologues and three commercial houses, La Mama, Theatre for a New City and the Nuyorican Poet’s Café, all commission new works in 2001. In 2004 Rivera was selected to participate in the Latino Writers Lab of the National Association of Latino Independent Producers and the New York International Latino Film Festival. She adapted her play, *La Gringa*, into a screenplay and becomes a semi-finalist for the MTV Screenwriting Competition. Finally, Rivera has continued to teach a new generation of playwrights throughout the New York area in venues as diverse as The City College of New York, Manhattan Theatre Club, Arts Connection and City Lights Youth Theatre.

As Carmen Rivera moves into the next decade, she is concentrating on the creation of a book musical, to be produced as homage to the great New York Latin nightclub, *The Palladium*, as well as her collaboration with Cándido Tirado on *Celia: Her Life and Music*, which opened at New World Stages on September 26, 2007. These

⁵⁷ Claim made by members of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre’s Professional Playwright’s Unit.

projects enable her to once again create texts through archival research, as she travels between New York and Puerto Rico, working to integrate the libretto of these musicals with the songs of past and present salsa greats. The production is labor intensive, as Rivera duplicates the creation of communal texts while balancing the translation of primary song lyrics and biographical notes from many musicians who played at the club more than fifty years ago. As Rivera states, “my characters cannot assimilate into society. I’m very fascinated by people that are on the outside fringes. For example María in *La Gringa* is aware that she is a hyphenated character. But her cousin Iris doesn’t even know what a hyphen is.”⁵⁸ The intention of this dissertation is to provide a trajectory of the development of Rivera’s work to the present day, and in turn to document how *latinidad* is created through imagined communities, both from below and above, and most importantly as objects of communal creation, “for us and by us.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Rivera references here the ideology of the hyphen, found both in Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s book *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) and the work of Juan Flores and Puerto Rican representations “off-the-hyphen”: a counterpoint to Pérez-Firmat’s view of US Cuban-Americans hyphenated status in relation to Puerto Rican’s naturalized citizenship, which prompts the negation of a hyphen to self-identify.

⁵⁹ Rivera’s belief that her theatre is “for us, by us” also derives from the popular brand of urban hip-hop attire named FUBU. This term is one that claims “authenticity” by urban outfitters and consumers alike, a true symbiosis of *latinization* and *latinidad*.

Chapter 1: *Becoming Carmen Rivera: 1990 – 1993*

The Universe, 1990.
A State of Bliss, 1990.
Elena, 1990.
To Catch the Lightning, 1992.
Julia, 1992.
Plastic Flowers, 1993.
ameRICAN, 1993.

In each of the following three chapters I have chosen to document the work of Carmen Rivera chronologically. In doing so I believe each chapter will highlight a period of her work as reflective of her awakening as a scholar, community activist, and theatre practitioner. As we move through each chapter I hope to prove that Rivera's dramaturgy is directly connected to moments of creation, loss, renewal and healing. In Chapter One, I note that Rivera's plays highlight strong characters and audience accessible plotlines. Many of these early plays demonstrate her familiarity with the grittiness of the world of the Nuyorican Poet's movement, particularly the absurdity of the plays of Pedro Pietri.¹ At this time she also began to reveal her signature dramatic style: integrating poetic verse and *fantastic realism* in the plays *The Universe*, *State of Bliss* and *Elena*.

Rivera's plays often employ the omnipresent voice of the author, consistently writing her culture and her unique perspective on the life of her characters. As Rivera has pointed out, *The Universe*, which four years later became *La Gringa*, remains a love letter to her Uncle Maurice, who helped instill in her a knowledge of Puerto Rico and the pride she should feel as she embraces her roots, while also warning her of the cultural truth that drives her theatre: the fact that her characters are "others," trapped either on or

¹ See Pedro Pietri's *The Masses are Asses* (Washington, D.C.: Waterfront Press, 1984) as a perfect example.

off the “hyphen,”² without a bearing in the United States, nor, as they are often reminded, in Puerto Rico.

Rivera’s play *A State of Bliss* deals with the ideologies and difficulties of cause and effect, and how the actions of a few can influence the universe of all. We discern Rivera’s love of Eastern philosophy and mysticism through the character Nirvana, as well as both her and Latino culture’s dependence on Catholicism, in the character Lázaro. In *Elena*, Rivera begins a new stage of realistic dramaturgy, as she retells the story of her friend from high school, Elaine, and how her lifestyle led to the unfortunate choices many Latinas face in the world. Rivera demonstrates both the strengths of women, as well as the weaknesses that drive their poor choices. She is never apologetic for Elena, allowing the audience to empathize with her plight. Rivera describes *Elena* as a “straight-forward play” that uses the Christmas season as a counterpoint to the solemn, morbid mood of the piece. *Elena* dramatizes how the suicide of the title character affects the relationship of two secondary characters, Ana and Michelle. Rivera here, as in many of her plays, is chiefly interested in how audiences are affected by their past and their subjective memories.

Rivera’s *Julia*, a favorite at college campuses and high schools, deals with her own self-discovery. She writes the play to show the audience the reality of the American educational system and how it often makes it problematic, if not impossible, for women and English as Second Language students, to receive an education. Although at times didactic, the play brought Rivera her first real success, as it was performed often and later

² See the sociological work of Juan Flores, including *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1993), *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

anthologized by John Antush in his anthology of Nuyorican dramaturgy.³ *Plastic Flowers* and *ameRican* reveal her familiarity with the milieu of the Nuyorican plays of the 1970s and early 80s. Both plays are quite similar in narrative and style to the work of Miguel Piñero and Piri Thomas. Her ability to write in this form demonstrates Rivera's talent for capturing speech patterns, dialogue and slang.

Again she returns to her family, namely her cousin who she describes as "too cool" for *Plastic Flowers*, and though *ameRican* is not based on Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera's poem of the same name, Rivera proudly acknowledges that he did attend the play and regarded it as one of the best "Nuyorican" works he had ever seen. *La Gringa*, which I analyze in Chapter Two, celebrates its fourteenth year in repertory in 2010. It has provided Rivera with staying power through the end of the century and into the new millennium. I will discuss the dramaturgical choices leading to its creation and what that success has meant for Rivera as a writer. As she has asserted, it is a play about "looking inside yourself."⁴

The Universe (1990)

To attempt to articulate what has become Rivera's "signature" theme, the displacement of culture for Latinos removed from their motherland(s), one needs look no further than the work of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortíz. In 1947 Ortiz sought to critique the term "acculturation," originally defined by sociologists Robert Redfield, Richard Linton, and M.J. Herskovits, in their 1936 seminal work, "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation." As originally defined, "acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into

³ John Antush, *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 9 February 2006.

continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups.”⁵ This definition proved problematic for the Cuban born Ortíz who felt the term was misleading since it was meant to place uneven pressure upon the submissive group by the dominant, thus assuming assimilation and not acculturation.

Ortíz understood that what was present in many island nations was colonization by Europeans and Americans and that this term would literally give a positive “spin” to the eradication of Latin cultures in the middle part of the 20th century. Ortiz instead offered his own term, “transculturation” which he defined as a give and take between two or more cultures within a “culture–share.” Ortíz’s use of the pronoun “we” to begin his definition relates to current trends of *latinidad*, which assume a trans-Latino community and its relation to each other. Ortíz addresses the difference between acculturation and transculturation by stating that “we understand the term transculturation to better express the different stages in the process of transition between one culture and another, because this process does not consist exclusively in acquiring a culture – which is what the Anglo-American term acculturation really means – the process also necessarily implies the loss or uprooting of an originary culture, which could be termed a partial deculturation as well as the consequent creation of new cultural phenomena which could be described in terms of a neoculturation.”⁶

Rivera, by her own acknowledgment, follows this ideology of the transcultural development of a Latino theatre and thus a Latino audience base. Her theatre, which I have chosen to chart in three chronological stages, not only posits the question “What makes us Latino?,” but also attempts to dramatize that inner-struggle through a dramatis

⁵ *International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1960), 19.

⁶ Fernando Ortíz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. by Harriet de Onis (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1947).

personae of what I call “culturally-confused characters.” *The Universe*, the first play written by Rivera as well as the skeleton for her most popular play, *La Gringa*, is filled with these cultural contradictions around identity. As Rivera notes, “Identity is the key. I definitely feel like I don’t belong anywhere. And I think that does to a certain extent, in my own psychology and sociology, play a role. I don’t have nostalgia. Like some of the Cuban-American playwrights that write about a longing for their home. I don’t write about longing because for me I don’t long for anything. This is how I see place. And as for class...class for me is being poor.”⁷

The Universe is a nine-page play, dedicated to her Uncle Maurice and highlighting moments of a summer she spent in Puerto Rico. The play is constructed as a dialogue between María, a 22-year old Nuyorican visiting her family and trying to find “roots” in the soil of Puerto Rico, and her Uncle Manolo. María is so taken by her journey that she wants to live in her parents’ homeland, which they were forced to leave due to the economic pressures placed on many immigrants during the 1940s and 1950s. María’s idealization of Puerto Rico and what it has to offer is in distinct contrast to the views of her family, native Puerto Ricans who are quick to point out María’s poor use of Spanish and her “yankee” status on the island, otherwise described by them as being a “gringa.” María’s desire to live and work in Puerto Rico is challenged by her uncle, a heroic character whose life has been spent as an actor and *soltero*:

⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 9 February 2006.

María: I really want this job, if I get it, I'll have all my stuff down here within two days. Don't you see? I love Puerto Rico. I don't want to go back to Philadelphia.

Manolo: Listen to me, think about it for a second. This is only your third time in Puerto Rico.

María: So what?

Manolo: Just because you finally learned to speak Spanish and you're in love with a Caribbean island doesn't mean you'll like living here. You grew up in the states, it's not going to be the same.

María: Don't you think I've thought about that...I feel at home here. I mean, when the plane was circling San Juan, I saw the whole city shining as bright as the sky at 11:30 at night. It was like the whole universe was underneath my feet, and all those lights were stars shining, almost blinding me. It was so beautiful.⁸

María's dream is a tropicalized one, constructed by her perception as an American looking nostalgically at a homeland which she neither truly knows nor understands. She is like a tourist at Disneyworld, who decides to pack up and move to Orlando because the vacation was wonderful. Manolo is quick to point this out to his niece, whom he loves deeply but believes is unaware of the stigma attached to a *gringa* entering the Puerto Rican job market. María explains that she is an "authentic" Puerto Rican due to the fact that she checks the box "*Puerto Rican*" on all her applications. Manolo is quick to inform her that "checking a box doesn't automatically make you Puerto Rican." As a recurring theme in her work, Rivera will address this perception of *latinidad* and identity politics. Strains of her pro-independentista/anti-commonwealth ideology resound throughout her work but there always seems to be a residual contempt for those who are quick to over-politicize the cause of Puerto Rico as a colonized territory. Instead, Rivera takes up the cause of the displaced Puerto Rican, lacking a homeland on either shore.

The Universe is designed as a dialogue between these two political ideas and revealed through the words of loving family members. Rivera, in a brief two scenes,

⁸ Carmen Rivera, *The Universe*, unpublished manuscript, 1990, 2.

exposes the anger and resentment of both factions, hoping to reclaim an island/country colonized throughout its recent history. When these two contrasting viewpoints clash Rivera's audience becomes schizophrenic, unable to clearly distinguish their own position.⁹ Further, Rivera confronts Puerto Rico's commonwealth status and those inhabitants that may have benefited from leaving the island due to economic hardship:

María: Look my parents are from here, my roots are here...

Manolo: That doesn't mean anything. Your history is over there. Your family here. All the families here build their houses with Puerto Rican wood. They sweat on Puerto Rican land. They kill themselves to live here. You just visit every five years, two weeks.

María: Why are you getting so angry?

Manolo: I'm not. It's just that you think you have a right to live and work here just because you liked San Juan from the airplane. You guys left the island a long time ago and now you want it back!

María: I didn't leave, my parents did!¹⁰

To be Puerto Rican in Rivera's plays means to accept the judgment of those who have geographic dominance. Though one may possess vast amounts of knowledge on the turmoil of Puerto Rico's past, there is often the inability to "sit at the table." In an ironic twist, Rivera's literary pioneers, the Nuyorican Poets, experienced this same fate upon their visit to the island in the mid 1970s. The term, "not Puerto Rican enough"¹¹ became a resounding battle-cry for the group upon their return to the states. The condition for Nuyoricans is a paradoxical one, not quite here, not quite there, and Rivera's early work deals with the experience of the Puerto Rican nomad in an extremely personal way. As María states, "The problem is that nobody gives me a chance. 'My cousin, *la gringa*'...I

⁹ I use this term as described in the work of Puerto Rican actor and playwright José "Papo" Márquez's *Puerto Rican Schizophrenia* (1977). I will detail this idea in Chapter Three as well as in this chapter's discussion of *ameRICAN* (1993).

¹⁰ Rivera, *The Universe*, 3.

¹¹ As described by Miguel Algarín in his writings on the visit as well as being highlighted in the film *Piñero*, produced by Colombian John Leguizamo and starring bi-ethnic Latino Benjamin Bratt.

know more about Puerto Rican history than most ‘Puerto Rican Nationals!’ Albizu Campos. Muñoz Marín, Julia de Burgos, los Taínos. I feel like the rug’s been pulled out from underneath me.”¹² Rivera’s further investigation of both arguments becomes comical and we see in *The Universe* the gestus of her sardonic wit. Manolo, who serves as the representation of Puerto Rico’s strength and independence later exclaims to María “Why the hell would you want to live here? It’s better that you don’t live here. Nobody lives here. We suffer, that’s all...listen to viejos bochinchando... watching the novela. Who gives a shit!”¹³

As Frances Aparicio describes in her book, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin American Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*, Puerto Ricans are nostalgic for a past that is connected through heart and soul while intertwined with their music, thus allowing the appropriation of the culture if one can capture its rhythm and lyrics. When compounding this with the hybridization of a culture through music, I argue the Nuyorican community is activated when recalling two different types of music; one, the music they heard upon their departure and simultaneously the music of the United States upon their arrival. Manolo is just as tied to the colonizing culture of the U.S. as María is tied into the music of Puerto Rico:

Manolo: Anyway, you know this song? (He plays “Sentimental Journey” on a cassette radio. He starts to sing.) “Gonna take a sentimental journey”

María: (She joins in) “Gonna set my heart at ease.”

Manolo/María: Gonna take a sentimental journey to renew old memories.”¹⁴

¹² Rivera, *The Universe*, 4.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 6.

Regarding this example of duality and transculturation, Aparicio reminds us that, “it is also highly reminiscent of Néstor García Canclini’s concept of hybrid cultures in Latin America, where heterogeneous icons, symbols, technology, and cultural practices, derived from different historical periods and cultural traditions, converge in cultural practices that articulate our vexed relationship with modernity. Salsa music, in many ways, is itself a hybrid cultural site.”¹⁵ Though Rivera does not interject salsa as a cultural signifier in this early play, she will re-envision this entire discussion between the two characters five years later in her play *La Gringa*. At that point, the use of Latin music, instruments and salsa will help identify many of the basic core arguments regarding the hybridization of Nuyorican and Puerto Rican culture through music.

Further the María archetype will be personified in many Rivera plays, particularly the two that specifically deal with Puerto Rican historical figures. Interestingly, both those women are artistic creations of *latinidad*, Julia de Burgos as a literary muse and La Lupe as a musical one. As director Susana Tubert points out, “Todos los que van a ver el show han dejado atrás una nación o una familia, todos estamos buscando un lugar donde asentar nuestras raíces afectivas.”¹⁶

Tubert, who directed Dolores Prida’s 2001 musical *Four Guys named José and una mujer named María* describes here a moment in the play where all four Josés become nostalgic for their countries of origin. Through the music they are able to reconnect with the families and cultures of their past. Though the four, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican and Cuban, fight throughout the show regarding the authenticity of Latino

¹⁵ Frances Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music and Puerto Rican Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 242.

¹⁶ Norma Niurka, “Susana Tubert la visión de una directora,” *El Nuevo Herald*, 20 October 2000, 20.

culture, all four agree that music is one element of signification that cannot be questioned in creating nostalgia and desire:

José Boricua: This music, like my mother, comes from Ponce, Puerto Rico. Although she was born in Brooklyn, she always says: “I’m from Ponce.” My father was born in San Juan, and every time he hears this next song about leaving his hometown, he gets all misty eyed...When I was growing up I didn’t know what that was all about, but now, here in Nebraska, whenever I think of New York my heart goes *pakiti pakiti*...And I understand the old man.

(*The other Josés soon chime in*)

José Cubano: When we began to put this show together, we soon realized that we had more in common than just songs and food.

José Mexicano: Our parents’ stories were all the same. They came here in search of a better way of life, bringing their songs along with their dreams – but always thinking of returning.

José Boricua: Some lost their dreams along the way, but they held on to the songs...the songs...nothing or nobody can take those away.

José Dominicano: These are our parents songs about their hometowns – each a paradise where they could not afford to stay.¹⁷

In the end, *The Universe* serves as an initial vehicle for Rivera’s dramatization of Latina identity. Her earliest plays are all self-reflexive and carry with them the weight of a young writer probing these basic questions. Rivera’s ability to activate *latinidad* through varied signifiers and particularly through popular culture continues into her most recent work. *The Universe* chooses the metaphor of music to propel an ideology of identity and belonging. The duality of displacement and belonging are always transparent in her work and *The Universe* is her first attempt to point out the shared rhythms of both Latino and American sounds. While *Sentimental Journey* becomes a point of encapsulation for both María and Manolo’s cultural worlds, it is the creation of a new music that motivates both characters to a mutual understanding of the hybrid nature of

¹⁷ Dolores Prida, *Four Guys named José and una mujer named María*, rehearsal script, 2001, 38.

Puerto Rican exile, unlike that of the political exile of other Latino cultures, but highly complex in its construction of duality. The Puerto Rican deserted the island for economic and social mobility, however for most this exile became a one way ticket, as the attempt to return was abandoned once they were integrated into the “melting pot”¹⁸ of North America. It is through the music that Manolo and María forge a new bridge across the mainland and Puerto Rico:

Manolo: Maybe you’ll start writing music again.

María: Maybe.

Manolo: I want you to write a song for me! Listen...(he sings) “Got my bag, got my reservations...”

María: “...Spent each dime I could afford...” (*Together*) “Like a child in wild anticipation. Long to hear that all aboard.”¹⁹

Rivera will return to the creation and performance of music as cultural signifier of *latinidad* in many of her other plays, most notably *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino*. However it is in *The Universe* that Rivera first establishes the notion that it is through the creation of an imagined community, one filled with the sounds of both Puerto Rico and the United States, that we may finally unite the two disparate factions of Nuyoricans and Puerto Ricans. As Manolo states when asked where the original inhabitants of Puerto Rico, the Taíno Indians, now live, he proudly proclaims “They live with the coquí.” The physical loss of the noble Taíno can only be heard now through the native sounds and whispers that echo throughout the commonwealth. Though it is Manolo’s decision to sing *Sentimental Journey* in order to unite both cultures, he finally realizes that there is only one way to accomplish this.

¹⁸ Ironically, the term melting pot is introduced by playwright Israel Zangwill in his 1908 play *The Melting Pot*, a favorite of President Theodore Roosevelt and the precursor to this highly controversial sociological term of assimilation.

¹⁹ Rivera, *The Universe*, 7.

Rivera concludes *The Universe* with the stage direction “María starts to sing *En Mi Viejo San Juan* – and they dance together.” Dolores Prida’s choice in *Four Guys named José and una mujer named María* to use this song as a marker of *latinidad* for the “exiled” Puerto Rican, replicates that of Rivera, as she forges unification between families disrupted by their return to Puerto Rico, a common theme in Puerto Rican drama. It will be interesting to note the specific changes that Rivera makes to this short script when she adapts it into her most successful play, *La Gringa*, four years later.

State of Bliss (1990)

State of Bliss is one of three plays written specifically for performance by the Shaman Repertory Theatre. All three (*The Universe*, *State of Bliss* and *Elena*) were created as short stories but with her initiation into Shaman, Rivera had a group of actors willing to dramatize her pieces. Rivera’s voice, originally believed to be one of narrative prose, quickly began integrating dramatic dialogue and stage directions to utilize the performance space rented by Shaman. *State of Bliss* posits Rivera in a fairly comfortable narrative, allowing her to espouse many of her beliefs on religion and her own contentious regard towards it. Rivera abandons the theme of *latinidad* and attempts to construct a play without spiritual borders. Her strong Catholic background²⁰ clashes with her newly formed adult beliefs on spiritualism, Eastern mysticism and reincarnation. It is in this short play that Rivera first tackles the issue of domestic abuse within her own home, which will become a recurring theme throughout her career. As she recounts:

²⁰ Rivera pursued 12 years of Catholic school education, having attended St. Jude’s Grammar School and later Cardinal Spellman High School, both in the Bronx. “I grew up in a very strict Catholic house and I went to church on Sundays.”

My dad was very violent and a lot of *State of Bliss* was about my parents. I would love for them to go to some parallel universe when they can find peace. A lot of what that play is about was what I wanted for my parents. When people are given love they thrive. When I wrote this play I was saying we are all looking for some kind of love.²¹

The play centers on the life of Nirvana, a wife, who through her hard work and dedication has become a lawyer while also dedicating her life to her husband's needs. Nirvana is described in the *dramatis personae* in the following way: "In the Buddhist religion, the state in which the drives toward material wealth, earthly fame, and immortality are destroyed and the soul is released from the cycles of reincarnation; hence a state of blissfulness and enlightenment."²² The play begins with Nirvana packing her bags to leave her home. Lázaro, her husband, comes home from his occupation as a business executive and complains ad nauseum about his day. The two immediately begin to fight over Nirvana's housekeeping failures, particularly the fact that she does not have a beer ready when he comes home. She, in turn, confronts him with the news that she is leaving him.

While Nirvana assumes the Buddhist archetype of "karmatic prosperity," Lázaro retains the Christian representation of the haggard man near death. In this way, Rivera also confronts her own preoccupations with religious symbolism, foreshadowing the fact that both must cease to exist in this world to be reborn and know bliss in the next. Lázaro's concerns with his wife's behavior includes her non-attentiveness, busy work schedule and desire to work outside of the home. Nirvana bases much of her desire to leave on the fact that she is viewed by Lázaro as a "play-thing" and his desire to be with

²¹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

²² Carmen Rivera, *State of Bliss*, unpublished manuscript, 1990, 1.

her centers on her cleaning, cooking and sexual availability. Ultimately Nirvana's exclamation, "I am leaving you because there is no love between us anymore!" sets Lázaro in a rage and during an attempted rape he breaks her neck.

Scene One ends with Lázaro's lamentation, "I love you. I have always loved you. Don't take her from me! I can't live without her."²³ As these words are spoken Rivera shifts her play to a new "environment," one described as enacting the spiritual and creating an "other dimension or parallel –universe" setting. In this world Lázaro attempts to run to Nirvana but is met with an "invisible barrier" that protects her. In this scene, Nirvana bears no ill feelings for Lázaro. Rather she wonders what happened the moment after the attempted rape and why the two cannot cross into this new dimension together. Lázaro's true emotions spill out as he is freed from the constraints of *machismo*, which have sociologically bound him as the dominant figure in their household:

Nirvana: What happened? Where are we?

Lázaro: It can't be heaven...I killed you. It was by accident. I didn't want to but I grabbed you too hard. Then you stopped moving...

Nirvana: Then, why are you here?

Lázaro: I couldn't go on living without you. I really loved you so much.

Nirvana: Why didn't you say that before?

Lázaro: I didn't know how, I thought you knew it...

Nirvana: No, I guess inside maybe somewhere I knew it but I guess it always seemed like you were so miserable with me.

Lázaro: I wasn't, Nirvana I wasn't. I felt like, oh God, I don't even know how I felt...

Nirvana: I never stopped loving you, Lázaro. I wanted you to stop me from leaving.²⁴

In this scene, Rivera proposes the idea that the spiritual world will be the only place where these two can escape the pressures of earthly wants and desires and feel free

²³ Rivera, *State of Bliss*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

to exist as “beings of light,” devoid of earthly temptations and gender stereotypes. The theme of women’s empowerment becomes a major component in Rivera’s later dramaturgy, based on the experience of her own mother, Juana Bautista Carrero, a teenage mother who decided to enroll in college when Carmen was ten years old. Juana would eventually earn two master’s degrees and become a public school principal. This story manifests itself in many of Rivera’s plays as her own mother becomes a symbol for Latina empowerment. Subsequent plays mirror this common theme as the patriarchy re-creates itself in various environments: corporate America in *ameRICAN*, the music industry in *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino*, as well as the academic and literary world in *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water*.

Her father, often at odds with Rivera, serves as a prototype for Rivera’s position on the disenchantment of Latino men, beaten into submission by Anglo-American perceptions of Puerto Rican men. Rivera does not make her “father” characters evil but rather, discontented. Their anger emanates from a fear of being unable to succeed in an anti-Latino job market. Carmelo Rivera, who worked in a fabric factory and designed curtains prior to purchasing his own bar, has resolved many of the issues that existed between him and his daughter and remains one of her most fervent supporters. Lázaro’s epiphany is eventually Rivera’s wish for her own father.

Lázaro: It wasn’t your job, it was me. I didn’t know how, I couldn’t...I felt paralyzed. I wanted to say I loved you. I wanted everything else not to matter but something outside of me was stronger. It controlled everything.

Nirvana: Maybe it was your fear.²⁵

Lázaro: This is so new. I wish we had this before...

Nirvana: It’s okay, we have it now.²⁶

²⁵ Rivera, *State of Bliss*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

Rivera creates a spiritual ending for her own play as Ariel, described as an entity, descends and informs Lázaro that he must leave Nirvana to “continue his spirit’s journey.” The two, separated by the “invisible barrier,” exchange love oaths and move on to their own loci of afterlife. I have suggested to Rivera that as a practicing Catholic, her theatre assumes a particular “magic realism” that seems inherent in her work. Rivera repudiates this, however, pointing out that “magic realism” is not a component of her work but rather, the ideology of *fantastic realism* makes all irrational ideas in theatre suddenly rational. As she sees it, “magic realism” is a form that Latina/o playwrights need to write to accommodate the standard academic canon; a way in which Latinos can “fit into a particular categorization of writing that makes us understandable or accessible on college syllabi.” Rather, Rivera purposely moves away from this genre of literature and attempts to create, with each new play, a combination of spiritualism that is “irrational,” rather than magical:

I think on two levels. On the subconscious level I think spiritually. A typical argument in my house growing up would be my mom telling my dad I don’t know what I did in my last life that made you find me so early in this one. When I got to high school I couldn’t believe that people didn’t know about reincarnation. My mom was always burning candles and talking about spiritual things. There was always an awareness that we were connected to something bigger...another dimension. We always believed that the door was like a revolving door.²⁷

²⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

Elena (1990)

Rivera's third short play written for Shaman Repertory Theatre is entitled *Elena*. Once again Rivera returns to writing through the lens of the Nuyorican attempting to return to the promise of an idyllic Puerto Rico. In this play, Rivera shifts gears and draws a darker conclusion, namely the death of the title character. In both *Elena* and *The Universe*, a dreamlike state occurs when the protagonists fly over San Juan and see the lights of homes, illuminating like stars across a moonlit sky, however, Elena cannot tell her story due to the fact that she has died a mysterious death. Here the promise of a trip to Puerto Rico merges into a nightmarish ordeal as secondary characters, Ana and Michelle are forced to re-visit the death of one of their best friends. Rivera describes the events that led to the writing of this play as a testament to how strange occurrences create devastating moments that often lead to inner-connectivity in dramatic time:

Elena was a young woman named Elaine who was found murdered. She was tied up with barbed wire. I applied to NYU Creative Writing and I used this as my application. I ran into a friend while I was writing a movie about Elaine. She was Elaine's best friend. It was freaky. She had prematurely aged and her hair had turned grey. It was very spiritual. I saw her every day for years in school.²⁸

Rivera juxtaposes the physical or emotional love that Elena sought with her own love of Puerto Rico. The play is set at Christmas in a department store as Ana encounters Michelle, who has been avoiding her calls after the death of their mutual friend. Michelle eventually confronts Ana as to her whereabouts on the day prior to Elena's death. Rivera creates a very typical teenage dialogue between the two, Michelle accusing Ana of leaving both Elena and herself "flat" because of a new friend. Ana's response suddenly shifts the play's style, balancing both a kitchen-sink drama and a socio-cultural document

²⁸ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

of identity. Elena's decision to fly off to Puerto Rico on a trip that each of them had already paid for meets with her own parents' disapproval. Once she decides not to go, Elena mysteriously disappears, possibly a victim of her own parents' abuse.

Rivera's mixing of multiple scenarios supports her description of this script as an original cinematic enterprise. We are never quite sure how Elena died or who did it. The crime itself does not serve as the central conflict, rather it is the reception of how Ana and Michelle interpret the series of events that led to her death that structure the play. In turn, Rivera's desire to integrate what I see as a disturbing post-colonial critique of Puerto Rican homecoming, morphs this play into a document socio-realism, masked as a detective story. Rivera consistently uses the image of an overbearing and violent father who refuses to allow his Nuyorican children safe access to Puerto Rico. Through this analysis, the father is metaphorically transformed into the colonizing patriarch, namely the United States, clamping down on its Puerto Rican workforce economically and denying a return flight to their native homeland. Michelle's description of her mother, also punishing Elena from the other side, supports Rivera's theme of displacement for the Nuyorican from both the United States and Puerto Rico. The mother as the submissive parent represents the colonized Puerto Rico while the violent and absolute authority, the father, represents the desire for the United States to economically control Nuyoricans from leaving the mainland to return to the "stars in the universe" above San Juan:

Michelle: Elena was over my house and we called you, your father told us you went to the movies with a girl from school.

Ana: That's not true. It was him! He was so angry with me, he found out about our trip to Puerto Rico and he wouldn't let me out of the house much less answer the phone.

Michelle: Then why did he say that?

Ana: I don't know, you know how he is.

Michelle: At least you only got punished...Elena's mom thought Elena stole the money from her to buy the ticket to Puerto Rico. She really did a number on her. She looked like a monster from a freak show...Goddamnit she depended on you!
Ana: God, it was my father Michelle...I didn't know...he didn't tell me, fuckin' jerk!²⁹

Rivera reveals a particular criticism of commonwealth status, both from the position of a colonized Puerto Rican, as well as a displaced Nuyorican. Gentile's early influence on her writing is felt as the play, posed as a depiction of the death of a young girl who yearns for the island of Puerto Rico, attempts to use fantastic theatre's exercises on Sub-Atomic Physics. In this exercise the playwright attempts to use scientific interaction based on the transformative power of alchemy. The choice to do so "transcends all defined limits of logic, and it demonstrates clearly the concept of opposite entities acting upon and transforming each other."³⁰ The two opposing standpoints presented by Ana and Michelle regarding Elena's death allow this transcendency to occur, illuminating the audience with dual re-creations of an unknown situation. Gentile's reading of the *Tao of Physics* by Robert Oppenheimer proposes that once an electron is dispelled it creates two holes in the lead plate that contains it and these two holes represent two varied strains of thought or logic.

Ana and Michelle can thus view the death of Elena as an assault on their desire to return to Puerto Rico as opposed to a brutal murder with mysterious circumstances. Rivera's use of fantastic theory, though sporadic early in her career, helps form the basis of the irrationality of Puerto Rico's commonwealth status and further, the antagonism by Puerto Ricans on the island towards their families in the United States:

²⁹ Carmen Rivera, *Elena*, unpublished manuscript, 1990, 3.

³⁰ Carmen Rivera, "The Origins of Fantastic Realism: A New Development from Latin America," M.A. Thesis. New York University, 1992, 7.

Ana: Why did this trip to Puerto Rico cause so much trouble?

Michelle: Who knows, they never made sense about anything they did. Yours and Elena's parents freaked out and my mom could not have given a shit...she probably would want me to get lost in El Yunque.

Ana: That would not have been so bad. We were planning to do that anyway, live in the forest, live off the Earth.

Michelle: We were going to find the Taíno wise man.

Ana: Yeah, El Cacique, we were going to adopt him at the parranda...and devour tons of coquito.

Voice: Attention shoppers. The store will be closing in ten minutes! Thank you For your patronage. Have a Happy Holiday.³¹

Rivera includes an off-stage voice, one which touts observance of organized ritual in contrast to the native spiritualism that Ana and Michelle hoped to encounter in El Yunque. In the end, *Elena* serves as a reminder to Nuyoricans that the return to Puerto Rico is a dangerous one and attempting this pilgrimage conflicts with their materialistic status as “yankees.” Ana and Michelle’s desire to return while surrounded by the commercialism of the Christmas season sets the irrationality of the play in motion. Rivera’s study of *fantastic realism* lends itself to a rich and complex reading of the play *Elena*, steeped in allegory and post-colonial argumentation. As she describes, “*Fantastic Realism* is an exciting development from Latin America, which fuses the concept of fantasy into everyday life. Because almost every human being on this planet has had fantasies, *fantastic realism* is accessible to everyone, although one must enter the theatre completely open to go on a journey where the destination is unknown. One will not find easy and logical answers to conflicts. Freud does not work here. The spectator will journey into the fantasy of the characters.”³²

³¹ Rivera, *Elena*, 6.

³² Rivera, “The Origins of Fantastic Realism,” 1992.

To Catch the Lightning (1992)

In her first play, *To Catch the Lightning*, Rivera best captures the ideals and theories of Guillermo Gentile's "Fantastic Theatre." *To Catch the Lightning* served as Rivera's graduate thesis play at New York University and was later produced at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. The play adheres to an absurdist tradition following closely on the heels of Pedro Pietri's interpretation of the form. Thus, *To Catch the Lightning* becomes a "tertiary absurdist" play, due to the fact that Pietri modeled his work on Ionesco and Rivera models this play on her reading of Pietri's *The Masses are Asses*. Cándido Tirado's assertion that the construction of this play features Rivera's "futuristic voice" is quite interesting as Rivera defines her theatre not as futuristic but "more like science fiction or the Twilight Zone."³³ I wrote short stories first. Before I wrote plays this is how I wrote. Futuristic...fantastical."³⁴

The play lends itself to visual interpretation as Rivera ostensibly creates a stage design that mirrors the inner-trappings of an immense spider's lair, wrought with family secrets and a reality which we quickly learn is based solely on the standpoint of the individual characters. No one is allowed to exit or enter without the permission of Antonio, the father. The characters are of unknown heritage, thus allowing for universal cultural reception of the play.³⁵ *To Catch the Lightning* is reminiscent of a Latin American theatre style which embraces magic realism, existentialism and absurdism. One

³³ "My second favorite show was *Lost in Space*. I didn't know what a playwright was when I was a young girl – but I dreamed about being in the show *Lost in Space*, so I wrote a part for myself in the show. Dan and Judy, the second in command and the daughter of the captain, who both happened to be single, got married and had a little girl...me...Lisa. I actually wrote out scenarios and designed costumes for myself. So I guess you can say this was my first foray into writing." Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid. "They're not Latinos but I want them be empowered. I want the little girl to survive. I will cut an arm off before I ever end a play without empowerment. Even if they cannot overcome. I really do think about this."

can see great similarity with the style of Griselda Gambaro, whom Rivera has noted as a major inspiration.³⁶

Rivera's metaphoric style is evident in *Lightning* where she notes that she "put the play within the metaphor of a spiderweb. Trying to contain people. The set designer designed a blue, black and red spiderweb. The chairs all had three legs. It's about this man that tries to create the perfect family. I felt it would be interesting instead of showing an abusive man to show someone who seems to be helping others. Trying to save people, He finds a baby in a garbage can. He brings a homeless boy home."³⁷

The play begins with a Prologue, where an offstage voice creates a feeling of nostalgia, of reminiscences and of *ghosting*. Gentile's hand is felt as we are "let in" to the world of the story through the narrative of one of its participants. The rational description of this character will counter-balance the irrational decisions that she and others make during the play, thus initiating the fantastic reality that Gentile attempts to create in his productions. The clearest way to describe both this production and Gentile's theories on the creation of fantastic reality plays would be that "the words do not fit the actions."³⁸

Prologue (*read OS while the stage is still dark*)

As a child my father brought me many times to a park by a river, especially when there were violent storms. He would bring a camera. He wanted to catch the lightning. We waited for some time, then all of a sudden we saw it, the lightning, a bright pink streak of light! My father tried to snap a picture but it was gone before he was able to focus. Then it appeared again in another part of the sky. This time it was brilliant green. My father again wasn't able to catch it. Those streaks of light played a mischievous game of peek-a-boo with him. They appeared every couple of seconds but never gave him a chance to catch them. I'm happy they didn't.³⁹

³⁶ I note as two fine examples Gambaro's plays *Rising Sun* and *The Camp*.

³⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

³⁸ During my interview process I have used this description which has been met with acceptance by Rivera, Cándido Tirado and actors who have worked with Shaman Repertory and Gentile himself.

³⁹ Carmen Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, unpublished manuscript, 1992, 1.

To Catch the Lightning is a play devoted to dreams and inverted nightmares. As Rivera explains she “loved this play because it allowed people to see this side of me. Not as the writer of these Puerto Rican plays, or *La Gringa*, but horror plays. My mother’s friends had a big problem with this play. Interestingly, my mother was saying ‘you know the abuse in real life was much worse than in this play.’”⁴⁰ The onstage spiderweb is a constant reminder of how trapped the central characters are within the control of Antonio, the play’s protagonist father, who decides to barricade himself along with chosen victims of a rarely discussed apocalyptic disaster within the confines of his home. His surrogate daughter and son, Samantha and Gideon live in constant fear of Antonio’s outbursts and violent confrontations. Samantha, an eight year old girl, was found by Antonio years earlier in a dumpster and he decided to adopt her as his own.

Gideon at seventeen is a larger burden since he cannot be as easily handled due to his age and sex, yet it is he who is beaten by Antonio and constantly scolded. Antonio’s desire to maintain this fantasy family spirals out of control once he discovers Cassandra cowering outside of his residence. Rivera leaves the offstage danger and omnipresent fear purposely vague as we are only reminded that there are strangers and dangerous gangs congregating outside. However, we do know that packs of children patrol the outskirts of the town and we are left to believe that Antonio’s residence is the only solace for Cassandra, Gideon and Samantha. *To Catch the Lightning* is reminiscent of Latin American plays from the 1960s and 1970s which purposely indicated that there were repressive and deadly forces just outside the general playing area, but the audience was never made aware of the specificity of this danger. An example is the work of Argentine Eduardo Pavlovsky and specifically his 1977 play *Telarañas* (*Spiderwebs*).

⁴⁰ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

As Jean Graham-Jones notes, “The 1977 production functions as yet another example of family violence as a metaphor for the larger repression of the early Proceso years. Many plays of the period, such as Roberto Mario Cossa’s *La nona* and Ricardo Monti’s *Visita*, employed the family unit as a microcosmic substitute for the nation. Playful amusements were transformed onstage into a ritualized violence that almost always resulted in parricide or filicide. *Telarañas* portrays the legitimization of ritualized filicide as the parents destroy the child in the name of family values and, by extension, national and cultural values. According to Pavlovsky’s 1976 prologue, the play seeks to ‘explore, through drama, the violence in family relations in order to make visible the invisible ideological structure underlying every family relation.’”⁴¹

The play begins with Antonio’s attempt to gain control over everyone in the house. Gideon is constantly reprimanded and threatened with eviction from the home. He complies with all of Antonio’s orders and though seeming able to defeat Antonio in a physical confrontation, we understand that Antonio is being controlled with psychological violence as well. Antonio is obsessed with having his daughter Samantha capture his likeness in a painting and with checking on Cassandra, whom he constantly refers to as his former wife Diana. Antonio demonstrates this tyrannical control as he addresses Samantha in Scene 1.

⁴¹ Jean Graham-Jones, *Exorcising History: Argentine Theater Under Dictatorship* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2000), 152-53.

Antonio

That will be all Gideon. How are you my sweetheart? Give daddy a big kiss! That's a good girl. Where have you been? Daddy was going crazy looking for you (*Samantha doesn't answer*). That's okay...I only want to give you a proper art lesson. We must stick to the schedule. Now that we are starting late your lesson will have to be cut short (*Samantha does not speak*). Sorry, that is not my fault. Let us begin. Do you have your homework ready? (*Samantha shakes her head no*) Sweetheart we need to keep on top of these things. Let me see what you have... (*He turns the pages of her sketch book*) Samantha why do you keep doing this? (*She doesn't answer*). You will surely have me at the end of my rope very soon. I told you that I didn't want you drawing scenes of lightning anymore? Don't you understand that you cannot capture its beauty in a sketch? Nature is real, this is not real. Look at this, the colors are not even real. Only a photograph can capture the true essence of nature. I want you to stop this. Okay. Let's get to work. Oh no, sorry but the lesson is over. It would have gone on until its full length if you had not been in the bathroom. But don't worry sweetheart you'll do better next time. Okay now take your book, and remember no more lightning. Daddy has a big surprise for you. Give daddy a hug...go to your room now.⁴²

Antonio's persona mirrors that of many patriarchal stereotypes in drama, and in particular he is himself haunted by the image of the macho stereotype prevalent in Latin literature.⁴³ His abusive nature however is consistently undermined by the innocent nature of the more physically virile yet emotionally stilted Gideon. As a filial counterpoint to the strong willed Samantha, Gideon uses his own supposed innocence to secure a permanent place in Antonio's home. While consistently threatened with banishment by Antonio, Gideon seems to always find a way to remain in the home by accomplishing minor tasks and assuming the blame for every mistake in judgment made by Antonio. Gideon performs the role of martyr, bearing the brunt of physical and mental abuse while Cassandra, doubling for Diana, is allowed to inhabit the home without

⁴² Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, 7.

⁴³ I will investigate this idea further in Chapters 2 and 3 which will relate how the ghosts of both Julia de Burgos and La Lupe haunt the stage of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and serve as "muses" for Carmen Rivera as reminiscent of the scholarship of Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003) and Camilla Stevens's *Family and Identity in Contemporary Cuban and Puerto Rican Drama* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004).

servitude. Cassandra's role in the home will be simple; she must perform the role of the mother of Samantha, thus the mother of the "new world."

Rivera's subjugation of Cassandra is based on the sin of Eve in the Garden of Eden. As Diana she escaped the servitude of Antonio, god-like in his dominion over her and Samantha. She re-enters the home after viewing the chaotic world after the fall of Man and is resurrected as Cassandra, handmaiden of Antonio. That Gideon "trumpets" her entrance in the first scene of the play supports this vision of Paradise for Antonio. It is only Samantha, who refuses to acknowledge Cassandra as Diana, that disrupts the perfect world of Antonio and his "first family." Antonio will only allow his family to exit the home after they have pledged their allegiance to him and sworn not to leave. The fact that the danger outside of the home has impacted each member psychologically and emotionally guarantees that Antonio's plan is a foregone conclusion. The conflict rises however when Samantha, at the age of eight, challenges Antonio's power and resists his desire to maintain "un hogar sólido."

I reference here Elena Garro's play, *A Solid Home*, which features deceased characters trapped in their family's mausoleum. It is in this play that a child also yearns for her lost mother and is unable to rectify past memories of her time on earth. I argue that *To Catch the Lightning* mirrors this *fantastic realism* in much the same way. The four characters, as well as the offstage voice of Samantha's true mother, are contained in a "living-dead state," attempting to break free but unable to leave what is supposedly the family's safe haven. When the child takes it upon herself to leave this mausoleum setting, Antonio knows he must make his world right by taking the family once again outside "to catch the lightning."

Rivera's own life interweaves within this play as she has described it as "semi-autobiographical at certain times." The breakdown of her own family unit and the verbal and psychological abuse that she experienced as a young woman while watching the often dysfunctional relationship of her mother and father, fed these characters, particularly that of Antonio. As noted earlier, Antonio is not a bad person, nor is he intentionally abusive. His goal is to create and maintain a family within the solitude of his own home. His desire to keep both his wives and his children mirror the often tempestuous socio-cultural stereotype of Latino men in the United States. As described in detail by David Abalos, the Latino male is often left on the periphery of education and self-advancement. While recent female arrivals from Puerto Rico, Latin America and other island countries were able to work in factories and schools, Latino men were often belittled at the job for lack of language and feminized by society if they attempted to complete an education.⁴⁴

Antonio is a great deal like these men, attempting to control his environment and denying access to the "outside world." The ruffians that he describes as congregating outside of his domicile are unknown, faceless individuals that he explains will cause havoc if encountered. When Samantha disagrees and attempts to escape at the end of Act One we are reminded of Lucifer's attempt to overtake the kingdom of Heaven. Samantha seeks knowledge that Antonio wants to keep from her. When she confronts him and wants to equal his dominion over the home and its inhabitants, he threatens her with banishment. *To Catch the Lightning* in this way serves Rivera as a metaphor for the Garden of Eden. By "catching the lightning," Antonio will preserve his position as God. His inability to do so guarantees the fact that he can be displaced by a younger and more

⁴⁴ David T. Abalos, *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 2002).

virile Gideon, or worse, his daughter Samantha. Here Rivera posits herself and her relationship with her own father, though his response to the production was quite revealing:

We all have different sides of us as a writer but I felt very comfortable about this one. I wrote a play about abuse. My mom and dad went. My dad came with two girlfriends at the same time. My dad and I have more in common than we don't. He was proud when he saw our family onstage. This play is most me, my feelings. My need to escape at the end. For me that play is more autobiographical than anything else I have ever written. Sometimes it's too much. I feel naked with that play. My brother didn't see it. I'm hoping to do this play again.⁴⁵

In a mirror of the way Rivera opens the play, utilizing the “dream voice “ of a grown-up Samantha, Rivera also closes Act One with the dream voice of Samantha’s mother, thus book-ending the scene with moments of *fantastic realism*. Samantha, who has decided to leave the home when given the opportunity, lives with the ghost of her own mother. Diana is what Samantha will become as an adult: independent of the control of Antonio as husband/father as well as embarking into the unknown and often terrifying world of the play. Diana, as this voice, serves as both a catalyst for change within the play and the *raisonneur* for what Gentile calls a “narrow detective story.”

(A voice starts to cry out Samantha’s name. It sounds like a loud whisper, she cries out “Samantha” seven times and Samantha runs into the drawing room. A silhouetted figure is there)

Voice: Hush little baby don’t say a word, mommy’s gonna buy you a mockingbird...

Samantha: Mommy...

Voice/Samantha: If that mockingbird don’t sing mommy’s gonna buy you a diamond ring.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ In 2006, Rivera informed me that the main reason that she wanted to do the play again was that she “finally figured out what was wrong with this play...fear.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

⁴⁶ Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, 36.

Samantha and her mother's voice become one with the simultaneity of song. We soon realize that the spiritual connection between the two is beyond the rational world and becomes real in Gentile's "irrational" one, since earlier in the play we notice that Samantha and Antonio cannot synchronize their creativity during the art lesson. The voice of the daughter is unified with the voice of the mother. This proves cataclysmic for Antonio since he is unable to connect with either Samantha, or his son Gideon. As the haunting of Samantha by Diana continues, we are for the first time aware that Diana fled to escape the pressures of Antonio's "utopia." Though Samantha is unsure whether Diana has been killed and is speaking to her from the grave or whether she has crossed over into Gentile's dramaturgical space where "fantasies are real," we understand the intimate bond between the women who have been smothered by Antonio's obsessive behavior:

Samantha: Mommy, where are you?

Voice: I am right here sweetheart...

Samantha: Mommy I'm happy you came back.

Voice: You were so little when your father brought me here. I thought you were the sweetest little girl in the world...I love you very much, you must listen carefully okay?

Samantha: Okay.

Voice: The woman in the house with you is not me she is someone else.

Samantha: I don't understand I thought it was you.

Voice: No, she is not me, her name is Cassandra...

Samantha: You didn't come back? Why did you leave us mommy?

Voice: It was so hard to leave you and Gideon behind. I couldn't stay with him anymore.

Samantha: Gideon was right.

Voice: Samantha you must not believe that woman.

Samantha: We have to tell daddy that she's lying...Mommy...don't go!

Voice: I will never leave you. I will always be with you no matter where you are.

Samantha: Where are you going? I want to go with you no matter where you are.

Voice: You can't go with me, good night my love!

Samantha: Mommy don't leave...mommy...(The door opens as if by magic) Mommy...MOMMY! (Samantha runs toward the web-like door as the mother exits).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, 67.

Act One establishes the dominion of Antonio. His absolute authority and power over the members of his surrogate family begins to be exorcised as Samantha strives to take control and “grow –up” in Act Two. The more passion Antonio invests in keeping Samantha oblivious to the outside world, the deeper her resiliency and desire to break free and leave. As Antonio loses more control the subversion of the family continues. Antonio becomes physically weaker and returns to infancy as the play progresses. Every adult decision made by Samantha disrupts his power and the stronger becomes his need to abuse Gideon and his new wife Cassandra.

Samantha’s injury at the electronic door early in Act Two provides Antonio an opportunity to re-establish himself as the dominant power in his household. The fact that Samantha was injured attempting to escape from the house also angers Cassandra and Gideon, who for the most part are willing to accept the abuse of Antonio as long as he provides them with the food and shelter they desired when living outside. Rivera’s reconstruction of fear and solitude symbolizes the haunted environment within Samantha’s mind, bordering both the spiritual and material world. Within the spiritual, Diana can find solace and protection from the obsessive Antonio, thus prompting Samantha to visit this location as she begins to enter adolescence:

Samantha: No, I want my mommy!

Antonio: Diana our baby is calling for you! (*Cassandra runs over to Samantha’s room. Samantha is mumbling, she’s barely audible, she’s crying*)

Cassandra: What happened?

Antonio: Here honey, here she is. This is mommy. She’s right here.

Samantha: That’s not my mommy, my mother’s dead.

Antonio: No! Don’t you ever say that. Do you understand! She’s right here. She’s not dead. You see, flesh and blood. She’s not dead!

Samantha: No she’s dead! I saw her jump. She jumped out, she jumped out of the window but she came back here to talk to me. She wanted to get away from you.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, 47.

Antonio's world unravels once confronted with the truth. He cannot contain Samantha's desire to leave since she is slowly maturing and becoming a woman. The fact that her dead mother is returning to speak with her as a ghost also disrupts his plans for a safe physical domain separated from the savage throngs living just outside his doorstep. As Maria, Nirvana and Elena before her, Samantha begins to realize her place as a woman in a patriarchal society and wishes to spread her wings. No longer is she in need of Antonio's home for safety. Her own budding womanhood forces her to make a choice, just as her mother chose death over servitude. Diana as a spirit mentor is now more powerful than she could have been within Antonio's dominion.

Eventually Antonio conducts a mock trial at the expense of the civil rights of his family. His decision to try Gideon for the crime of ineptitude further angers Samantha who, now badly injured from the door escape, can only watch stunned as her brother is prosecuted for a false crime. The spiderweb that surrounds all the members of Antonio's family begins to constrict as Gideon realizes the danger of Antonio's power. His manipulation of the judicial system in Act Two serves as a representation of the abuse of dictatorships throughout Latin America. All the while, the sounds of the "outside world" begin to enter through the cracks and doorframes of the home. Antonio is trapped and the more power he exerts over his "loved ones" the more he regresses towards infancy. Only when Samantha finally screams out in defense of Gideon does the trial end, with Antonio once again seeking to control the verdict.

Samantha: Gideon hasn't had a chance to speak.

Antonio: Oh yes he has, he said he was innocent. What does the jury think?

(Pause) Sorry! You took too long and forfeited your power of verdict. The judge will now take over. Gideon you have been found guilty of trying to murder

Samantha. The verdict is in! Your sentence will be exile from this home.
*(Samantha starts crying and moaning loudly).*⁴⁹

Though eventually changing his verdict Antonio has been shown to be the tyrant that Diana fled. He is forced to make amends with his family the only way he can, by promising a trip outdoors to catch the lightning. In doing so, he opens the possibility of escape for his children, particularly Gideon who realizes his life will always be controlled by the verdicts of Antonio. Samantha eventually confronts Gideon with the opportunity to escape once they are allowed to exit the front door. However Gideon represents the needs of many Latin American citizens controlled by menacing and abusive regimes. He is unwilling to attempt escape and when further questioned explains to Samantha that he is better off abused and beaten at the hands of the government (Antonio) than living by himself on the street. His decision to live and serve his persecutor finally matures Samantha to womanhood as she decides she will abandon her home and seek knowledge and freedom in the unknown environment just outside her door.

Antonio, at the play's conclusion, is bound to Samantha's wheelchair, having lost the ability to control his daughter. He is now dependent on the kindness of those he abused and is wheeled outside by Cassandra.⁵⁰ Her position as wife and mother is now reduced to that of nurse as Antonio remains too weak to take a snapshot of the lightning. Samantha's newly drawn portrait and wedding present illustrates the sun, grassy knolls and rivers. She envisions a new utopia, complete with children swimming, laughing and climbing trees. Antonio's marriage to Cassandra, a false unification of country only

⁴⁹ Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, 51.

⁵⁰ In discussing this scene, Rivera compared the Antonio character to that of Augusto Pinochet, President of Chile from 1973 – 1989. This play also mirrors many of the dramatic elements of Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*, which serves as a "Latin American trial play" and presupposes the abuses of the Pinochet regime. Beatriz Arroyo of the University of Salamanca has recently begun researching Latino plays of forced incarceration and classifying them as "obras de testimonio."

proves fatal to his own power over this household. Once exposed to the outside world. Antonio becomes less than a man, reduced to an infant-like state, suckling at the breast of Cassandra.

Samantha in turn encourages Gideon to venture out with her into the world, to gain knowledge and courage away from the totalitarian regime of their father. Only when Antonio attacks Gideon for the final time does the son gain the courage to rebel, once and for all, against his father. He throws down his own crutch and struggles to roll Antonio over to Cassandra. Rivera's note that the "son gains power from the exposed sun" symbolizes a modern day Christian allegory. The children rise from the ashes of their father's hell by escaping his tyranny. They in turn become transformed and absorbed into the new world, as their father simultaneously cries out that he has "caught the lightning" in a photograph. Antonio and Cassandra are left barren and alone once the children leave. The infertility of Antonio's household is now apparent as he is left weak, abandoned and dependent on the strength of Cassandra:

Cassandra: Don't say anything! I'm going to take care of you now.

Antonio: This is how you pay me back, you go live with the animals! No! (*He's crying*) Gideon I was just kidding...I'll adopt you, I promise. Samantha my little girl...no!

Cassandra: Forget about them! You have me now. We'll have our own family. (*Antonio sits there crying and sucking his thumb. Cassandra takes out a breast and begins to breast feed him as lights fade*).⁵¹

Rivera concludes the play with an off-stage epilogue. In it, a grown Samantha disputes her father's final claim of authority and control while also exposing the reality of

⁵¹ Rivera, *To Catch the Lightning*, 38.

escaping from a dominant environment.⁵² Rivera frees herself with this play to experiment with form and to reject the theme of Nuyorican identity. By doing so, *To Catch the Lightning* becomes a promise of things to come: heightened structure, dialogue and use of metaphor, all tenets of *fantastic realism*.

Julia (1992)

Rivera's earliest foray into didactic playwriting is still, to an extent, her most successful. *Julia* may be her most commercially successful and critically analyzed play, having been published in the popular anthology *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays*. Rivera's place in the ever-evolving canon of Latina/o literature is often measured by *Julia*, though the play has never had an extended production run.⁵³ *Julia* serves as Rivera's own reckoning that education for women of color is necessary but earned at a cost. While its dialogue is well-constructed and the re-collective imagery of both the countryside of Puerto Rico and the urban grittiness of New York City in the 1970s is stunningly visual, the play can also be read as problematically didactic. The reader here is consistently reminded that they are being "taught" life lessons by the characters in the play.

The setting itself recreates this environment, using short scripted scenes and the constant and repeated device of characters serving as both teachers and students. Each character in the play reverses roles as Julia serves simultaneously as mother and student, wife and mentor, mother and daughter and finally teacher and student. Viewing Rivera as

⁵² "We left for good. I never saw daddy again but I never forgot his claim that he caught the lightning...it might have been true. If it was then it was an accident. I know now at least two things about lightning: one, it never strikes twice in the same place and two, no one can ever catch it...(The door closes by magic).

⁵³ Rivera also explains that her "theatre company wanted to produce the play as quickly as possible so I had to finish it very fast. Due to this I wrote it in the easiest structure."

a “didactic” playwright seems to run contrary to the rest of her work. The accessibility of this play, seen by many as a Latina historiography on women’s education, could have posited Rivera in an incorrect categorization as a Nuyorican playwright whose chief responsibility is the re-education of Latinos through alternative histories. Rivera’s recollection of a recent experience with *Julia* seems to illuminate this reception of her work:

This play was recently done in a school upstate. It was very sweet. It had a large cast. I hadn’t seen the play in a long time and there was a part that I thought they added but it was actually in the text. I didn’t consciously try to write a didactic play. I was speaking to a friend of mine about school and I was complaining and a woman turned around and told me, “At least you had the chance to go to school.” I didn’t set out to write it in the form of a didactic play. It came out that way. None of my other plays follow that. It seemed right for that story.⁵⁴

At the school performance the children chose to do the play in the round. The entrances and exits were through the audience, thus creating a community watching the play and more importantly, watching themselves watching the play. As in much of her work, characters must validate themselves to prove their worth in American society. While Julia was a child in Puerto Rico she wished she could go to school but was more integral to the household by not doing so. The fact that she was able to appreciate and pursue an education was unimportant in her rural community where her worth was greater because she could peel and cook *plátanos*. Her role in this imagined community was one of daughter/sister/mother/scholar. She successfully negotiated all of these duties while not being able to read. Rivera provides the audience with a powerful image as Julia’s mother transforms her daughter’s schoolbag into a sack for carrying these same

⁵⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

plátanos. Julia as a young girl yearned for the education she was deprived of by her mother who needed her to fulfill the role of woman/provider, while her brother Junito went off to school, although the only thing he wanted was to stay home.

Junito: Mami, I'll be the man and stay home and help you.

Mother: Like you did this morning? Feeding the chickens, right?

Junito: Oops...

Mother: I don't need a man, I need help.

Julia: You see mami, he wants to stay home.

Mother: What's the matter with both of you kids? I said no Julia...between la nena, el café, the chickens, the plátanos, the wash, cooking, the floors y de mas...Junito get out of here right now! (*Junito exits*) And go to school! (*The mother- with the baby-sits down*) Julia come over here. (*Julia walks over to her and sits down next to her on the sofa*) Julia, there's so much to do. I really need you here to help me.

Julia: I even made a bag. Out of my old blanket, for school.

Mother: (*Takes bag out of Julia's hand*) It's very beautiful.

Julia: I can't use it now. It's just garbage.

Mother: Yes, you can...let's see, Julita you did do a good job. Maybe you can make a lot of them and sell them.

Julia: I don't want to make bags, I want to go to school.

Mother: I know. Maybe next year.

Julia: Yeah.

Mother: Who made these pigtails on you? You did?

Julia: Dolores and Mercedes are going to wear them too.

Mother: You're so pretty. I bet I'm the only mother who has to fight with her daughter to keep her home. (*Julia doesn't answer*) Maybe next year...okay? You know what we can do with your bag? We could put the plátanos in it. Okay...okay?

Julia: Okay.

Mother: That's my nena Linda. This nena over here needs her bottle (*Julia's mother gets up and takes the baby to the kitchen*)

Julia: Mami doesn't want me to put plátanos on my clothes because they will stain my clothes. Then she wants to put platanos in my bag. Then the bag will get full of stains. All the flowers will get messed up. I hate plátanos. They give me a stomach ache and they're going to mess up all of my flowers.⁵⁵

Rivera, in her Master's thesis entitled "The Origins of Fantastic Realism: A New Development from Latin America," describes the use of symbols in her work. She believes that her "fantastic theatre doesn't use symbols but uses metaphors. The

⁵⁵ Carmen Rivera, *Julia*, unpublished manuscript, 1992, 4-5.

difference is that the symbol is fixed but the metaphor is interpreted by everyone differently. They conceive it in a different way.”⁵⁶ Thus, poet Julia de Burgos serves as a symbol of success for the emigrating Julia who, as a native Puerto Rican, is in need of validation. When she arrives in the United States she is directly confronted by the ideology of being an “other.” Being Puerto Rican in this play is wrong or inconsequential, thus positioning itself in direct contradiction to many of Rivera’s works. The pure nature of the island here becomes the hybrid culture, one in which the native must appropriate the culture of the dominant or colonizer. Julia’s purity of spirit does not make her more ideal, rather it makes her inferior and in need of “conditioning,” first by her naturalized husband, and then by the American educational system.

Rivera turns one of her most basic concepts on its ear, as it is the Nuyorican ideal of *latinidad* which becomes superior and the native authenticity of Puerto Rico the inferior. It is first Julia’s schoolbag, stuffed with *plátanos* and later books, which serves as the metaphor for Rivera’s play, just as Uncle Maurice in *The Universe* and later in *La Gringa* uses the *guiro* as a “metaphor for categorizing difference between the Nuyorican and Puerto Rican personality.”⁵⁷ Rivera is quick to point out that many critics have questioned her continuous self-reflexive question, “Are you Puerto Rican?” As she explains, “Yes, that question is very important for my characters to ask themselves and others around them, just as I was asked that question everyday. Just as most Puerto Ricans are asked that question on a constant basis. This has always been working in my head. In my character’s heads. God, I’m Puerto Rican. Leave me alone!”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Julia ponders the possibility of a better life in much the same way that René Marqués's characters do in *The Oxcart*. Julia's optimism upon her arrival at Newark Airport instantly creates a sisterhood with a fellow traveler. Here the necessity to conform for the sake of earning a living wage conflicts once again with her desire to seek an education:

Miriam: Are you lost?

Julia: I need to find my bag. It's only one little suitcase, but I don't know where to go.

Miriam: I'm going that way, want to walk with me?

Julia: Yes, please.

Miriam: Is this your first time in the United States?

Julia: Yes.

Miriam: Are you scared?

Julia: Yes, a little bit.

Miriam: Don't worry. I've been here three times this year already.

Julia: Three times! Why so much?

Miriam: I don't know. I get bored. I hate the sweaty factories here, but then there's no work at home. You'll find out. What's your name?

Julia: Julia.

Miriam: My name is Miriam. Do you know anyone here?

Julia: I have some names of friends. I'm going to send for my younger sister.

Miriam: Then you definitely need a job.

Julia: I really want to go to school.

Miriam: Forget about school, money comes first! Ah, my cuñada, Claudia, oye Claudia! I'll be right back... (*Miriam exits*)

Julia: A new land, new people, new language, maybe this was a mistake. (*She takes out Julia de Burgos's poem*) What would you do Julia? All this newness. Does it erase all of my life? If it does, what does it replace it with? I'll find it here, I have to.⁵⁹

The fact that Julia carries a Julia de Burgos poem with her throughout her childhood and into adulthood, yet lacks the ability to actually read it, reinforces the belief that Julia inhabits both a desperate economic present and a fragmented nostalgic past. For Julia to correct what she views as her major flaw, namely her inability to read, she must call on the ghosts of her homeland, namely in the guise of Julia de Burgos. As Rivera

⁵⁹ Rivera, *Julia*, 22.

often notes, the use of a spiritual awakening in her characters, and the necessity to revive spirits of the ancestors for intercession, bonds characters and audiences to an imagined re-collective past prior to Puerto Rico's imposed colonization. Within this complex world, Rivera begins to delve into her own dramatization of *latinidad*, where Nuyorican and Puerto Rican code switch depending not on a class but rather on her character's definition of these terms. In the play, Ana, a doctoral student and future professor has her Latina "validation" placed upon her by an illiterate Julia:

Julia: I can't write my last name.

Ana: Why not?

Julia: Because I can't.

Ana: I don't understand. You wrote your first name.

Julia: That is the only thing I can write.

Ana: Can you read?

Julia: No.

Ana: How do you know how to write your first name?

Julia: This...*(She goes into her purse and takes out the poem by Julia de Burgos)*
Look...you see, her first name is like mine, so I copied it.

Ana: You copied, that's amazing..., but how did you know that Julia was your name too?

Julia: My friend told me, then she gave me this poem. I kept it all this time. I didn't even tell my husband that I have this. *(Julia hands the poem to Ana Campos)*

Ana: Julia de Burgos, she was a great poet. I love her work.

Julia: Did you know her?

Ana: No, I wish I did. I'm studying her in school.

Julia: You go to school?

Ana: Yeah. I'm a doctoral student at Hunter College.

Julia: You're going to be a doctor?

Ana: No...*(she laughs)* I'm going to become a professor.

Julia: That's very good. Are you Puerto Rican?

Ana: Almost, Nuyorican. My family is from Puerto Rico but I was raised in New York.

Julia: Nuyorican? That's ridiculous.

Ana: That's what they call people like me.

Julia: You're Puerto Rican anyway.

Ana: Thanks. That feels good.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Rivera, *Julia*, 17.

Rivera once again deals with the inner-politics of the Latino community or the self-hatred that goes on between *primos* from Puerto Rico and New York. Though not specific to her work alone, Rivera's early work consistently contains this dialogue between island culture and Nuyorican culture. Beginning with *The Universe*, an attempt at "authenticity" of the Puerto Rican ideal is predominant in her work, and Rivera concentrates her attention on outlining this familiar discussion for her Nuyorican audiences. While many critics praise her for her use of authentic language, I argue that Rivera's greatest gift is the understanding and empathy she has for the plight of the Nuyorican: too American for the island and not quite "Spanish" enough for New Yorkers of Latino descent.

For Rivera, the major theme in her drama is displacement. "I don't feel I belong anywhere and at the same time I feel like I belong everywhere. In *La Gringa*, María says she is a *gringa* in Puerto Rico and a *spic* in the United States. I actually worked really hard to find a situation where I can express those feelings. We are living in a country which has still not fully formed its culture. We are still under development. What is an American? I was born here but I still don't believe I belong here. For me, both Puerto Rico and the United States are home."⁶¹ The play also includes the awakening of Julia as a feminist, resting heavily on Rivera's own beliefs regarding the creation of the Latina playwright:

Julia: My friend Sonia told me they used to study her poetry...That's right, poetry?

Ana: Yes, poetry.

Julia: They studied her in school, but I bet they mostly studied men who used to write.

⁶¹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

Ana: That's for sure. Julia de Burgos was not only a great writer, she wrote in a time where it was difficult for women to even go to school.

Julia: That's exactly what happened to me. My mother made my brother go to school, and she wouldn't let me go.

Ana: Same thing with my mother. That's why it's amazing that Julia de Burgos did as much as she did. You can say she was one of the first Puerto Rican feminists.

Julia: A what?

Ana: Feminist. She believed in equal rights for women.

Julia: Then I'm a feminist too.

Ana: All right!⁶²

Rivera notes that when she "mentions the feminist line I guess that I am creating didactic theatre by expressing my own views. Wake up people. This is what I think a feminist should be. Anything that you choose to be in life should not involve pain and exclusion."⁶³ Rivera's sisterhood with Julia the character, Julia de Burgos the poet and the inspiration for the play itself, Esther Huertas, forms a communal bond that extends off the written page or past the proscenium arch. Rivera dedicates the play with the following:

The playwright would like to thank Ana Juarbe, who conducted a workshop on Image Theatre using many wonderful Puerto Rican women from El Barrio in the spring of 1991. It was at this workshop that the playwright met Esther Huertas, upon whom she has based this story. Mrs. Huertas is a dynamic and inspiring woman. It is her poem, "Uno se deshoga" (9/29/88), that appears at the end of this play, and first appeared in the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños Bulletin," published by Hunter College in the summer of 1990. Muchisimas gracias Esther y Julia, de todas las mujeres Latinas.⁶⁴

Rivera frames the play within the realm of poetry, juxtaposing three distinct Latina/o experiences in verse. The community present in the play *Julia* evolves from each individual character's interpretation and creation of poetry to define them. Julia de

⁶² Rivera, *Julia*, 37.

⁶³ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006 .

⁶⁴ Rivera, *Julia*, 58.

Burgos's poem begins Julia's journey from Puerto Rico to the new world, though she cannot read it. The poem entitled "Questions" sets the tone for the young Julia, who will eventually mature and attempt to answer questions about her own existence and place. This world is one where she can pursue education and a sense of dignity removed from the cultural norms imposed upon her by Puerto Rican society of the 1940s:

A laugh has just finished laughing on my lips.
 Laughter of what?
 Of all the created.
 A tear has started to cry inside my eyes.
 A tear of what?
 Of all of the past.
 Contempt has been disregarded by itself in the morning.
 Contempt of what?
 Of all of the future.
 What remains with me in the present?
 The laughter...
 The cry...
 The forgotten...
 The contempt...⁶⁵

This poem, ripped from a friend's textbook and placed by Julia in her own pocket is used by Rivera to demonstrate her desire to create a new life through poetry. Julia's own first poem, spontaneously orated in the same scene demonstrates the willingness but undisciplined skill which Julia will need to acquire in the United States, leaving Puerto Rico in "the forgotten" of Julia de Burgos's poem:

Plátanos, plátanos, so sweet,
 Sometimes they smell so bad, so bad, so bad, so bad., as...
 As bad as feet.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Rivera, *Julia*, 38.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

The “contempt” mentioned in Julia de Burgos’ poem manifests itself in Julia’s long-standing hatred of *plátanos*. The sociological description of Latinas/os desire to rid themselves of “la mancha del platano” was never more apparent than with Julia and her “maduro stained schoolbag.”⁶⁷ The poetic journey continues in the play once Julia meets her husband Felix, a custodian at the university where Julia has become a cafeteria worker. Felix attempts to woo Julia with his own poem, unaware that Julia has been inspired by the life of Julia de Burgos:

Felix: You’re not from New York City right?

Julia: How do you know?

Felix: I know many things. Where are you from?

Julia: Puerto Rico.

Felix: I knew that!

Julia: If you knew that, why did you ask me?

Felix: I didn’t want you to think I knew everything! I knew you were from Puerto Rico because I can spot a Puerto Rican a mile away.

Julia: How can you do that?

Felix: I’m from Puerto Rico too.

Julia: No me diga, from where?

Felix: Barranquitas.

Julia: Ah, you’re a jibaro.

Felix: Jibaro? I couldn’t even tell you the difference between a pig and ah, ah rooster.

Julia: They are both like men, the rooster chases women and the pig stinks.

Felix: How do you know that?

Julia: I know many things too.

Felix: Maybe, it’s because you’re a jibara!

Julia: Not me! Next, go away I have to work.⁶⁸

Julia’s attempt at distancing from both her *jíbara* roots and men from Puerto Rico demonstrates her contempt and desire to re-envision her life in the United States. Though

⁶⁷ “La mancha del platano” refers to the fact that when handling plantain bananas a permanent stain is left on hands and clothes. This stain was and still is used as an indicator of a Latino’s “country” roots or *jibarismo*. The term, originally associated with Puerto Ricans arriving in the urban city of San Juan from the mountains and then moving from San Juan to the mainland United States, has now been conversely used to stereotype Dominicans attempting a similar journey. This may be a reason why Dominican students seem to express a great interest in the work of Carmen Rivera, as we will see in subsequent chapters.

⁶⁸ Rivera, *Julia*, 15-16.

she works as a cafeteria worker, she presumes that Felix will be like the men from her small town, the same men that her mother declared she “did not need!” It is only when Felix demonstrates his ability to create poetry, that Julia accepts him as her equal and possibly her mate:

Felix: I have something for you.

Julia: What? *(Felix takes out an envelope)* Here. *(Julia opens it. There's a piece of paper in the envelope)*

Julia: This is for me?

Felix: Yes, you're probably gonna think I'm stupid...it's a poem. *(PAUSE. Julia stares at it)* You don't like poetry?

Julia: Yes I do. I know about Julia de Burgos.

Felix: Oh No!

Julia: You don't like Julia de Burgos?

Felix: Yes, she's a great writer. My poem is not like hers. *(He takes it away from her)*

Julia: Felix!

Felix: No, I can't let you read it...okay...maybe... *(Felix keeps offering and taking back the poem)* I mean if you're used to reading Julia de Burgos. I know you're gonna think my poem is corny.

Julia: No...

Felix: Nevermind. Forget it...*(Taking poem back)* I mean I want you to read it BUT...I don't want you to think it's bad...okay...here...you can read it. *(He hands poem back to Julia)*

Julia: I'll bring it home with me.

Felix: You don't want to laugh in my face.

Julia: No, at home I can read better.

Felix: I'm nervous, can you read it now!

Julia: My break is almost over

Felix: You just go there. I want to know what you think, since you like poems.

Julia: *(She stares at the poem for a couple of beats)* It's nice. I have to go.

Felix: Wait, what part was nice?

Julia: The whole thing.⁶⁹

Julia: Felix, I have to tell you something.

Felix: You didn't like the poem.

Julia: No, not that.

Felix: What?

Julia: I can't read your poem.

Felix: Why? Oh no... You have a boyfriend.

Julia: No! I don't!

⁶⁹ Rivera, *Julia*, 20-21.

Felix: Why can't you read my poem then?

Julia: ...I can't read

Felix: When you learn English better you'll learn to read.

Julia: I didn't learn to read in Spanish. Can you read the poem to me?

Felix: Yeah! (*He does*).⁷⁰

Ultimately, Julia needs to come to terms with her own illiteracy and the creation of herself through poetry. Rivera's ironic switches of teacher/student are most poignant when Julia's own son becomes her teacher, helping her learn to read and to discover the poetic muse within herself. The fact that Julia first attempts to read one of Vicente's own 2nd grade books, Walt Disney's *Cinderella*, enacts a narrative which is cyclical. Vicente is now the same age as Julia when the play began and Julia will re-visit her "forgotten" past and lost childhood by reading *Cinderella*. As the remaining scenes move towards conclusion, we erratically jump forward in years, viewing Julia's formal education while maintaining a patriarchal household for Felix. Vicente grows from birth to fifteen years while Julia and Felix's marriage slowly becomes one of equal power distribution, climaxing when Felix in a rage of jealousy gives Julia an ultimatum:

Felix: You think you're smarter than me now, now that you are hanging around college people.

Julia: Felix, you're getting ridiculous.

Felix: No, you're the one who's ridiculous. This is going to finish right now!

Julia: What are you going to do?

Felix: Where are your books?

Julia: None of your business.

Felix: Tell me where they are!

Julia: You want them, go find them yourself! (*Felix goes off-stage into their bedroom*) Felix I swear, don't you dare touch my books. (*Vicente gets up to exit to his room*) Stay right there...

Vicente: I'm going to do my homework in my room.

Julia: No, stay right there. Ana says it's very healthy for kids to see their parents solve problems. That way the kids realize their parents are not perfect. Felix if you ever touch my book!! (*back to Vicente*) Not that you would have ever thought

⁷⁰ Rivera, *Julia*, 22-23.

we were perfect, but I agree with Ana. It is healthier. (*Felix comes out of the room with books*) Give me my books!

Felix: No they're going in the garbage.

(*Julia grabs his arm and the books fall on the floor. Felix bends down to get the books, but Julia stops him*)

Julia: GET AWAY! Are you crazy!! Give them to me!! Where are the poems?

Felix: Que poem ni poem!

Julia: Where are they? Oh thank God they're here! (*She takes the poems and puts it in her dress*) It's the poem you gave me...and another one by Julia de Burgos...don't you ever touch them...if you do, you'll never eat, drink, sleep, bathe, breathe, or do anything else in this house again!

Felix: Okay...okay...but its only because "I" think it's good that you write in that notebook...because you like to. And you don't have to tell your girlfriends about this, okay...I'm going to get up and go to the refrigerator myself and get my own beer. (*Felix exits*)

Vicente: I know that my parents are not perfect, so, since I'm feeling very healthy, I am going to my room to do my homework.⁷¹

Julia has finally come full-circle becoming the feminist that she had promised Ana Campos earlier in the play as well as re-inventing herself in the image of her mother's deepest desires, namely eliminating the need for a father/husband to hold back her own progress. Still, Julia needs to fulfill her destiny and create herself through verse. In a moment of pure meta-theatricality, Julia's final poem re-creates itself and becomes Esther Huertas' original inspiration for the play. In this moment, Rivera merges the "imagined community" of Julia and her journey from Puerto Rico with the shared experience of many audience members, and to a large extent, "authenticating" their own personal experiences within the rigors of the American educational system. No longer is Julia colonized within the repressive system that governed her entire life, as she breaks free from the contempt of that world and re-creates her life, closely emulating that of Julia de Burgos:

⁷¹ Rivera, *Julia*, 49-50.

Ana: You scared me.

Julia: I'm sorry.

Ana: No, that's okay. I didn't expect anyone for awhile that's all. (*She checks her watch*) You're very early.

Julia: I know, I wanted to talk to you about something.

Ana: Is everything okay?

Julia: Yes. Actually everything is very okay. I want to share something with you.

Ana: Sure.

Julia: It's a poem.

Ana: Poem?

Julia: I wrote it.

Ana:...I'm honored, let me hear it.

Julia: It's called, "When one chokes"

To be deeply loved by someone
Gives one strength;
But to love someone deeply
Gives one courage;
I am not afraid of dying
BUT really I don't want to be
There when it happens.
ONLY when I am dreaming am I alive
When I am awake,
I feel like I am death

Ana: ...Oh my God...that was beautiful. I feel like I discovered a lost continent, like the universe let me in on some secret by me knowing you. The next Julia de Burgos, Julia Durán.

Julia: I'm dedicating it to her and to you. Thank you for changing my life!

Ana: I didn't do anything, you did it all. Thank you.⁷²

In *Julia*, Rivera provides moments of reflection and insight into a theatre that is developing as it weaves authentic Nuyorican dialogue with poetic verse. Her characters seem comfortable and Rivera captures their individual slang and gesticulations wonderfully while still recreating a particular universality of the US/Puerto Rican experience. She begins experimenting with form as well, interweaving dialogue and poetry within her narrative, which will become more obvious when she begins to write

⁷² Rivera, *Julia*, 52-53.

more complex structural plays such as *La Lupe: Mi Vida, Mi Destino* and *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water*.

Rivera also begins to play against representative type, particularly the stereotype of the tough, macho Latino who destroys the women around him. Felix, though extremely flawed is for the most part an extremely caring, loving and dutiful husband and father. He revels in Julia's attempt and success at reading and until their bitter argument late in the play, supports all of her academic endeavors. Felix, a creative spirit himself, believes in Julia and her dream to achieve an education, more so I would argue than her mother or other Latina co-workers. Rivera puts a stamp on her male characters by re-defining them against many of these common stereotypes promulgated by other playwrights of her generation, such as the abusive men in plays by Migdalia Cruz or criminals in the work of Edwin Sánchez.

Plastic Flowers (1993)

Rivera's play, *Plastic Flowers*, prompted her first move away from Shaman Repertory Theatre and onto the stages of La Mama and the Nuyorican Poet's Café. *Plastic Flowers* is a Puerto Rican nostalgia play, interspersed with the familiar structure of a Latino/a domestic drama. All the characters seem familiar: the overbearing father, the repressed mother, the hard-working *jíbaro* son and the emotionally broken daughter. The play dramatizes the historical controversy of forced governmental sterilization of women in Puerto Rico from the 1930s to the 1970s. The characters predate and oftentimes mirror situations that Rivera will eventually expand upon in *La Gringa*, in particular the character of Monchi, who in *Plastic Flowers* is eighteen and beginning his

love affair with the soil of Puerto Rico, in direct opposition to the modernization ideals of his controlling father. Rivera will return to this character at the age of twenty-five in *La Gringa*, a bit more haggard and possibly less heroic in his examination of the colonization of Puerto Rico and the possible conclusion that the island will stay a commonwealth due to the inability of its inhabitants to seize independence.

This early Monchi is to a certain extent self-absorbed and angry, demonstrating an inability to recognize the need for any change in Puerto Rico, including the need for corporate modernization. His ideals are further threatened by the fact that his own father welcomes the idea of American entrepreneurship and accommodates this outside control whenever possible. As Rivera notes:

This play has a lot of love in it. It has a lot of anger in it. A lot of vulnerability. A lot of impotence. It's got a special place in my heart. In real life the Linda character is Iris's sister. And Monchi is Cándido. The play is really about fertility. Cándido is from the country and my grandmother is from the country. I believe that the assault on our culture has made us sterile. To cut our pasts and eliminate our futures. For me Monchi, in terms of his character as a man, doesn't need to dominate people to be a man. I needed to mention him in both plays. That he was a cool guy. Monchi tells his father that no matter how many times you pave over the driveway the roots will still grow in through the cracks. That's us. We are the roots. In *La Gringa* we need the goddess of fertility to bless us. The plays are connected. It's something I thought about a lot.⁷³

Rivera returns to her family as the basis for her drama *Plastic Flowers*. Linda, described as a seventeen-year old woman with the mental capacity of a six-year old is reminiscent of a Williams-*esque* heroine. Her inability to perform simple tasks around the farm has driven her father to decide that sterilization is the best alternative for her. Again, the father plays a major role in the play as he forces his opinion on both his daughter and the rest of the family:

⁷³ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

Simon: Juana, the doctors said she needs to have it done, that's it.

Juana: I'm afraid Simon. It's not her fault that she's like that.

Simon: Stop it Juana! I don't want to hear anymore. The doctors know what they're doing.

Juana: But is it right?

Simon: Juana there's no right and wrong here. It's only about Linda.⁷⁴

Plastic Flowers continues Rivera's investigation into the use of metaphor to convey a central thesis. The idea of Linda being sterilized for her own good reflects the often controversial debate over tubal ligation in Puerto Rico as a forced measure to limit the population growth of the island as well as the emigration of Puerto Rican nationals to the United States. The Family Planning Project was a way in which the United States could control the population of Puerto Rico by the sterilization of its women. Though this was advertised as being an alternative for Puerto Rican women, it was often the doctors, referred to by Simon in the play's first scene, who made this determination for young women on the island. The plan for sterilization, though originally sponsored for both sexes, was not encouraged in men and the guidelines distributed by the United States government, printed in English, did not clearly articulate the fact that tubal ligation was an irreversible procedure and that the surgery itself was under-researched and underused in the continental United States.⁷⁵

Sterilization in Puerto Rico serves as a counterpoint for the fertility relevant in Rivera's later works. Monchi, Linda's brother, symbolizes this fertility for the Reyes family. He is a proud *jíbaro* whose intention is to nourish the Island and see it regenerate

⁷⁴ Carmen Rivera, *Plastic Flowers*, unpublished manuscript, 1993, 4.

⁷⁵ The film, *La Operación*, written and directed by Ana María García, reveals controversial estimates that between 1930 and 1974, 20,000 women may have been given what is commonly referred to as "la operación." Another statistic claims an additional 24,000 may have been sterilized between 1974 and 1976. A final staggering statistic outlined by the Puerto Rican government revealed that a possible 35% of women on the island may have been sterilized during these years.

itself. His sole disapproval of Linda's surgery counters the wishes of his father, who is intent on making Linda sterile as well as the natural environment that surrounds his mountain home. Simon references the need to sterilize his daughter by comparing her to his dog, Capítan. The sterilization of the inhabitants of his island becomes an obsession for Simon as he creates a concrete driveway over his natural earth to accommodate the modernization from the north. His car's health supersedes that of his plants, as does the overpopulation of the island in regard to his daughter's fertility.

Monchi, who will leave for agricultural college at the end of the season, is intent on conserving the natural resources the Island has to offer. He reminds his father that he "does not fear *plátanos*" and that he is "proud to be a *jíbaro*." Simon's retort, "my grandfather was a *jíbaro*, my father was a *jíbaro* and I want being a *jíbaro* to stop with me"⁷⁶ falls on deaf ears since Monchi has chosen to return to work the land and symbolically, to defend Puerto Rico and its culture:

Simon: I want the driveway for my car.

Monchi: Which doesn't work.

Simon: I can fix it on my driveway.

Monchi: Papi, Carmelo's driveway is all messed up. The roots of all the trees are lifting the driveway and there are flowers growing in all the cracks. He parks his truck on the grass like we do.⁷⁷

Simon, in all his discussion of modernization and renewal cannot stop the growth of Puerto Rico's beauty and foliage. His garden continues to grow though he attempts to poison his plants regularly. In turn, Simon follows the strict patriarchal construction described by David Abalos in *The Latino Male: A Radical Redefinition*, namely sustaining the fertility of men by assuming the traditional roles assigned to them. Simon

⁷⁶ Rivera, *Plastic Flowers*, 56.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

rebukes Monchi for his desire to be a farmer instead of a *pelotero* (baseball player), which he sees as the proper dream for a man. Monchi, in turn, castigates his father for the destruction of the beauty which surrounds him. The title, *Plastic Flowers*, describes not only the present that Simon brings Juana in the play's first scene but also his desire to modernize and make his surroundings clean and organized. The plastic flowers, which Juana states "feel funny," symbolize Simon's relationship with rural Puerto Rico, a place which needs to be sterilized by social Darwinism and the intercession of a feudal lord, metaphorically the United States.

In Simon's process of re-organization, the landscape needs to be scraped clean of all memory of the past. Linda needs to be sterilized in much the same way that his former dog Capítan had been. Though Juana protests that the "fixing" must cease, Simon demands that their current dog, Belleza must also be fixed because her barking is "driving me crazy." Simon alludes to both his dog and his daughter when he remarks, "I'm complaining! That's enough, right? After she has all those little squirmy puppies she's going to get fixed, dicho y hecho!"⁷⁸ As the antagonist to Simon's ideology, Monchi protests the destruction of all things fertile. The dogs, the land, and his beloved sister are all reason for him to continue his fight and become a simple farmer, much to the chagrin of his father and the colonization that forces his fellow *jíbaros* to migrate from their rural towns to the major urban center in San Juan.

The commodification of this small town has begun and pits Simon against the rest of his neighbors as he screams, "Collecting platanos? Nobody buys them anymore, ahora everybody wants el Burger King!"⁷⁹ Simon's embracing of colonization has engendered

⁷⁸ Rivera, *Plastic Flowers*, 29.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 36.

a code-sharing language as he speaks the proverbial *Spanglish* of the Nuyorican. Once Linda enters the scene and chastises her father for yelling at her dog and not providing her with enough “kotex” for her bleeding, Rivera signals the metaphorical juxtaposition of Linda with Belleza. Simon must have order in the same fashion that the United States must keep order by sterilizing the women of Puerto Rico. Linda’s role-playing of being an expectant mother with Chichi her doll positioned inside her shirt only infuriates Simon further. Juana’s solution to the problem, feeding Linda valium in multiple doses, is again a common way to “calm the illiterate masses” and further recalls the work of Tennessee Williams.⁸⁰ Fed up with the demands of his dominant father and subservient mother, Monchi attempts to stop the sterilization:

Monchi: I’m not going to let you cut her up.

Simon: We’re not cutting her up!

Monchi: That’s right...you’re sterilizing her...so that you can forget she’s becoming a woman!

Simon: If you weren’t going to study to be a jibaro this wouldn’t be happening.

Monchi: You’re blaming me.

Juana: Monchi! You’re going away to school, we want you to study, but what are we going to do with Linda?⁸¹

When Monchi questions his parents’ motives and suggests that their belief that his departure to college will cause Linda to “run out and get pregnant,” Simon screams, “Somebody can hurt her, coño can’t you see that?” This reasoning further illuminates his desire to control his household and his similarity to Antonio in *To Catch the Lightning*. Linda and Samantha cannot be controlled by their fathers once they become women. The only way the fathers can achieve control over their daughters is to stunt their growth or

⁸⁰ Rivera describes the work of Williams as the best example of American theatre and as a type of dramaturgy she hoped to emulate.

⁸¹ Rivera, *Plastic Flowers*, 15.

manipulate their bodies. Rivera's theatre re-envisioning this destruction of the female body by allowing an intermediary male, in the form of a brother, to sacrifice himself for the good of the sister.

Monchi has sacrificed his childhood to care for his sister in the same way that Gideon sacrifices his body and psychological well-being for Samantha in *To Catch the Lightning*. Monchi's response to Simon, "anybody can get hurt...that doesn't mean you sterilize the whole world" promotes an *independentista* perspective on Puerto Rican/United States relations. Though the issue of over-population may have been deemed valid between the 1930s and 1970s, the island itself needed to scream out for self-determination and self-preservation. Without doing so, radical numbers of women were sterilized in Puerto Rico and continue to be throughout the world today. Simon's plastic world demands Monchi's exclamation, "You want to cut her up into some plastic doll which is so much easier to take care of."⁸²

Eventually Juana must take a stand as the matriarch of her family and reclaim her own womanhood, that of her daughter and metaphorically, her island, by announcing, "Dios mío Monchi! I know she's not a dog. She's my baby and I'm going to protect her." Juana is finally ready to accept responsibility for the role she has played in Linda's condition. The generational destruction of the fertility of Puerto Rican women finally becomes transparent as Rivera reveals the underlying secret of the Reyes household:

Juana: It's my fault okay!! It's my fault she's like that.

Simon: Juana I said stop it!

Juana: I should not have taken the medicine.

Simon: Juana the doctor gave you pills.

Juana: I should have known better...every time I see her, I see what I did to her.

⁸² Rivera, *Plastic Flowers*, 19.

Simon: You didn't do anything to her.

Juana: I destroyed her! Sometimes I can't even bear to look at her...when she's playing with her dolls. I can't believe she's seventeen years old.

Linda: Mami, you don't like me anymore.

Juana: Oh my God, yes mi amor, I love you. (*They hug fiercely. Juana plays with Linda's hair and gives her lots of kisses. Simon is furious.*)

Simon: We went to three doctors even that fancy one in San Juan. They all said that Linda should be sterilized. You don't have no doctor's degree, so don't tell us what to do. You study plants and flowers...do you think agriculture college can make you smarter than a doctor?⁸³

Rivera concludes *Plastic Flowers* in a somber way. We are left to believe that Linda will eventually have her surgery due to the fact that her parents are growing older and she has proven unable to discriminate between the brotherly affection of men and their desire for sex. She is a lost child whose body has matured beyond her capacities. Monchi must move on with his dream of becoming a farmer, and recognizing that the prosperity of life on the island depends on his constant vigilance. In turn, Monchi must sacrifice his sister for the health of the nation. Rivera's bittersweet ending contrasts with the delicate balance of the natural beauty of Puerto Rico. Ironically, the Reyes's farm will be consumed by nature itself unless Simon is willing to convert and sterilize its growth.

Rivera is empathetic to the cause of the *campesino* but chooses here to leave the spectator unsatisfied in his/her ability to draw a clear conclusion as to the fate of the family, community or nation. The stark contrast to the "happy endings" of *The Universe* and *Julia* position Rivera as an author in search of a middle-ground between acceptance of Puerto Rico's colonized past and the prospect of a bright future. *Plastic Flowers* is purposely ambiguous and therefore allows the audience to draw its own conclusions. Though Simon's hope for "Linda to be safe" and for Monchi "not to become a washed up

⁸³ Rivera, *Plastic Flowers*, 20-21.

jibaro like [himself]" seems somewhat of a heartfelt resolution, *Plastic Flowers* places Rivera in a much darker and less optimistic stage of her career.

ameRICAN (1993)

Rivera's first comedy, *ameRican* is a social satire which lampoons the image of crossing over into "corporate America." After spending two years working in a Philadelphia insurance agency, Rivera decided to create a play that directed a great deal of anger at the machinations of "hidden *latinidad*" and the success of "closeted minority executives." *ameRICAN* assumes that the audience will suspend belief in the play's situations and realities. The primary example of this, an actor playing a Japanese computer, is a construct of *fantastic theatre* and the "ridiculousness of artistic creation through transformation."⁸⁴ The idea for this farce came to Rivera through her analysis of Guillermo Gentile's theatrical group and their popular radio show entitled "Media Hora de Locura" or "Half-an-Hour of Madness." The vignettes or sketches are created through irrational and illogical exercises based heavily on the group's ability to improvise. Once the exercises have been completed, a performance is structured to fit within a half-hour time limit. *ameRICAN* is based on the premise that a Latino/a will do anything to make it in Corporate America and therefore sell out name, identity and culture to do so.

The original theme for *ameRICAN* is colonization. The overt nature of conquest, as a military or violent uprising is addressed as Rivera dramatizes the America she has known and studied during her education at NYU,⁸⁵ an America that has colonized nations through monetary and political pressure. Rivera's education during the Reagan era helped

⁸⁴ Rivera, "The Origins of Fantastic Realism," 1992, 17.

⁸⁵ Rivera received her BA in Economics and Latin American Studies at the institution.

form her political ideologies as well as her disagreements with her own father's politics. "My dad was right wing. I never understood how he could side with people who kept him down."⁸⁶

In the play, María Elena García has changed her name to Marie Garsha and been hired as an insurance executive. The fact that she is constantly berated by her boss, Jordan Wisely, with anti-Latina slurs and racist remarks, does not deter her from first accepting and then fulfilling the first half-hour of her job. Marie, in a didactic diatribe informs the audience that if she ignores the taunts she will rise above them keep her comfortable position. In a moment of *fantastic realism*, a Japanese computer comes to life and challenges her views on *latinidad*, cultural acceptance and "passing for white." Rivera concludes that the play "is about being colonized. When you are colonized you don't exist. The colonizer makes the colonized dream their dreams. Puerto Ricans are schizophrenic. Like the play by Papo Márquez. Half of you wants the dream to be American, not to be connected to the island. But then there is the other half of you that's saying, 'I'm fucking here, I exist.'"⁸⁷

María's arrival at the American Insurance Company prompts a post-colonial discourse as Jordan declares that he is "glad we stole you away from those other guys." While a straight reading of this line suggests a competing company, the idea of passing has been established and this theft activates Marie's own desire to be stolen from her Latina culture. Jordan's complex desire to hire a woman is also confounded by his admitted dislike of Latinos/as, qualifying him as a "selective bigot." The need for revolution within this corporate setting is clear but Marie, unwilling to undermine

⁸⁶ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

authority cannot commit to this ideology. Only the omnipotent Japanese computer prompts Marie to look deeper into herself and reclaim her roots. As a basic tenet of *Fantastic Theatre*, Gentile rejects the Marxist view that revolution must occur within the social strata of society. He believes that a true revolution occurs when individuals can free themselves from their oppressors.

As Virginia Ramos Foster remarked in regards to Gentile's *Fantastic Theatre*: "Social change is essentially to be effected through the awareness and maturation of the individual rather than through the revolutionary change of social institutions exclusively."⁸⁸ The change needed to institute cultural awareness at the American Insurance Company is dependent upon the computer's ability to decipher Marie's cryptic name. The computer first asks if Marie is from Japan, since the closest possible name change would be from the word Geisha. By doing this, the computer attempts to input and re-create Marie's actual identity:

Computer: Where is your name from? I can't find it.

María: My grandfather gave me the name.

Computer: Where is your grandfather from?

María: It doesn't matter, the country doesn't exist anymore.

Computer: The last country I have disappearing is Atlantis. You must be from Atlantis. I could connect you right away to at least 20 teleprompts that are searching for descendents from Atlantis.

María: I am not from Atlantis!⁸⁹

Rivera's use of pop culture icons throughout the play, which include Sony Walkmans and García Vega Cigars further complicate the computer feed practice central to Gentile's performance style. Like a grand pastiche, Rivera attempts to re-create multiple signs and symbols to identify identity. Rivera and Gentile seem inspired by the

⁸⁸ Virginia Ramos Foster, "Theatre of Dissent: Three Young Argentine Playwrights," *Latin American Theatre Review* (Spring 1979): 47.

⁸⁹ Carmen Rivera, *ameRICAN*, unpublished manuscript, 1993, 5.

work of Brazilian Gerald Thomas, who like Gentile approaches these types of performances with careful attention to re-creating the popular into the cultural.⁹⁰ Marie's plan is quickly unraveling as the computer, devoid of human emotion can only search through multiple databases until it finds an appropriate match. The deeper the computer probes Marie the closer he comes to her secret, eventually threatening to "out" her *latinidad* to Jordan:

Computer: María Elena García., employed at the Patriotic Commercial Insurance Company from 1986-1991...Wait some more stuff is coming up, Venezuela, Mexico, NO, NO, Puerto Rico, the Bronx, No Puerto Rico. Doesn't that mean rich port?⁹¹

Only Marie can hear the voice of the computer, thus making her indecision a symptom of schizophrenia. As the computer rattles off information that only Marie can know, the pressure mounts on her to reveal her Latina roots. Layering this internal guilt is Jordan's constant racist and ethnic slurs which motivate the computer to attack Marie with an arsenal of Latina/o signifiers including "Luquillo Beach," and "Cuca's Belleza Beauty Salon." Rivera further probes the illogical and creates a sex act between the actor playing a computer and a VISA machine. This interplay between actor and technology makes *ameRICAN* a distinctly different play within Rivera's canon. As Rivera explains, "*Fantastic Realism* provided a vehicle of expression that opened up a new world for me.

⁹⁰ Gerald Thomas has stated repeatedly that he owes a special artistic debt to Wagner; his *Gesamtglucksfallwerk* is a postmodern homage to the Wagnerian synthesis of all the arts, or the Wagnerian synthesis becomes fragmentation, collage, and deconstruction. The expression originated from a cross between the Wagnerian "total work of art," synthesis of all the arts and German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's expression, "every occurrence is chance." Thomas's "art of total chance" can be defined as a nonverbal aesthetic discipline. But *Gesamtglucksfallwerk* is really more of a postmodern pastiche of signs. Its multi-referentiality is an anti-synthesis: there is no closure, denouement, resolution, epiphany, catharsis...rather these become in Thomas's postmodern pastiche that which Mesguich defines as layered inscriptions, intertextual fragments to be deconstructed in a process of "cultural interrogation." David S. George, *Flash and Crash Days: Brazilian Theater in the Post-Dictatorship Period* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1999), 23.

⁹¹ Rivera, *ameRICAN*, 5.

The characters did not need logical reasons for their actions; they had their fantasies. These fantasies would fuel the dramatic action. I [(think] the idea of the fantasy was magnificent.”⁹² Marie’s degree of schizophrenia is heightened once the computer begins asking probing questions that make her doubt her own integrity and heritage.⁹³

Computer: How does it feel to be newly white?

María: I am white.

Computer: How long did it take to straighten your hair?

María: I am ignoring you.⁹⁴

Rivera finally allows Marie to escape and proclaim her *latinidad* once pushed to the extreme by the computer. In a moment replicated by her “other María,” the protagonist in *La Gringa*, the audience is finally given a glimpse of the choices that are often made by Latinas/os in corporate America; to hide their cultural heritage in order to be accepted and succeed. The theories developed by Gentile to allow for freedom of creation and irrationality give way to Rivera’s social realism, as *ameRICAN* becomes a socio-cultural document of *latinidad*:

María

Don’t look at me like that! It wasn’t a crime! You have no idea what it’s been like. Goddamn it, I have an MBA from the Harvard Business School and it doesn’t mean a thing! I’m sick of being the token everywhere I go! When I had the application in my hand, the OTHER box jumped out at me. Then a brilliant idea struck me, check the WHITE box. Who would know? My family would be thrilled at the idea...it was my aunt’s idea to go to Cuca’s Beauty Salon to straighten my hair in the first place. When the idea of the white box hit me, I couldn’t contain myself, but my hand instinctively went to the OTHER box. My mind was screaming out to my hand to check the white box. My hand wouldn’t listen. Every time I forced my hand to check the white box...it would fight me. It insisted on checking the OTHER box. Finally my mind triumphed and I branded

⁹² Rivera, “The Origins of Fantastic Realism,” 1992, 45.

⁹³ “I think every Puerto Rican, whether they deny it or not has this schizophrenia. And I would venture that blanket statement. The sociologists can speak better to this but when you are colonized, you are very hard to deal with. Are you trying to control me? Even if you’re told to go right because on the left there is a cliff you tell your colonizer, fuck you...I’m going left. I don’t give a shit because I’m in control of my destiny. I can be and that translates and I am aware that I have that on me and I believe a lot of Puerto Ricans also do.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁹⁴ Rivera, *ameRICAN*, 10.

that WHITE box with a huge black X. Within an hour of submitting my application I received twenty calls. You can't beat that. This guy's even happy to see me. That never happened to Maria.⁹⁵

Rivera's decision to critique the structures of American business and hiring practices takes an interesting turn within *ameRICAN*. Rivera, as a writer of socio-realism, abandons the genre to enable the creative process of *fantastic realism* to drive the plot and dialogue. However, in this climactic moment of María's re-awakening Rivera reverts back to the straight-forward style that signifies her writing: expository analysis and dialectical accuracy. Finally, by the end of *ameRICAN*, the theme overpowers the process and Rivera's play becomes a critical analysis of the "right...from the left." As Rivera questions the development of *ameRICAN* she explains, "I think in my own development as a human being I was always puzzled by the lack of significance that our people, Latinos, were afforded. Whether it's from the media or wherever. It always puzzled me how many negative and derogatory things there are about Latinos. I always wondered why? I mean they don't know me."⁹⁶

The conclusion of *ameRICAN* also features an interesting revelation. The computer, in one last desperate attempt to have María acknowledge her *latinidad*, directs a fax to her desk addressed to the RICAN Insurance Company. With no possibility of turning back and her pride on the line, María breaks down and admits that she has checked the white box. In this moment María is unaware of her future at the company. Her desire to conform has finally been exorcised and she admits the error of her ways, re-

⁹⁵ Rivera, *ameRICAN*, 11.

⁹⁶ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

claiming her true name, as well as refusing to fire the “immigrants” that work in office supply. Rivera’s often repeated commentary on “self-hating” Latinos closes the scene:

Computer: I hate to burst your bubble...you were not the first one to try this.

You know what Jordan Wisely’s real name is? Juan Reyes.

María: (*bursts out laughing*) Yeah, right! He doesn’t look like a Reyes.

Computer: You passed for Garsha.

María: Hi, I ordered a name plate this morning...what...the woman who took my order was fired.

Computer: He works fast.

María: I wanted to change my order. Last name García, María Elena. Your name is María? We’re compañeras then. Can you put accents on the two “í” s? (*as Maria says this lights fade*).⁹⁷

Though threatened with termination, María holds true to her word and revels in her Latina identity, offering a clear resolution of the play’s dilemma. On another level Rivera provides an ambiguous ending, with its absence of resolution regarding María’s future, serving as a moment of cultural insecurity. Latinas/os are unable to chart their position in corporate America since they must relinquish their culture to succeed. In the end, the bittersweet conclusion is further complicated by the acknowledgment that María’s boss refuses to make an immediate decision regarding her future, thus once again shutting out the possibility that a Latina, unwilling to play the “name game,” is more times than not shut out of corporate America.

⁹⁷ Rivera, *ameRICAN*, 19.

Chapter 2: Carmen Rivera – Latino Theatre’s Breakout Playwright 1994 - 1998

La Gringa, 1994.
Urashima, 1995.
A Song in the Heart, 1995.
The Next Stop, 1995.
The Power of Words, 1995.
Betty’s Garage, 1996.
The Nurse, 1997.
Delia’s Race, 1998.

Rivera’s early work with Shaman Repertory Theatre, which later became the Latino Experimental Fantastic Theatre (L.E.F.T.), and her desire to re-visit her earlier one-act play *The Universe*, resulted in 1996’s *La Gringa*, a play which Rivera submitted to the country’s most successful Spanish-speaking theatre company, Repertorio Español. Currently in its thirteenth year the play continues to attract full houses and stands as the longest running play in the company’s repertory. Repertorio Español, founded in 1969 by Gilberto Zaldivar and Rene Buch, continues to thrive, with its own theatre complex on East 27th Street in the heart of Manhattan, as well as the only million-dollar operating budget for a Spanish speaking theatre in the United States.

Buch studied and received an M.F.A. from Yale University while Zaldivar came to the United States in 1961 as a political refugee. The founding of Repertorio Español was a collaboration which sought to “introduce the best of Latin American, Spanish, and Hispanic-American theatre in distinctive, quality productions, and to bring theatre to a broad audience in New York City and across the country, including seniors, students, and Hispanics of all national backgrounds.”¹ Repertorio also facilitates the annual MetLife Nuestras Voces Playwriting competition, dedicated to the production of Latino voices

¹ Jorge Mina, Repertorio Español, Marketing Strategy Newsletter, 1997, 1.

which have included new works by Nilo Cruz, Carlos Lacamara and Cándido Tirado. In addition, the company produces playwrights from Spain which include Federico García Lorca, Pedro Calderón de la Barca and Lope de Vega, as well as Latin American playwrights including Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Isaac Chocrón.²

***La Gringa* (1994)**

La Gringa has become a staple in the canon of Latino theatre, running for over fourteen years. Rivera describes *La Gringa* as a love letter to her uncle, a man who helped her look inside herself and see the person she was destined to be. Following the idea of a “universality” of people meeting and influencing each other’s lives,³ Rivera notes that without her own journey to find her Puerto Rican roots, the character of María could not have been born. The autobiographical nature of *La Gringa* has elicited a positive reception wherever the play has been performed.⁴ As Rivera explains, “I don’t know what made this play ‘the one.’ I know it’s a hero’s journey and I was very conscious of following mythology when I wrote this. I had the mythology maps around me as I was working on this. Every character is someone. I wrote a Threshold Guardian

² It is interesting to note that the new plays supported by Repertorio Español do not necessarily need to be written in Spanish, as the translations (either from Spanish to English or English to Spanish) will be done by members of the company. The most important feature of any play Repertorio Español presents is its overall appeal to their audience base. The company feels that it is a play’s relevance to the audience, not the original language in which it is written, that makes it a successful venture. In fact, Zaldivar attributes the success of his company to the variety of plays performed. Zaldivar’s audiences “love the repertory concept. It’s like loving the movie. Sometimes people come here and say ‘What are you showing?’ and then there will be a car full of kids with their grandmother and their father. They know Repertorio and they see what’s playing. That’s the majority of our audience.” Personal interview with Gilberto Zaldivar, 4, September 1998.

³ Much like the Kevin Spacey film *Pay It Forward*, directed by Mimi Leder (2000), where characters interact and help each other by “paying forward” a favor given to them.

⁴ “There was a Queche man who lived up in the hills of Bolivia when we did *La Gringa* there. He lived way up in the mountains. Bolivia is like a bowl and the further up you go in the bowl the more indigenous you are. He lived up in Alto Plano which is the top. The bottom of the bowl is whiter. It’s more European. He went to the college and he saw *La Gringa* and he said, “that’s me.” I think the play encompasses this hero’s journey. We were shocked when we went to Latin America and everybody was like this is so caribeño. And we had to provide a glossary of words that included alcapurrias and pasteles. And we were sold out for the whole run throughout the different countries. Robert Federico of Repertorio always tells me that when they pull out *La Gringa* for a while to put in another play, as soon as they put it back into the rep it sells out again. Wherever we throw it, it sticks.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 9 September 2006.

who became Norma. Iris is the Trickster. Manolo is the Mentor. There's María, the reluctant hero, who says, 'I'm here...I'm Puerto Rican!' I think that when Rollo May talks about mythology and how it works, I followed his formula and it works.⁵

La Gringa is a drama about family lost and found. The family's broken ties, due in part to one sister's need to leave the island in search of a better life in New York City, mirrors the structure of René Marqués's classic, *La Carreta* (*The Oxcart*). While his play culminates in the family's inability to return to Puerto Rico and the subsequent destruction of their dreams, Rivera's María returns to the island to reclaim her roots. The irony and conflict is rooted in the fact that though María has defied the odds and returned on her own "guagua aérea,"⁶ she meets with great opposition from members of her family, who define her as an outcast or "gringa." As Edna Acosta-Belén explains "The commuter or circular character of Puerto Rican migration between the island and the United States also contributes to the cultural straddling that is so characteristic of U.S. Latina/o cultural production." Acosta-Belén compares this type of production of *latinidad* to the creative work of both Luis Rafael Sánchez and Tato Laviera, whose poem *AmeRícan* serves as a basis for Rivera's play of the same name.

Acosta-Belén stresses that "[a]claimed author Luis Rafael Sánchez invented the metaphor of 'la guagua aérea' (the airbus) to characterize this bi-directional flow and described Puerto Rico as 'a nation floating between two ports where hopes are smuggled.' Nuyorican poet Tato Laviera mocks those who proclaim the assimilation of Puerto Ricans born or raised in the United States with his famous code-switching verses,

⁵Rivera cites Rollo May's book *Cry for Myth* as an inspiration for creating a mythology for María and her return to Puerto Rico. Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006

⁶ Luis Rafael Sánchez's work *La Guagua Aérea* dramatizes the Puerto Rican migration story and describes the characters who continually make the round-trip to New York City from Puerto Rico and vice-versa, describing their hopes and dreams.

‘Qué assimilated brother, yo soy asimilao.’ Instead, he affirms a new hybrid ‘AmeRícan’ cultural identity.⁷ María’s naiveté prompts both her aunt and cousin to launch an attack on her immediate family for becoming what they believe to be “sympathizers” to the colonization of the island by Americans. This heroic journey⁸ by María to reclaim her history and seek acceptance by her family serves as the structural skeleton for the play.

Rivera wrote *La Gringa* over a two year period during which time she struggled to write a second act to the play. Eventually, Rivera read the *Cry for Myth* by Rollo May as an inspiration and a way to refocus attention on the idea of *La Gringa* as a myth. Through this reading she began investigating issues of self-identification and became aware of May’s description of a five step process that leads to the indoctrination of oneself into a given culture. Rivera’s interpretation of May’s poetics on myth facilitates her writing the second act following his detailed guideline, substituting Puerto Rican folklore for much of the “idolatry” May calls for in mythmaking. As Rivera notes:

The first step is releasing your ego. That’s when María lets go of her jacket adorned with a Puerto Rican flag. The second step is libation, when she speaks to both of her uncles. The next step is worshipping of ancestors and that’s when she goes to visit her grandmother’s grave. The fourth step is baptism and that’s when she goes to El Yunque and receives the dry rain, from Atabey the Goddess of Fertility. That’s what keeps us fertile. When you take the history away you take the roots away and we become sterile. The fifth step is celebration and that’s the parranda.⁹ That’s how the second act of *La Gringa* comes directly from the *Cry for Myth*.¹⁰

⁷ Edna Acosta-Belén, “Latina/o Cultural Expressions: A View of US Society Through the Eyes of the Subaltern” in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, edited by Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 77-92.

⁸ “I was going to tell this story anyway but I tried to follow the story of mythology. A hero’s journey. No matter where you place them, they work. That’s why I always teach myth no matter where I’m teaching. It’s worked for thousands and thousands of years. Going though any writer is a hero’s journey. Hero’s journeys transcend ethnicity, transcend race and so many people can connect with the play.” Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁹ The *parranda* is an exuberant musical celebration of culture.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 9 December 2006.

María's journey to visit her parents' birthplace is further complicated by her inability to speak Spanish, thus marking herself as an "other" in a land of "others." However, her Uncle Manolo supports María and negates the belief that language defines a person by stating "Speaking Spanish does not make you Puerto Rican."¹¹ In doing so, Manolo confronts the long-debated argument which centers on the term *hispanic*, which is used by the U.S. Census Bureau to define Spanish speaking persons as well as helping to create a pan-Latino population, more easily documented and catalogued due to their shared language.¹² Manolo's belief that language alone cannot serve as the defining characteristic of a Puerto Rican's cultural heritage and therefore gives María the ability to claim herself "as Puerto Rican as anyone else."¹³

The false notion that one's [correct] use of Spanish identifies oneself as "purely Puerto Rican" is demystified by scholar Jorge M. Guitart who points out that "Puerto Rico is perhaps the only linguistic community in the Hispanic world where the speech of educated speakers shows certain phonetic traits that are stigmatized by those speakers themselves."¹⁴ This duality of the Nuyorican is considered by Juan Flores and George Yúdice in their essay, "Living Borders/Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation." The authors argue that "Latino affirmation is first of all fending off schizophrenia, of that pathological duality born of contending cultural worlds and, perhaps more significantly, of the conflicting pressures toward both exclusion and forced

¹¹ Carmen Rivera, *La Gringa*, unpublished manuscript, 1994, 60.

¹² As Chon Noriega points out, "In the popular imagination, governmental classification, and mass media distribution – specific Latino/a groups are not understood in national terms." Chon A. Noriega, "El Hilo Latino: Representation, Identity and National Culture," *Jump Cut* 38, 46.

¹³ Rivera, *La Gringa*, 13.

¹⁴ Jorge M. Guitart, "The Pronunciation of Puerto Rican Spanish in The Mainland: Theoretical and Pedagogical Considerations" in *Teaching Spanish to the Hispanic Bilingual*, Guadalupe Valdés ed. (New York: Teacher's College Press, 1981), 49.

incorporation.”¹⁵ Eventually, María will have to confront this Puerto Rican schizophrenia and realize the contention between her family in New York and her *familia* in Puerto Rico. The self-formation that Flores and Yúdice describe is evident in many of Rivera’s plays, placing her in dialogue with many of the Nuyorican poets who have preceded her. A specific case might be the argument of Sandra María Esteves, also delineated by Flores and Yúdice as an “existential split,” which serves as a basis for *La Gringa*. Esteves writes “I am two parts/a person boricua/spic past and present alive and oppressed.”¹⁶

María’s declaration that her family left Puerto Rico unwillingly and only due to the economic stranglehold of the 1950s personifies them as victims of imposed colonization, and she as the child of this forced assimilation. However, María’s skewed perception of the Island and its markers of identity including *coquies* (native tree frogs), *guiros* (musical instrument made from a gourd), and *alcapurrias* (fried meat pies) mirror Arlene Dávila’s belief that mainland Puerto Ricans have a desire to consume materials which identify themselves as “boricua” or “Taíno.” Dávila proposes that these individuals become market consumers of an idealized authentic Puerto Rican” and María serves as the perfect example of this type of consumer of market ethnicity. The constant need to fight against this type of commodification of island culture is reinforced by Rivera when analyzing Puerto Rican self-representation on the stage, and the reason why minorities yearn to see possible identity markers that might represent them. This was never more evident in the form of the hotly contested Paul Simon musical and financial debacle, *The Capeman*:

¹⁵ Juan Flores and George Yúdice, “Living Borders/Buscando América: Languages of Latino Self-Formation,” *Social Text* 24 (Fall, 1990): 60.

¹⁶ Sandra María Esteves, *Yerba Buena* (Greenfield Center, NY: Greenfield Review, 1980).

It's like the play that came out that same year, *The Capeman*. Even though Paul Simon (the composer) and Derek Walcott (the librettist), both non-Puerto Ricans, attempted to re-create what it was like for us to be removed from our island, and failed badly, we still needed and need to see things that make us remember, especially when we are here, in New York. When you're colonized they take your past away. They take your history away. That's why in the beginning of that musical, when the Puerto Rican flag is projected on the front curtain...it's like ecstasy. Your past has been taken away from you.¹⁷

María's cousin Iris insists on this negation of commodification of Puerto Rico as marketplace when she questions María's jacket, which she proudly wears with its emblazoned Puerto Rican flag displayed on the back. María, as far as Iris is concerned, is just as guilty of "selling" Puerto Rico and its promise of paradise as her *gringo* counterparts in the United States. During her verbal assault of María, she demands the jacket be removed, since no *true* Puerto Rican would wear this signifier of identity, stating instead "We're all Puerto Rican on this island. We don't have to advertise it."¹⁸ Thus in the eyes of her cousin and aunt, María and her parents are criminals whose departure from the island has marked them as other – not loyal enough to be Puerto Rican/not good (White) enough to be Yankee. As described by Juan Flores it is the "Clash of values and perspectives on Puerto Rican identity have colored the cultural dimension of return migration and the experience of diasporicans on their many sojourns and relocations to the island, with Nuyoricans often cast as the criminalized, racialized other in their own beloved ancestral homeland."¹⁹

¹⁷ For a further discussion of *The Capeman* and the marketing of Puerto Rican identity on the Broadway stage see Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's "Paul Simon's *The Capeman*: The Staging of Puerto Rican National Identity as Spectacle and Commodity on Broadway" in *Latino/a Popular Culture*, Michelle Habell-Pallan and Mary Romero, eds. (New York: NYU Press, 2002), 147-161 and Jason Ramírez, "The Case of *The Capeman*: Appropriation of the Authentic," *Aztlan Journal of Chicano Studies*, 30/1 (2005): 179-94.

¹⁸ Rivera, *La Gringa*, 21.

¹⁹ Juan Flores, "The Diaspora Strikes Back: Nation and Location" in *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan Publishers, 2007), 214.

This need for María to possess Puerto Rico as a material property²⁰ conflicts with the beliefs of Monchi, a friend of the family and possible suitor for María. Monchi is a self-professed *jíbaro*, a man who has turned his back on a career in engineering to return to the land. His desire to buy back Puerto Rico, one plot of land at a time, positions him as a “counter-colonizer” whose hard work ethic will free Puerto Rico from oppression and United States control. María, as an invading *Yankee* emissary, sets her sights on remaining in Puerto Rico, possibly due to the fact that her personal and professional life in New York has floundered. She tells her family that she has lost a boyfriend and would be happier on the island. This weighs heavily on her cousin Iris, who questions María’s reason for staying in Puerto Rico.

Iris: Don’t you have a job in New York?

María: I’ll quit and look for a job here.

Iris: Wake up from the dream María, I can’t even get a job here. My name’s on every waiting list from here to the San Juan area.

María: I’ll try...we’ll try together...we’ll both look for jobs.

Iris: Great, more competition...what if it takes you two or three years?

María: I have faith that it won’t.²¹

María, in her attempt to better her own position by migrating to Puerto Rico, will unwittingly displace residents of their own opportunities. María thus becomes a “re-colonizer,” claiming native rights to the land due to familial heritage while re-appropriating paradigms of power due to her “Yankee status.” Monchi’s questioning of María’s plans is met with María’s declaration of wanting to “discover her roots,” to

²⁰ As Iris tells Norma, “She took pictures of El Morro, facing the water, then inland; all the Taino statues in the museum. Even a picture of the dump, La Perla. You know your niece wanted me to go into one of those jail cells and put my hands in the irons and pose for her stupid camera.” Rivera, *La Gringa*, 19.

²¹ Ibid., 21.

which Iris replies “you wanna root, here’s a root” and instead hands her a ñame.²² In these varied ways, Rivera creates in María a semi-autobiographical character who wishes to reclaim a heritage depicted by her parents but seen through the lens of her own americanized perceptions. She longs for a life and a home in Puerto Rico, economic prosperity and a dream-like status that does not exist for native Puerto Ricans. María’s internal yearning for her dream is best exemplified during a phone conversation with her mother, where she demonstrates to the audience her inability to distinguish between her own future and her mother’s past.

María: I love it here. I love Puerto Rico, do you understand that? I want to live my life in Puerto Rico, mom...mom you’re always talking about how much you love Puerto Rico, your childhood, climbing trees...it’s not different for you. Your love of Puerto Rico is more than memories. Well then, I want my memories to be Puerto Rican memories.²³

María’s rash decisions are prompted by her own inability to understand that her desire to relocate is based on a nostalgia driven by the memories of her mother. She is at odds with both her Nuyorican and Puerto Rican roots. As noted by Myra Mendible, “Reclaiming *latinidad* involves not just a deconstruction but also an excavation – a disinterment of bodies less docile.”²⁴ María’s desire to synthesize her dual status causes a rift between her mother and aunt, sisters driven apart by the necessity for economic survival in a commonwealth status. María cannot share both cultures simultaneously and therefore needs to choose one over the other.

Nicholas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas discuss this conflict in relation to the creation of *latinidad* when they explain that “There is no automatic or inevitable

²² Rivera, *La Gringa*, 25. The ñame is a native vegetable which grows from the ground and is often eaten root and all.

²³ Ibid., 26.

²⁴ Myra Mendible, *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 20.

necessity to the emergence of a shared sense of Latino identity, as indeed there are never any natural or self-evident positive grounds for any identity. Identities must be produced through social relations and struggle.”²⁵ In the same manner, Sandra María Esteves’s poetry once again gives voice to María’s plight when she states, “being Puertorriqueña Americana born in the Bronx, not really jíbara/ Not really hablando bien/ But yet, not gringa either, Pero ni portarra, pero sí portorra too/Pero ni qué what am I?”²⁶ This point is also evident in Rivera’s self-realization of her own limited Spanish and her Nuyorican status. Through trial and error, Rivera eventually learned to speak Spanish and noted in 2005 that “Spanish has not only set me free to speak Spanish. I accept who I am as a Puerto Rican woman, born and raised in New York City. I’m not going to choose one culture over the other – nor am I going to worry about who accepts me or not. I am who I am – with accent and all.”²⁷

María has been afforded a healthy economic life in New York in comparison to her family in Puerto Rico. The Nuyorican identity or *gringa*-status of María causes her to be viewed in an antagonistic way though she attempts to unite the sacred past of the *Taínos* with the modern hybrid identities of the Nuyorican. Rivera, as a product of a New York City liberal environment, and a strong female role model in her mother, was quick to embrace the kind of *Taíno* resurgence analyzed by scholars including Arlene Dávila and Jorge Klor de Alva who believe that “the current United States–based *Taíno* revival movement [which] originated during the period of radical politics and cultural awakening that emerged at the end of the 1960s...caused alienated Caribbean Latinas/os in the

²⁵ Nicholas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 21.

²⁶ Sandra María Esteves, *Tropical Rains* (New York: African Caribbean Poetry Theater, 1984).

²⁷ Carmen Rivera, “The Evolution of the Meaning of the Spanish Language in My Life” in *Boletín del Archivo Nacional de Teatro y Cine del Ateneo Puertorriqueño: Teatro Nuyorican y Teatro Puertorriqueño en Nueva York*, Roberto Ramos-Perea, ed. (San Juan, PR: Ateneo Press, 2006), 59-60.

Northeast and Middle West (to change) their dietary habits, revitalize Latin music, invent new art forms, and study Caribbean history and culture.”²⁸ In furthering the work of these two scholars, Gabriel Haslip-Viera stresses that “many of these individuals studied the pre-Columbian *Taínos* for the first time in their lives during this period. However, others claimed to be ‘aware’ of their *Taíno* ‘roots’ as a result of stories or *cuentos* they had heard from parents, grandparents, or from other members of their families.”²⁹

This syncretism³⁰ which Paul Allatson defines as “the binding together and intermingling in new forms of distinct religions or cultural practices” is dramatized by Rivera during the climax of the play as Uncle Manolo, Monchi and María venture out to bring a Catholic rosary to the grave of her grandmother while also visiting Atabey, the Goddess of Fertility in the rainforest known as El Yunque. As David Carrasco notes in his essay, “Cuando Dios y Usted Quiere: Latina/o Studies Between Religious Powers and Social Thought,” sacred places, like El Yunque in Puerto Rico, allow Rivera’s play to transcend the limits of time and space, and examine the liminal spaces between worlds.

Carrasco stipulates that “[by] ‘sacred place’ [he means] a locus where human beings experience the presence of supernatural, divine, ancestral, demonic, or numinous powers. These powers which can take the forms of angels, animals, humans, enemies, ancestors, spirits, sounds, lights, water, stones, symbols of identity, and voices appear to communicate that a specific location is an opening to another world, another time (past or future) and these places become the site for the human production of story/myth, ritual/pilgrimage, memory/imagination.” By re-articulating the realm of the myth,

²⁸Gabriel Haslip-Viera in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, edited by Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 418.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

³⁰ Paul Allatson in *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 220.

Carrasco supports the mythical structure of *La Gringa*, forged by the literary hybridization of May and Rivera.³¹

During this scene María confronts the anger directed by Tía Norma in relation to the burial of her mother. María's mother Olga chose to bury their mother in a family plot, hours removed from her sister's home which Norma now sees as an attempt to control what happens in Puerto Rico from her vantage point in New York, imposing a inter-family colonial aspect to *La Gringa*. María, in turn, realizes that the universe (the original title of the play) will be appropriately aligned if an offering is made to the spirits of her ancestors. Manolo also uses this opportunity to appease Atabey, since he feels he has abandoned her, thus causing the diseases that plague his unhealthy body. Manolo's "last rites" at the foot of Atabey's "Yunque preserve" serve as both a Christian sanctification as well as a *Taino* practice of atonement:

Manolo: Atabey is welcoming you. She never welcomes anyone on their first visit, except for me of course...My turn to commune with Atabey. You wanna come Monchi? Atabey can turn herself into four women, one for you and three for me.

Monchi: No, just tell her to send water to my farm.³²

Rivera juxtaposes the sexual fertilization Manolo hopes to perform with three goddesses with Monchi's desire for the agricultural fertilization of Puerto Rico. His last line prior to the arrival of Manolo, "Where there is death there is life," signals the need for future generations to move on to a higher existence, as Manolo accomplishes with his own death at the conclusion of the play. Manolo's acceptance of his own earthly demise

³¹ David Carrasco, "Cuando Dios y Usted Quiere: Latina/o Studies Between Religious Powers and Social Thought" in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, edited by Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 65.

³² Rivera, *La Gringa*, 67.

suggests Rivera's belief in the resurrection of life in new forms, having given Manolo the line "Like the Phoenix, [I will rise] out of the ashes."

In turn, Norma dismisses spirituality and instead decries the "problem that is María as she exclaims, "It's this girl here. You don't follow the rules, you expect a chauffeur, you put on music, you leave a mess everywhere, you take Manolo out of his room and drag him to Rincón and El Yunque. You get everything you want...you're just like your mother. She wanted to leave Puerto Rico, she left. I know what you're up to. You want a job here so that you can keep an eye on the house for Olga before she comes here and takes it."³³ Norma's behavior demonstrates that she and Iris, who have been untouched by Atabey, are lacking the spiritual atonement for their past and thus bare false witness against their sister. Manolo's death will serve as the catalyst for reuniting the two sisters, and in turn, the communion of the family, both in Puerto Rico and New York. Through the celebration of the *parranda* and the uniting of past and present with the singing of the *bomba*,³⁴ the family will finally be at peace and Puerto Rico will be whole again. Ironically it will be Iris, María's antagonist throughout her visit, who calls the truce between the warring factions of her family:

Iris: We are family, and that is very important to me, even with the fights. Blood is thicker than...than...geography. You shouldn't go to New York angry about a fight that's neither here nor there. And you know, even though you're a *gringa*, you're still Puerto Rican.³⁵

Ironically, this line was added upon the play's first tour of Puerto Rico in 2006.

The Iris character is patterned after Rivera's actual cousin, who made many of the

³³ Rivera, *La Gringa*, 71.

³⁴ A verse rhythmic chant sung to celebrate native culture. Its origins are rooted in Africa and may serve as a precursor to current musical genres including hip hop.

³⁵ Rivera, *La Gringa*, 75.

negative comments about Carmen when she took a vacation to Puerto Rico in the 1980s. Prior to leaving for the tour, Rivera called her cousin and told her that the play would be coming to Puerto Rico and that she hoped they could all see it together. Rivera expressed some trepidation regarding her cousin viewing the character of Iris, to which her cousin answered, “Pero como no, tú eres gringa y también eres puertorriqueña.” Rivera immediately called René Buch of Repertorio Español and had him add the line to both the tour as well as the long-running production.

The conclusion of the play, which reunites Norma and Olga during a telephone call detailing Manolo’s death, also allows Rivera to perform both Catholic and *Taíno* spiritual reverence, simultaneously. María receives the traditional blessing “Dios te bendiga,” (God bless you), usually passed from an elder to a younger person, in this case from her aunt, and then goes to Manolo’s room:

María: Oh, I know you’re here. I feel it. (*A light appears on María’s face and darts all over the room. It is Manolo’s spirit. She holds guiro*) I’m really going to miss you. Thank you for everything. For helping me understand. I know by now you probably found Atabey. Heaven is really an interesting place now. (*She puts guiro on bed*) Well good night Manolo. (*María exits Manolo’s room and closes the door and light darts out and focuses on a shoe box as she exits. She almost trips. She pulls another guiro out of the box. María kisses the guiro. She plays a rhythm on the guiro and sings the coqui song*) Gracias Tío. (*The lights fade slowly as the coqui song gets louder*).³⁶

La Gringa has become the dramatic staple in Rivera’s canon. The play has been performed by a cache of Latino actors including Carmen Rivera herself. During the first months of the run, an actress left the role and the director, René Buch, asked Rivera if she would consider playing María. Rivera, having been an actress herself, agreed and played the role for two months. The “peculiar authenticity” of Rivera, the author, playing María,

³⁶ Rivera, *La Gringa*, 87.

her creation, as well as her alter-ego, lent layers of meta-theatricality to *La Gringa*.³⁷ The play strikes a chord with Repertorio's audiences, particularly with its younger audiences who see it during the weekly Student Matinee Series. During his introductory remarks Executive Director Robert Federico challenges the young audience members to write a sequel to the play which documents their own heritage.

As Rivera has tried to incorporate a didactic form of dramaturgy at different points in her career, the challenge of *La Gringa* and young audience development played a crucial role in its continued success as well as an often criticized pan-Latino approach to dramatic representation. "Dominican students love the play. We had a school where they wrote *La Gringa II*. It was about a Dominican cousin coming to the U.S. It was the sweetest thing. It resonates with this younger Latino culture which often doesn't know where it wants to go, just like María."³⁸

Thus *latinidad*, often problematic by those who see it as a homogenizing of disparate cultures into a single pan-ethnic one, is embraced by Rivera when used for didactic purposes. María, a Nuyorican, stands in for María, a Dominican, or María, a Colombian. Rivera's dramaturgy attempts to create bonds between the ethnicities, where empowerment is achieved through shared commonalities of culture. As noted by Jon Rossini in discussing the work of Latina/o playwrights and their desire to (w)right themselves as well as challenge the reception of their ethnicity in theatre, "Latino playwrights use the theatre to materialize new models of ethnicity, often doing so ahead

³⁷"I started off as an actress. I was offered the role originally but I had stopped acting because I got sick. Later I was offered the role. I had to take over and I took it on. I decided to just do the blocking and the lines. Also there was the challenge of acting in Spanish and having so many lines. After about a month Ricardo (Barber), who plays the uncle, told me that I was finally getting it, because I was awful [in the beginning]." Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

³⁸ Ibid.

of theorists who discuss cultural practice.”³⁹ One can argue that the Puerto Rican and Dominican experiences can be similar in many cases, and those young audience members can for the first time see their own lives in *La Gringa*, a play of cultural acceptance and transplantation. Detractors of this use of *latinidad* may argue that *La Gringa* is a promotion of a pan-Latino imaginary or “universal Latino” reconstruction.

Frances Aparicio makes a point of explaining Mérida Ruá’s views on how younger people can re-envision themselves by watching this type of popular culture. Aparicio explains that “Rúa proposes the term ‘*colando-ing*’ to refer to the negotiations that inter-Latino subjects make in specific social contexts, in family, neighborhood, or with friends. *Colando* can mean passing for one identity while erasing the other; choosing from a repertoire of transculturated elements; or making oneself part of a larger group, by either cutting in line or with the assistance of others.”⁴⁰ The argument therein lies in how those being impacted by this categorization either accept or negate the notion of a shared Latino experience.

Further, what role does their nation of origin and its cultural history as well as their new country of habitation, here being the United States, and its history of colonization, play in their reception of *La Gringa*. Edna Acosta-Belén notes that “Through their creative imagination, Latina/o writers and artists assert their differences and reveal an awareness of their role as collective voices of a particular community, and as the bearers of survival and resistance struggles against the forces of racism and cultural obliteration. Thus the ethnic political edge attributed to their creative works is for the

³⁹ Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrioting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 20.

⁴⁰ The term *colando* is used by Frances Aparicio in her article, “(Re)constructing Latinidad: The Challenge of Latina/o Studies,” in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, edited by Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 45-46.

most part unavoidable, and quite often detracts critics from analyzing this cultural production in relation to the wider contexts and evolution of US and/or Latin American and Caribbean literary, artistic, or musical traditions.”⁴¹

Rivera’s play thus enacts *home* within multiple homes. The Dominican María and the Puerto Rican María can see themselves during the 11:00 am matinee of *La Gringa*, both within an insular community of Latino students as well as individuals of Dominican or Puerto Rican heritage, colonized and transplanted in the United States. Further, those students of mixed Latino heritage see themselves enacted and empowered by *La Gringa* by becoming one with their fellow students.⁴² As Acosta-Belén states, “Transcending these traditional boundaries and monolithic notions of cultural ‘purity’ or ‘authenticity’ is also the key to the Latina/o creative drive, since through the construction and assertion of hybrid identities, different nationalities are rejecting debasing dominant discourses about who they are both in relation to US society and their countries of ancestry.”⁴³

Frances Aparicio’s argument reaffirms Rivera’s, in relation to the close knit ties of New York/Caribbean audiences including Dominicans in Washington Heights or Puerto Ricans in the South Bronx, who create an imagined community for U.S. Latino writers to analyze, often in opposition to the self-categorization of nationality portrayed by Latin American playwrights. Aparicio states that “The experience of confronting racial, cultural, and linguistic marginalization and subordination in the United States as a

⁴¹ Acosta-Belén, “Latina/o Cultural Expressions,” 79.

⁴² Nerely Galarza, a student at Bronx Community College, commented on the issue of *latinidad* and representation after viewing the play. She, being both Puerto Rican and Dominican, chose to empower her mixed ethnicity by proclaiming she was “Borin-cana.”

⁴³ Acosta-Belén, “Latina/o Cultural Expressions,” 79.

result of the colonized status of our communities is a strong argument that distinguishes US Latino writers from their Latin American counterparts.”⁴⁴

***Urashima* (1995)**

In 1995 Rivera writes *Urashima*, a one-act play written for the New York Stage and Film Festival at Vassar College in 1995. Through its development Rivera begins to experiment with the process of collective creation in her dramaturgy, chiefly due to her partnership on this project with then unknown director and founder of the Tectonic Theatre Project, Venezuelan Moïses Kaufman. Rivera also writes the piece for veteran Latin actress Sol Miranda, who was cast to work on the project as well. To a large extent Rivera the “Latina playwright” becomes Rivera the “popular,” or some might say, “bankable” playwright.

Urashima follows the story of the title character, a young fisherman who is enchanted by the sea. His desire to live in the deep with Ola, the embodiment of the ocean, prompts him to leave his human life and father behind. Urashima’s yearning to “become one” with the sea eventually leads to his death and ultimate resurrection four hundred years after his drowning. Rivera uses time as a structural device in *Urashima*, beginning the play with the discovery of Urashima’s human body in its pristine state and then recounting his life over four centuries. The character of the doctor/narrator allows the audience to serve as a silent witness to the discovery at the autopsy:

⁴⁴ Aparicio, “(Re)constructing Latinidad,” 43.

Doctor: Thank you all for coming. Please come in. Thank you...I recently was called in to view this body. I considered this a routine assignment. Much to my surprise, this has been the most fascinating experience of my life. This body was found in the sea. What is amazing about this body is its condition. It is completely intact. It has not begun the process of decomposition. What is the story of this human being? What secrets is he hiding? I have invited all of you to his autopsy, to witness a great moment in scientific history.⁴⁵

The physical deconstruction of Urashima's body will allow Rivera to juxtapose time and locus, shifting from the earth to the sea and back again. The human condition, continually searching for a sense of itself within the larger universe is exemplified in the form of Urashima. His attempt to return to the sea, feeling displaced in his human form, is reminiscent of Rivera's own belief in the elevation of the soul past the physical and onto the spiritual stage. Rivera creates the characters Ola (sea), Turtle (animal), and the Father (family) to serve as a chorus and to warn Urashima against a transubstantiation of his body to a hybridized form of man/sea/soul.

Rivera's "nature play" is written as a criticism of those who see the world as static and unchanging. Urashima's quest to become the sea though born a man, can be further analyzed as the desire for cross-cultural and cross-gendered re-creation of self. As his father warns, men are born to serve a hyper-masculine purpose on earth, and therefore Urashima's desire to become the feminine sea, is impossible in his current male form:

Urashima: When I go to the sea it only gives love. I feel safe there. (*He hears his name being called again. Both father and son look out.*)

Man: When the sea calls you must not listen.

Urashima: I cannot close my ears.

Man: You must.

Urashima: How can I not hear her beautiful song? She sings to me so sweetly. And to the gentle rocking of the boat that makes me feel like I am floating in space. I am free there father. I am free.

Man: You are part of the Earth.

⁴⁵Carmen Rivera, *Urashima*, unpublished manuscript, 1995, 1.

Urashima: When I go out on my boat and bring you back fish. I am part of the sea.

Man: You are not. The sea lets you float on her and lets you take her fish. You are not part of the sea. Birds fly, they belong in the sky. And fish belong in the sea. You belong on Earth.⁴⁶

Urashima, who seeks to become the same as the feminine Ola, is consistently reminded that he must be true to his born physical self. Rivera drives home this point by focusing on the masculine appearance of Urashima in comparison to the sea he desires to become:

Doctor: In examining his hands we can determine that he was a laborer. The callouses on his hands indicate a great deal of abrasion. A harsh object frequently scraped his skin, perhaps a net. Due to the fact that he was found in the sea, we can determine that he might have been a fisherman.⁴⁷

The analysis of Urashima as a transgendered character is signaled by Rivera throughout the play, as Urashima frequently describes himself as “beautiful” or “delicious,” and when immersed in the sea, he is presented with an underwater flower by Ola, as a formal wedding symbol. In this reversal, the masculine Ola marries the feminine Urashima and creates a traditional home. Ola, who we learn has lived with Urashima for four hundred years, eventually realizes that her husband/wife desires to return to his father on earth. Rivera allows for this return by introducing the device of the “box,” an object which Ola promises will allow Urashima to return home to her. Once Urashima utilizes the box, after having discovered that his father has been dead for centuries, his physical form is changed to dust as he “begins to age and wither” and is allowed to return to the arms of Ola, now re-invented as wind.

⁴⁶ Rivera, *Urashima*, 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 3.

The spiritually elevated Ola demonstrates her ability to become fluid objects and her heightened state serves as the catalyst for Urashima's return to the sea. Rivera returns the play to the material world by having the doctor inform us that Urashima, in the pristine physical state described at the beginning of the play, has a "box" inside of him. In the end, *Urashima* serves as a return to a non-realistic dramaturgy which Rivera last attempted with *To Catch the Lightning*. Though often a common playwriting exercise which allows writer and actor to personify objects or nature, Rivera creates a world where her characters break free and utilize the spiritual space which has consistently intrigued her. *Urashima* allows Rivera to experiment with the uniting of live space and spirituality which continues to play a major role in her post-millennium writing process.

A Song in the Heart and The Next Stop (1995)

Rivera's next two works, first developed as a one-act play called *A Song in My Heart* and later a full-length work re-titled *The Next Stop*, are written while she was a member of the Professional Playwrights Unit of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre under the direction of Allen Davis III. Through this affiliation, Rivera eventually became a staple in the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre's season and she forged an often contentious relationship with Artistic Director and founder Miriam Colón-Valle.

The plays center on the necessity for angels in our lives as *A Song in My Heart* follows the story of a recent drug addict following his rehabilitation. Tony is taking a #2 train from Brooklyn to Penn Station to visit his former girlfriend Gladys, who has moved to Boston with their twin boys, Danny and Alex. While waiting on the platform he encounters two young African-American women named Fatima and Denise. The play

opens by paying homage to music as a narrative device as Tony enters the subway humming the lyrics to “Daddy’s Home to Stay,” foreshadowing the reunion with his children and girlfriend and the happy life they will share. The festive balloons and engagement ring that Tony carries clash with his brash personality as a lifetime hustler and addict:

Tony: ...Daddy’s home...Daddy’s home to stay...ay, ay, ay, aaaaaay...ta, ra, aaaah... Come on train, let’s go...shit man, get your ass here.⁴⁸

A Song in My Heart reveals a desire to engage the politics of race and culture in the inner-city. While Fatima and Denise are played as young African-American women with “very beautiful and intricate braiding in their hair,” Rivera also has them double-cast later in the play as African-American women who are “well-dressed” and have “no braids.” This marking of color and ethnicity is complicated by the fact that the women are also portrayed as being of a higher economic class, as exemplified by the following exchange between Tony and a homeless doo-wop singer named Singer:

Tony: Hey, hey...you know “When we get married?”
Singer: Nah man, sorry brother I don’t.
Tony: Come on you gotta know it.
Singer: I know it a little it...but I never really sang it.
Tony: Man, don’t tell me that shit, that’s a great fuckin’ song.
Singer: I’m sorry, man but I never learned it.
Tony: Look I’ll give you five dollars to sing it.
Woman #2: I’ll give you \$20 to shut up.
Singer: It’s not the money. I really don’t know it.
Tony: Here take the money.
Singer: No, I can’t take it.
Tony: No take it.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Carmen Rivera, *A Song in My Heart*, unpublished manuscript, 1995, 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 13-14.

This performance of “blackness” for Denise and Fatima early in the play, complete with braids and their “inter-borough” journey from the dangers of pre-gentrified Brooklyn into Manhattan, stands in juxtaposition to their performance as Woman #1 and Woman #2, “sans braids/plus funds.” This division of binary characters from Scene One to Scene Two sets up an intricate analysis of the issue of color within representations of *latinidad*. Myra Mendible describes the issue of race and categorization and the reconstruction of borders in *latinidad* when viewing the (re)presentation of race vs. ethnicity. Mendible warns that “beyond the wake-up call of including another ethnicity in the national imaginary and therefore expanding the ethnic register to a fluid spectrum rather than mutually exclusive categories, Latina/os remind us that there is no purity within *latinidad*, or indeed within any ethnic category, and therefore there are no easy borders between ethnicities. The resulting effect is that of an internal contradictory tension. On the one hand, there is the effort to flatten all difference in the brown race. On the other hand, there is the recognition that not all browns are alike or that, indeed, not all Latina/os are brown.”⁵⁰

Rivera, in establishing distinctions between identical bodies of performance (the same actresses doubling roles) and by braiding their hair in Scene One while dressing them “well” and giving them expendable cash in Scene Two, problematizes the dynamic of race and ethnicity in her work. In *A Song in My Heart* Rivera exposes her world of Latino characters and includes the tensions between light and dark skinned Latinos while highlighting the socio-cultural distinction between dark skinned Latinos and African-Americans. Rivera’s desire to create a cross-cultural dynamic in her plays enables her

⁵⁰ Mendible, *From Bananas to Buttocks*, 133-34.

characters to reach past long established racial divides in New York City and unify oppressed cultures:

Tony: You black women, beautiful people...I'm Puerto Rican. By the way my name is Tony. (*He offers his hand. The women return the handshake cautiously*)

Fatima: Fatima.

Denise: I'm Denise.

Tony: Nice to meet you...I'm Puerto Rican, but we mixed with African blood, that's why we're so beautiful. Everybody tells us that Spain is the mother country, but they're wrong, Its Africa, Mother Africa, Father Spain...that's how it is. I'm not ashamed of having black blood, a lot of other Puerto Ricans are though. My cousin tells everybody he's from Spain and shit. I had to kick his ass man, our grandmother is black, real black, you know, she's even darker than you. You know and he's fuckin' ashamed of her. Man that's wrong, you always got to love your family...That's what I teach my kids, you know, blood is thicker than water. Man that's academic. Remember that when you have your kids.

Denise: You're right.⁵¹

Thus one can imagine that in *A Song in My Heart* Rivera prompts a racial/ethnic discourse which confronts the issue of white dominance in Latino identities and the relegation of black bodies as *other*. Tony, a Puerto Rican man, must substantiate his feelings on black bodies and braided hair by stating that Denise and Fatima are equally beautiful to Puerto Ricans and further "confessing" that his grandmother was "in the closet" or citing the infamous phrase, "y tu abuela, dónde está?" In Scene 2, Tony is half-asleep on a subway bench appearing disheveled and inebriated. Tony has returned from Boston because his girlfriend Gladys has rejected his offer of marriage. Tony begins a tirade on the subway which is delayed at Chambers Street in lower Manhattan:

Tony: Sometimes I fuck up...(to himself) I know that. Man Gladys, but everybody fucks up at one time or another. (*He takes another drink*). That's academic. But I say I'm sorry, other motherfuckers don't do that. They just hit their bitches and that's it, but I give you love Gladys...and I love my kids...I'm not afraid to tell them that and hug and kiss them all the time...see I know they

⁵¹ Rivera, *A Song in My Heart*, 4.

ain't gonna be no faggots if I kiss them you know...they love me too. They were happy to see me, they missed me Gladys. Danny and Alex they loved the toys...they asked me man, "Papi you gonna come live with us." I told them yes...you can't keep sons away from their father, they need me...I need them...I need you. (*Tony takes out a picture of his sons*) I'm sorry...I love you...(*Tony kisses picture*).⁵²

Rivera engages the media-sensationalized belief that Latino men hit their wives yet love their sons, as long as they remain heterosexual. This seems to be one of the few moments where Rivera allows the simplistic nature of cultural stereotype to enact itself in her work. Tony, a clearly "bad" Latino who loves his kids is easily set up as a villain, one who an audience can denounce as they would any screaming alcoholic on the subway. However, with the arrival of a "Doo-wop Angel" Tony can be saved through the exorcism of song. This angel allows Tony to perform his penance while exposing the lack of concern for the homeless demonstrated by the affluent young woman on the train:

Tony: See. (*Tony takes out many single dollars*) I give money...he deserves it. I'm like that. I'm that kind of guy, I appreciate good talent.

(*Tony tells this to the woman who continues to ignore him. They let out a very tired gasp of exasperation. Tony takes his seat again and the singer goes to the women and holds out his cup*)

Woman #1: Get that out of my face!⁵³

In turn Singer is able to give sage advice to Tony regarding his inabilities as a man, husband and father and to use the opportunity of a stalled subway train to absolve him of his sins. Singer's advice, "Brother you still got yourself and you got great soul," doubles as the articulation of the spiritual side of humanity (soul) as well as the musical

⁵² Rivera, *A Song in My Heart*, 10.

⁵³ Ibid., 12.

side of the person (soul). The latter is particularly important since the angel reminds Tony that when he was younger he “played at the Apollo.”⁵⁴ This signification of Singer as a performer in Harlem also reinforces his African-American culture. Through these multiple characterizations of African-American culture in *A Song in My Heart*, Rivera displays varied states of life and death for this community; African pride through the braided women, affluence and disassociation through the “well-dressed” women, and spiritual salvation via “the meek shall inherit the earth” personage of the homeless singer.

In addition, since the two “well-dressed” women refuse to help their own race, Rivera further explores the idea of self-loathing cultures. Tony reaches out to Singer and gives him his phone number and address with the plea, “If you need anything, call me...you know I can help you get a job or whatever. Stay with my aunt in Brooklyn.”⁵⁵ *A Song in My Heart* concludes with confession and salvation, as Singer now identifies himself as “Angel,” and sets forth into the next car of the subway train. As he departs, singing Tony’s doo wop request, “When we Get Married,” Rivera’s stage direction reads:

*Tony puts the beer under the seat and leans his head back, as Angel is heard singing “Darling, darling, when we get married...” and Tony joins in “We’ll have a big celebration.”*⁵⁶

This celebration of salvation echoes that of *La Gringa*’s Manolo and María in El Yunque, where through the cleansing of the soul by “angelic” forces, Rivera’s characters are freed and able to re-envision themselves in the chaos that is her dramatic universe. María will be a better family member, Manolo will be saved and join Atabey, and Tony

⁵⁴ Rivera, *Song in the Heart*, 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 17.

will move on and become a better father and mate, giving up alcohol and possibly proving to Gladys that he can provide her with all the things she needs from a partner. *A Song in My Heart* details Rivera's "love affair with New York,"⁵⁷ as characters meet on the subway and discuss life in the city. Once Rivera re-drafted the play and re-titled it *The Next Stop*, she shifted her focus from an in-depth character analysis of Tony to the broader issue of relationships in Latino couples. Fatima and Denise now become the central characters of the play and their ethnic heritage is changed from African-American to Puerto Rican. In addition, the issue of parenthood is re-examined as Tony's twins are now mirrored by Colette, the twelve-year old daughter of Fatima, and Little Ivan, the infant son of Denise. While Little Ivan is confined to a carriage in Act One his father Ivan is incarcerated in prison, arrested for taking a "joy-ride" in a stolen jeep. Rivera also uses the revision to further explore her own mystical beliefs, creating a play where "angels are everywhere, but do not necessarily have wings."⁵⁸

Adding layers to the mother/daughter relationship is the fact that Rivera initiates a discourse where a minority mother willingly attempts to distance her child from the perceptions of minorities by her choice of her child's name. This practice, often employed by parents who wish to purposely create an ambiguous ethnicity for their children is best exemplified when Fatima states "no Carmens or Marias for my girl."⁵⁹ This obvious nod towards the self-hatred that often precedes total assimilation of culture demonstrates Rivera's attempt to tackle the complexities of self-perception for Latinas and the choices often made to accommodate oneself within the dominant culture.

⁵⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 9 September 2006.

⁵⁸ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 3 February 2007.

⁵⁹ Rivera, *Song in My Heart*, 25

Rivera's structural shift from a story about Tony, a down-on-his-luck Puerto Rican, to a play about the intercession of angels in the daily lives of New Yorkers, begins a process of social commentary as Rivera moves toward viewing New York as a microcosm of the larger issues at play in the universe. Her subsequent plays will deal with the issues of AIDS, spousal abuse, and survival, with careful attention paid to the construction of Latina/o identities. A gritty realism begins to take hold in her dramaturgy, which to a certain extent, conflicts with the producers of her work. Repertorio Español, which will eventually produce the Spanish language version of the play entitled, *La Próxima Parada*, has always been considered a "conservative house." Their productions of Lorca and Cervantes, often designed for student audiences, made the choice of *The Next Stop* a peculiar one. However, Rivera's success with *La Gringa*, and her quick rise to popularity prompted Repertorio to commission a Spanish version of the play.

Rivera explains an occurrence during the run of *La Próxima Parada* that reinforced the belief that her work was doing what she originally intended, namely, to open up discourse between multiple ethnicities, religions and genders. As she remembers, "One day a priest shows up with a church group to Repertorio Español to see the play. And I don't go to church anymore and I'm not a practicing Catholic. But the priest came up to me after the play and kissed me and said I know exactly what you were doing. And I started crying. There's something that I think about my own need to believe that I am really giving love and getting love back. All the religions say the same thing and it's all coming back. When I teach kids, I tell my students to think about what you did tonight.

Did you provide love today? What were your actions for the world? I try to live by these principles and they come out when I write.”⁶⁰

The intercultural collisions between these distinct groups, Latinos and African-Americans, religious and lay, wealthy and economically disadvantaged, seemed to inform the work of Rivera during the last years of the millennium. As Frances Aparicio notes “These sights of *latinidad* do not necessarily imply a utopian, egalitarian dynamic, nor do they suggest altogether that power differentials are decreasing, but rather, that new power relations emerge from these encounters.”⁶¹ Rivera’s desire to unite and empower her audiences proposes this emergence of enlightened citizens of the universe, not necessarily suggesting a “perfect world” but rather an illuminated one.⁶²

The Power of Words (1995)

Rivera dedicates her one-act play, *The Power of Words* to her students and their desire to claim language as a powerful tool of education and empowerment. Rivera notes in her April 19, 2005 address at Drew University that the evolution of language, whether it be a foreign language like Spanish, or the use of slang and “proper English” by teenagers, serves six major functions in her dramaturgy. Rivera documents her own struggle to learn Spanish as an example to educators and employers of how difficult it is for urban youth to empower themselves in academic institutions and the workplace.

Rivera notes that her desire to master a foreign language is much like teenagers

⁶⁰ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 3 February 2007.

⁶¹ Aparicio, “(Re)constructing Latinidad,” 46.

⁶² As Ed Morales notes in his review, “It’s difficult to do community-based theater about the dreary desperation of “the people” without sinking into the dreariness and taking the audience with you. That’s why playwright Carmen Rivera deserves praise for *La Próxima Parada*, a drama-comedy set entirely on a subway line that services Bushwick, Brooklyn.” Ed Morales, “Theater: *La Próxima Parada*,” *The Village Voice*, April 1999, 161.

attempting to express themselves through poetry. She notes that the re-claiming of oneself comes from the ability to master six stages of language: language of the unknown (Spanish/poetry), language of shame (inability to communicate on a par with others), language of struggle (frustration when one fails to learn), language of discovery (transformation to comprehension), language of revolution (ability to question and investigate fully), and language of freedom (acceptance of oneself and one's abilities) or as Rivera puts it...just being Carmen.⁶³

As a teaching artist for the New York City Public School system, Rivera began to discern the disparity between her playwriting students at the urban City College of New York, and her more affluent and university-trained students at NYU. Predating the success of Nilaja Sun's play *No Child*, which deals with the bankrupting of inner city high school students' education, Rivera provides her audience with a semi-autobiographical portrait of a writing teacher trying to reach her at-risk students. Those students; a black Latina named Tamika who loves to write, a pain in the ass named Toro, a recently released convict named Mike, a quiet and angry working student named Melody and her little sister Teresa, who attends class because there is no babysitter available. *The Power of Words* recalls many of the popular school films of the period⁶⁴ but chooses to depict one short class period in the life of this teacher and her students.

Rivera's theatre company L.E.F.T. produced the play at the Clemente Soto Velez Center on Suffolk Street twice during 1995 in an attempt to make the play accessible for

⁶³ The full transcript of Rivera's speech is entitled "The Evolution of the Meaning of the Spanish Language in My Life," 59-60.

⁶⁴ *Stand and Deliver*, *Dangerous Minds* and *The Principal* are just a few of these Hollywood films where the teacher needs to reach the hardened students by any means possible. These films always highlight black and Latino youth in need of intervention but often the teacher is an Anglo of upper economic or social status, or in the case of *Stand and Deliver*, Jaime Escalante, a real-life teacher in Los Angeles who leaves the corporate world to teach calculus to inner city students.

the Lower East Side community living with the reality of sub-standard schools and an artist residency curriculum which, as Rivera reminds the audience, is in place due to their “classification” within the school system as special needs students:

Ms. Soto: I can’t believe you guys come to school without paper. Don’t you think you’re going to need it?

Toro: Nah man, we’re Special Ed., nobody gives a shit.

Tamika: Yeah...that’s why we get all this art shit. Poor Special Ed. They can’t do anything.

Ms. Soto: Tamika you write beautiful poems and I teach poetry all over New York City to all different types of people so don’t even try it...I expect a poem out of you and don’t you use “Special Ed.” as an excuse not to do the work.⁶⁵

Rivera’s indictment of the New York political scene, with a particular emphasis and criticism of neoliberal policies in effect during the Beame, Koch and Dinkins administrations fans the fire that is directed by her students at Ms. Soto, as well as the mid-1990s policies, where the New York City Board of Education pumped millions of dollars into programs that sought to appease an apathetic liberal base of voters who sat idly by while the school system crumbled. Rivera’s questioning of programs which were put into place for political “facework” stands at the center of her evolution as a writer of social criticism during this period.

In *Barrio Dreams*, Arlene Dávila proposes a critical analysis of the failures of pre-millennium politics in New York when she notes that “Neoliberalism is often connected with homelessness, poverty, residential segregation, and other indexes of inequality, yet culture, a well-known instrument of entrepreneurship used by government

⁶⁵Carmen Rivera, *The Power of Words*, unpublished manuscript, 1995, 12.

and businesses, a medium to sell, frame, structure, claim, and reclaim space, is closely implicated in such processes and always in demand of closer scrutiny.⁶⁶

In the world of this play Ms. Soto stands in for Rivera, who worked as a teaching artist within the school system as well as at the Manhattan Theatre Club and Young Playwright's Inc. While Ms. Soto openly curses in class and reminds her students that she is a product of the Dyckman Projects in Washington Heights, she attempts to give them an education which is their "right...not a privilege." *The Power of Words* allows Rivera as a playwright to comment on herself as a social activist and the inadequacies of the education of young minority youth within urban areas. As Jeremy McCarter's review of the 2006 Nilaja Sun production plainly states, "*No Child* goes where theater rarely dares tread: a New York public high school."⁶⁷ If this is true, then Rivera accomplished this feat eleven years earlier with *The Power of Words*. Rivera's own voice rings out during the play, as Ms. Soto finds herself defending the didactic nature of poetry and its impact on student's lives:

Ms. Soto: When a female is called a bitch it means that they're lower than dirt and shouldn't be respected. You don't respect each other. The words you use...words...they're powerful. When you call somebody a bitch, you don't mean to call her a female dog. Do you? Those words are garbage and when you use them like that you're saying that you have garbage inside of you and you don't.

Mike: And you know what we got inside of us?

Ms. Soto: It's not garbage that's for sure, you have souls, you have spirits that dream and get angry and feel joy...you don't see that do you...

Melody: Oh brother!

Ms. Soto: Don't tell me you don't know how to use words, you already know the power of words, you use them all the time to hurt each other.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Arlene Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 9.

⁶⁷ Jeremy McCarter, "Blackboard Jungle '06," *New York Magazine*, 24 July 2006, 13.

⁶⁸ Rivera, *The Power of Words*, 15.

By the conclusion of *The Power of Words*, the children empower themselves through the poetry within their own lives. Each student attempts to write a poem using the words, “I remember” as a starting point. Toro, who throughout the play has fought the use of poetry in his life, recites his poem willingly. His memory serves as a rallying cry for young minority youth in New York City:

Toro: You ain’t gonna believe it, but it happened last year. Okay “I remember...the day I slipped in front of the police station; He said I banged his car; he said I ran; he said I resisted arrest; so he threw me on the ground; he threw me against the wall; he threw me inside the police station; He kicked my ass. My sister came to get me; he threw her on the ground; he threw her against the wall; he squeezed her nipples and called her a spic whore! Hours later they let me go and charged me with disorderly conduct.”

Tamika: Oh shit!

Ms. Soto: That happened to you?

Toro: I knew you weren’t going to believe me.

Ms. Soto: I believe you, I just want to know what happened.

Toro: Last winter, the fuckin’ cops didn’t clean the ice in front of the police station.

Mike: I believe you, the cops man, they don’t respect nobody.⁶⁹

The preferential treatment of certain constituents of the New York landscape, or Mayor Dinkins’ “gorgeous mosaic,” impacts how Rivera develops characters during this period of her dramaturgy. The forced delineation and outer borough exile of minorities, fostered by the increase of gentrification in areas like the Lower East Side, Harlem and El Barrio, and further enforced by New York’s militarized police force, becomes a theme in her work, as she carefully documents young people’s lives and the impact of “barrioization” in their communities. As Arlene Dávila notes, “Spatial transformations involve varied and complementary processes affecting the built environment: social control through legal/juridical implements and ideological control through cultural and

⁶⁹ Rivera, *The Power of Words*, 23.

informational institutions and representations. These are all part of the barrioization processes impacting everyday barriology...always at play though taking on disnature: far from a natural process, gentrification is fueled by specific policies and forces favoring some groups, forces, and entities over others.”⁷⁰

Rivera’s “kids” are viewed as enemies of the new demographic of New York City, and their public education is problematic since new residents of their neighborhoods hope for an urban renewal which focuses on the future, one which includes higher property values and an influx of upwardly mobile New Yorkers. Social Darwinism thus takes control of the education of New York’s public school children; heavily black and Latino youth who feel shut out and disposable. Little Teresa’s poem makes vivid the life of children in the inner-city and the violence that often preempts their growth. Teresa is a visitor to the class but clearly understands the difficulties of succeeding within the NYC school system:

Teresa: I can’t hold it in...I dream about papi all the time, I got to talk about it, Mel I can’t keep it inside no more...“ I remember the day my father got shot; we were eating dinner and the phone rang; somebody told him that his friend was in a fight; so my father went to help him; my mother told him not to go, but my father loved his friend; then Doña Fela came to our house screaming; she said papi was hurt; mami didn’t let me go out but I knew what happened...Mel said there was blood everywhere, on his glasses, on his shirt, on he sidewalk...he didn’t finish his dinner...(Pause. *Tamika has taken Melody who is now crying in her arms. Teresa sits down. She is also crying. Ms. Soto goes over to her.*)⁷¹

The vivid memory of Teresa and the impact it has had on her as an eleven year old eventually causes Melody, always cynical and angry, to draw a picture instead of writing a poem, suggesting a connection to Rivera as a child. Once prompted, Melody’s

⁷⁰ Dávila, *Barrio Dreams*, 8.

⁷¹ Rivera, *The Power of Words*, 25.

sketch reflects the themes of *La Gringa*, and Rivera's own desire to rediscover her Puerto Rican roots. As Melody presents the picture to Ms. Soto she remarks, "It's the hills by my grandmother's house in Puerto Rico...you can keep it if you want...only if you want to."⁷² The suggestion that the children themselves feel lost and abandoned in school begins to take hold in the work of Rivera as she embarks on documenting the despair of those who cannot help themselves, namely women and children, and their abandonment by politicians and media:

Tamika: Imagine sending Clinton to a war, or shit, remember Reagan, imagine sending him to war, he would forget what country he was supposed to go to.

(*They laugh*) Ah man where can we send Clinton?

Toro: How about China man, they still communist.

Mike: Yeah, yeah, Clinton would have to fight with the president of China, what's his name...

Toro: Some shit like Ping Pong...Clinton versus Ping Pong, that would sell a lot of shit in pay per view.⁷³

The notion of the media and the commercialization and consumption of war and politics reminds the audience that these young minorities are able to see past the basic textbook propaganda supplied by the schools and reason for themselves alternative theories. Their status as "Special Ed" does not impact their ability to analyze the current political and social trends impacting their neighborhoods and economic realities. *The Power of Words* is written in-between the Gulf Wars and at a time where the United States is firmly established as the world's only superpower. Complicating this matter further is the fact that the Guiliani administration's attack on civil liberties and their quality of life edicts forced the lower economic classes in New York City to become "suspects," particularly in cases of racial profiling. However, Rivera does not emulate the

⁷² Rivera, *Power of Words*, 32.

⁷³ Ibid., 28.

work of previous Nuyorican playwrights by placing the blame on one racial group or culture. Rather she attempts to teach a moral lesson and present a social critique against those who wish to see violence as a clear cut “black vs. white” issue:

Toro: Fuckin’ white people. They put the guns in our fuckin’ neighborhoods.

Tamika: You can’t only blame white people.

Toro: Yeah, do they got guns in their neighborhoods? All right then.

Mike: Did a white guy kill your father?

Melody: Nobody knows.

Teresa: Nobody is saying anything...they’re protecting the person who did it. But nobody protected my father.

Melody: It probably was somebody from around the neighborhood.

Mike: Do white people live in your neighborhood?

Melody: No.

Mike: You see it’s not only white people...everybody is fucked up. Black people kill Black people, Latinos kill Latinos, Chinese kill Chinese...white people just as fucked up, they kill each other too.⁷⁴

The irony here is the fact that Mike has previously been incarcerated and therefore could be the most militant of all the students. However Mike has clarity on issues of race and violence and is unwilling to blame any one group for the blight on his community. He promotes a feeling of self-awareness and a desire to make himself better through illumination and informs us that he was tutored while in prison by a poet named Gerald Times, who volunteered his services to the inmates. Through their association, which mirrors that of Ms. Soto and her class, Mike became an informed young Latino and socio-economic critic of the New York City educational system and the Mayor’s office, as well as the United States’ involvement in the Middle East.

Mike’s poem sums up the desperation of many of the young students Rivera turns to for her social critiques. The last line of the play, taken directly from his poem exclaims, “There’s nothing to remember...I died dead.” Since the other poems all began

⁷⁴ Rivera, *The Power of Words*, 26.

with the phrase “I remember” to prompt an analysis of their own lives, Mike’s is particularly insightful since it suggests that as a young Latino he begins his life in a non-existent state, a place where he is merely a statistic or assumed “less than alive” by politicians, employers and the public school system.

Betty’s Garage (1996)

Betty’s Garage was written for L.E.F.T. and cemented Rivera’s dedication to women’s causes throughout the city, which included homeless mothers, AIDS patients, and generations of older Latinas who had spent their lives caring for children, and now found themselves alone. This play, as do later plays, promoted Rivera’s philosophy that “we all have to take care of each other.”⁷⁵ The play became a very popular transfer as well, with productions mounted at La Mama, INTAR Theatre, the Women’s Project and the Songs of Coconut Hill Theatre Festival at the Clemente Soto Cultural Center. *Betty’s Garage* uses ambiguous language to describe the setting and time, suggesting a state of martial law and the persecution of members of an unnamed society, heightening the menacing tone of the piece, which eventually develops into a criticism of state services and the protection of women and children. The use of Crystal, a ten year old radio announcer’s voice to begin the play established a tone reminiscent of the work of Latin American dramatists writing under oppressive regimes.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Rivera, *Power of Words*, 32.

⁷⁶ Carmen Rivera has often cited that she is influenced by work from Latin America and specifically that of Griselda Gambaro.

Crystal: Good morning everybody – this is Crystal with today’s news. Today has been the heaviest day of fighting. The casualty number is up 75 percent. Twenty women alone were found dead by the riverbank and emergency rooms at the city hospitals are overflowing with injuries. We have just received word that “school” has been cancelled – to allow the schools to function as temporary shelters. Starting tomorrow the banks will be closed – the post office and federal offices will also be closed. There is no indication when they will re-open. Please remember that the curfew has been moved up to 4:30pm – so don’t get caught on the street. Any sign of a cease fire has now disappeared. All peace talks have been cancelled. That’s all the news for today folks – thank you for joining me. Have a nice day everybody.⁷⁷

Rivera espouses a feminist agenda through her characters. *Betty’s Garage* features the empathetic George, a dutiful and sacrificing husband reluctantly critiquing the work that his wife performs for women when he states, “Don’t give me that feminist stuff! I got a woman to protect you.”⁷⁸ Here George refers to Alma, a woman that George has sought out to protect Betty while he makes daily trips to transport refugees of the war against women. Alma, a hard-edged soldier for the cause is constantly at odds with Betty about her disregard for proper security and her trust of all women. Alma’s tough-talk and desire to carry a firearm angers Betty who believes that the women they are helping, particularly the young daughters, shouldn’t see violence for the sake of protection. Betty’s “garage” serves as a metaphorical safe space, away from the male-dominated world that forces the women into hiding.

As Phillipa Kafka explains in her book *Saddling La Gringa: Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers*, the depiction of women is one of multiple identities, having to straddle the perceptions of their varied environments. Her choice of

⁷⁷ Carmen Rivera, *Betty’s Garage*, unpublished manuscript, 1996, 1.

⁷⁸ Rivera, *Betty’s Garage*, 8.

terminology, which refers to Latinas as victims of “psychic enforced tourism,” attempts to decipher the complex layering of women running to Betty’s sanctuary. Kafka submits that:

It cannot be denied that multiple identities continue to recur as a problematic in one guise or another in the work of most Latina writers. Can the suffering from being forced to leave one culture, one’s originary home in the world, to enter into another, ever be integrated? Both birth culture and Anglo world are equally alien in regard to the oppressive treatment of Latinas by gender, class, and race. Yet Latinas are forced to observe both cultures from outside their class systems by virtue of being women born into those cultures. This excess, beyond and yet contained within ‘hybridity and syncretism,’ is precisely where ‘psychic enforced tourism’ lies. Needless to say, this experience is common to the Latina authors...as well as to most ethnic and women of color writers.”⁷⁹

As in *La Gringa*, syncretism once again becomes a part of Rivera’s work, albeit here it manifests itself in a form of *secular syncretism*, with the removal of faith as a factor in these women’s lives. Their fates will be determined by their intention to eliminate dependence on the state police system which has failed and now seeks to imprison them while creating a sisterhood of warriors, equally adept intellectually and physically. The distinct voices of Betty and Alma play against the backdrop of a world dominated by violent men; a place where one must decide as a freedom fighter if violence is to be met with violence (Alma) or with cunning and strategy (Betty). As seen in the following exchange, Rivera’s choice of creating the image of Alma extracting a gun from a bible serves as a constant reminder that force must often be met with force in the case of abused women:

⁷⁹ Phillipa Kafka, *Saddling La Gringa: Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), xxiv.

Alma: I helped my mother escape...(Alma opens the bible and takes out a gun)

Betty: What are you doing?

Alma: Getting ready?

Betty: I don't work with guns.

Alma: How do you expect me to protect you?

Betty: Without the gun.

Alma: Do you know who these people are?

Betty: A mother and a daughter.

Alma: Do you know them?

Betty: Come on...no one really knows anyone...how do I know you're not one of them?

Alma: Because if I was one of them you'd be dead by now!⁸⁰

Thus, *Betty's Garage* becomes a Judeo-Christian parable in its approach to survival and exile, where one must choose how to combat the enemy, whether by force or peaceful protest. The arrival of Sol and Mickey, a mother and child on the run from a government wishing to do them harm, heightens the conflict for Betty, who is now at odds with both Sol and Alma. Only Mickey, a twelve-year old girl, agrees with Betty's handing of the refugees and the necessity to run from her abusive father. Betty's comment, "There's very little you can hide from children," is in direct response to her mother's desire to shield her daughter from her abusive husband, who Sol feels is no danger to Mickey since "he's never hurt her." Sol, in turn, promotes the common position that she was at fault for her husband's abuse and that her only choice is to return to him.

Phillipa Kafka notes that "[a]nother element so common in the Latina authors...is the implication of senior women in Puerto Rican and other cultures as cultural collaborationists, as gatekeepers. Latina writers depict these gatekeepers as the group that perpetuates the patriarchal rules and regulations, acting as their custodians, like vigilant watchdogs."⁸¹ Sol serves as the prototypical gatekeeper, attempting to keep her daughter

⁸⁰ Rivera, *Betty's Garage*, 10.

⁸¹ Kafka, *Saddling La Gringa*, xxvii.

safe while guarding a tradition of machismo and domestic violence inherent in the culture of her forefathers:

Sol: Sweetheart come on.

Mickey: Don't call me that! That's what he calls you when he wants to be nice. That's what he calls you after the fights. He called you sweetheart all day today. And you make him that stupid dinner.

Sol: Mickey don't speak to me like that.

Mickey: Here sweetheart, thank you sweetheart, I made your favorite dinner sweetheart. You're even wearing that dumb locket he gave you. Mami he didn't even go see you in the hospital. I wish I could throw up that food you cooked. That's why we were late (*to Betty*) because she made him dinner.⁸²

Rivera's play signals a conspiratorial proclamation against women and their daughters and the decision to impede their progress in society at all costs. In the world of *Betty's Garage*, women are hunted and killed by men and if not for a band of freedom fighters, none would escape. The education of these women plays as big a role in their programming as the intergenerational conflict between mother and daughter reflects a patriarchal system which subjugates women early in their lives. As Kafka believes the work of Latina writers respond "to their firsthand experiences of inequitable gendered power relations with attempts to analyze the patriarchy's diverse manifestations and to oppose its domination wherever those manifestations present themselves."⁸³

This type of domination of women by men, through both physical and psychological domination can be seen in Rivera's work as early as *Julia*. The notion of women being misleading "gatekeepers" to their daughters helps define the post-apocalyptic world present in *Betty's Garage*. The preoccupation of men who seek to forcibly control and dominate their women, often present in the work of Latina writers, is

⁸² Rivera, *Betty's Garage*, 24.

⁸³ Kafka, *Saddling La Gringa*, xxvii.

re-envisioned in Rivera's plays, as the concept of Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," here, a garage and in *Julia*, a classroom.

The Latina writer's desire to depict this conflict and finally to break free from the confines of male domination is further explained by Kafka, whose analysis also constructs the Latina against the more empowered writing of Anglo women authors, who often depict their characters in positions of economic and social prosperity, or independence, beginning in the bedroom and on to the boardroom. However, as Kafka notes, Latina writers "depict their Latina characters as bored in rooms that confine them, in factories, fast-food restaurants, or domestic spaces, for the most part. Latina writers depict the enforcement of inequitable gendered power relations in females from the moment when Latina children begin their training under their gatekeepers at home, again in school, and again when they migrate psychically to the workplace⁸⁴ and physically to the United States."⁸⁵ They are faced with and forced to conform to racist, sexist, and class oppression all their lives, within and beyond their birth cultures."⁸⁶ While *Betty's Garage* does initiate this type of generic Latina dramaturgy, Rivera is always quick to point out that her work demonstrates the interplay between the male and female in terms of gender issues, economic prosperity and most importantly colonization. In simplest terms, "In my work, men are not always evil and women are not always saints."⁸⁷

While Rivera's play excoriates men who abuse their wives, she also provides the audience with male heroes. George, Betty's husband puts his life on the line throughout

⁸⁴ As does María Elena in *ameRícan*, psychically denying her Latina heritage to conform to a male-dominated Anglo corporate structure.

⁸⁵ As is the case with Julia upon her arrival to New York City and her domestic work both at home and in her cafeteria job. It is only when she escapes to her own room, namely the classroom, is she able to free herself from domination of her husband and her gatekeeper mother.

⁸⁶ Kafka, *Saddling La Gringa*, xxv.

⁸⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 3 February 2007.

the play, transporting women back and forth to locations of solace and communicating with Betty and other victims of the war on women. Though Betty is portrayed as a protagonist for the cause, George is allowed to be perceived as a worthy adversary for the military machine that subjugates women and those who wish to help them. George and Betty are both partners in this dangerous undertaking and Rivera reminds us often that George and his brother are always free to leave the garage but choose to stay due to their desire to see women free to live peacefully and without the threat of violence. Betty's courage and desire to fight for freedom is prompted by her memories of an abusive childhood and the death of her mother:

George: But it's easier for me to get away. I'm a man – the military doesn't stop the men...

Betty: George, this is part of our life.

George: We can't have one the way we're living.

Betty: I know...but I can't stop doing this. Every night in my dreams, I see my father strangling my mother. I'll stop doing this work when the nightmares stop.⁸⁸

The turmoil and shame that Betty feels towards her victimization is reflected in her “flight response.” It is only after Betty guarantees that she will get to a “safehouse” and be protected from her husband that Sol agrees to leave with George. Rivera's notion that every victim must pave the way for the next is further demonstrated when she gives Betty her locket and instructs her to sell it. Sol's proposal that Betty could “sell this and help somebody with it” prompts the realization that helping others often comes at a cost. Betty's response echoes the sacrifice that all abused women need to make and the constant reminder of moving forward to avoid a harrowing end:

⁸⁸ Rivera, *Betty's Garage*, 4.

Betty: Thank you. That would be wonderful but you could be traced (*if I am caught*). You keep it and remember where you've been and where you don't want to be. Don't ever look back.⁸⁹

Betty's Garage serves as a social commentary on women's protection and their civil rights. Rivera creates an environment of fear and government enforced control and detention for women, young and old alike. While pitting Betty, the pacifist, against Alma, the enforcer, Rivera also explores the disparate role of women as protector and nurturer. Neither woman's position is assumed correct, as no man is portrayed as being solely good or evil. Just as easily as the repressive men's organizations of the world have banded together to abuse and pursue "runaway women," Rivera portrays George and his offstage brother as heroic freedom fighters, safeguarding the lives of women. As in all of Rivera's plays, there is no clear demarcation when dealing with roles of gender, race or ethnicity. Rather, Rivera attempts to explore the inner mechanics of the human condition and the repression of humans by organized governmental bodies. During this period, Rivera's work takes on a distinctly political stance, embracing an understanding of the lives of down-trodden members of society, whether disadvantaged economically, socially or politically.

As in the first scene of the play, *Betty's Garage* concludes with ten-year-old Crystal's radio report signaling impending danger for woman and their supporters. The report follows a phone warning that both Betty and Alma have only two minutes to evacuate the garage. Betty's cry that "they found us" serves as a call to arms for abused woman to secure their safety at all costs, abandoning home and material goods if needed. Crystal's report of the bombing of churches, schools and "even a garage," serves as a

⁸⁹ Rivera, *Betty's Garage*, 27.

warning that these “shelters” for women are the next targets of violence in this unnamed society.

As Crystal recounts, “Reports are that the government is taking more aggressive steps to crack down on resistance groups, who damage any chance for an end to the civil war that has been plaguing families for centuries.”⁹⁰ Thus the desire for these characters to seek a space (a room to live or write in) or to speak (silence = death) supports the belief of theorist Helene Cixous who stresses that “by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech, which has been governed by the phallus...women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence.”⁹¹

Rivera’s decision to begin and end the play with the Beatles song *Blackbird*, which is synonymous with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, as well as repeat its lyrics as a verbal code shared by Betty and George, further illustrates her intention to call her audience to action and understanding of the plight of women in the world. The fact that both the Women’s Project and Songs from Coconut Hill, theatre organizations that promote issues of women, chose to produce this play after its initial run at L.E.F.T., demonstrates both the importance of the work and the rising status of Rivera during these years of creative output. Without question, her position as the most successful Nuyorican Latina playwright of the 90s offered her opportunities to collaborate with both Latino and mainstream theatrical groups in New York.

⁹⁰ Rivera, *Betty’s Garage*, 28.

⁹¹ Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” in *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender and Scholarship*, Elizabeth Abel ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 283.

***The Nurse* (1997)**

Rivera's *The Nurse*, became her first experience with SOHO Rep, a theatre group that uses newspaper articles to create theatrical texts. The play highlighted the absurdity of life in New York in a whimsical and playful way with Rivera taking her comedy to a level reminiscent of television sitcoms, as well as the Living Newspaper of the Depression era. The experience of writing *The Nurse* also allowed Rivera to unify her collaborative writing under the auspices of three influential playwriting units: the Ensemble Studio Theatre, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and New Dramatists. The play depicts the problems of being a nurse in a New York City tenement and the impossibility of carrying on a relationship because of continual requests for medical favors. As Jeannette enters her apartment with Angelo, her new husband, a series of phone calls interfere with their love making. Jeannette's friend Janine, her niece Lisa and her pregnant sister Sylvia begin a rash of calls to her apartment and so begins the frustration for Angelo and Jeanette.

The whimsical story allows Rivera to experiment in a purely light genre without the need for delivering a major sociological treatise for audience consumption. Instead Rivera works with two actors, three voices and minor props to create this New York love story reminiscent of the television shows *Friends* or *Mad About You*. *The Nurse* accentuates Rivera's talent as a comic writer, playing the dialogue for quick laughs and one-liners instead of creating the comedy through dramatic tension. The short length of the play and the speed at which the actors must deliver their lines recalls Rivera's early experience as a writer for the soap opera, *Guiding Light* and her collaborative work on actor sketches while working with students at MTC, L.E.F.T. and City College.

Rivera demonstrates her innate ability to capture comedic linguistic patterns across different ages during the three messages left on Jeanette's answering machine. In the first, her friend Janine's hypochondriacal behavior prompts both Jeannette and Angelo to ignore her:

Janine: Jeannette, are you there? Jeanette? Oh Jeannette...come on are you there? Please pick up the phone. If you're there, pick up the phone. It's Janine. Jeannette, it's your best buddy Janine...I thought you were home. I heard you go up the steps. Listen Jeannette, my allergy is acting up. My cat Cleopatra is driving me crazy. Do you have any of those allergy shots? I can just drop by tonight and take one. I don't think I will make it through the night without a shot. Jeannette just let me know what time to drop by. Bye.⁹²

Both *The Nurse* and the earlier *ameRican* dramatically portray computer mediated communication prior to the explosion of the internet, cell phones and other media enhanced communication tools. Rivera provides a brief interplay often discussed socio-cultural problem arising from Latinas having sex at an early age. Rivera posits her social commentary on this issue through the message of Lisa, Jeannette's teenage niece:

Lisa: Hey, titi Jeannette...titi...titi...it's Lisa. Listen I want to know if you have, um...you know condoms.

Jeannette: She's seventeen years old!

Angelo: Sh!

Lisa: I mean not condoms, just one condom.

Jeannette: Oh that's wonderful, just one.

Lisa: I can pick it up tonight, well, um...I want to pick it up right now, because...I'm going out on a date. Okay, I'll call you back...oh and titi please don't tell my mother.

Jeanette: My sister's gonna kill her. If she finds out, that kid goes back to Puerto Rico...I really don't want to know about these things.⁹³

⁹²Carmen Rivera, *The Nurse*, unpublished manuscript, 1997, 2-3.

⁹³Rivera, *The Nurse*, 5.

In concluding this short piece, Rivera introduces a more serious theme related to the dangers of being a young woman. Here she turns the often comically portrayed situation of childbirth, much ridiculed in modern sit-coms and commercial films, into a potentially serious medical condition, re-activating the dedicated nurse who, for the most part, was looking to escape her duties for the night. When her sister Sylvia calls, Jeannette immediately ignores the call until she finds out that her sister is bleeding and needs to get medical attention as soon as possible. Once it is determined that the baby is actually “on the way,” Rivera has Jeannette and Angelo comically run towards the door and into the night to aid Sylvia. Even in cases of low brow comedy, Rivera points to her drama as a medium where people can “help others while helping themselves.”⁹⁴

Delia's Race (1998)

Delia's Race was written to document the life of the late Delia Rodríguez, founder of *Mujeres Positiva*, an HIV-AIDS activist in Puerto Rico. The play is extremely poignant as Delia's life takes a turn when her T-cell count reaches zero and she begins her fight against full-blown AIDS. *Delia's Race* is published in *Positive/Negative: An Anthology of Plays about Women with HIV* and is honest and forthright in its attempt to capture a moment in time documented through personal interviews with Rodríguez, as well as “the uncertainty of women's survival during the AIDS crisis.”⁹⁵

The play begins in the office of Dr. Felix, Delia's physician who informs her that her T-cell count has gone from ninety-six to zero. Delia, who is at first surprised that she has reached full-blown status only five years since her diagnosis, informs the doctor that

⁹⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 9 September 2006.

⁹⁵ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 3 February 2007.

she cannot be derailed by this news since she needs to plan the First Annual AIDS Walk-a-thon in San Juan.⁹⁶ Dr. Felix warns Delia that he is concerned for both her physical and mental health and her disregard for this news:

Delia: Well then, I have to go, I'm running late. The dress shop is going to close soon and I don't want to get caught in a traffic jam on the highway.

Dr. Felix: It's okay to get upset.

Delia: I'm not upset. I knew this was going to happen. It's not like finding out you're HIV-positive.

Dr. Felix: I think you need to deal with this.

Delia: What I need to do is go to my fitting for my dress for my daughter's wedding!

Dr. Felix: Delia, I think you should go to counseling.

Delia: For what?

Dr. Felix: It's important for you to have a support group.

Delia: I know all about support groups – that's why I started *Mujeres Positiva*!⁹⁷

In the following scene Delia begins to doubt her ability to make it through the wedding and becomes depressed at the prospect that she will not survive to see future grandchildren. As Delia begins to obsess over the news, she concludes that her life is incomplete and begins a night of drinking and despair. During her drinking she rejects telephone calls from her administrative assistant, her daughter, and finally a young woman who believes she may have been infected with HIV. Delia, who has refused the first two calls finally realizes her important place in this “race against the virus” and runs to answer the phone. After stumbling to the receiver she is met by a disconnect signal and becomes disheartened having, in her estimation, failed as a “positive woman:”

⁹⁶ Delia Rodríguez was instrumental in bringing the event to Puerto Rico and *Mujeres Positiva* continues to be a major sponsor after her death.

⁹⁷ Carmen Rivera, *Delia's Race*, unpublished manuscript, 1998, 4-5.

Delia: No! Hello, hello, are you there? Young lady...hello...ah damnit! I'm sorry I didn't pick up, I'm sorry. Oh God, you need to stop testing us and you need to wake up! (*Curls up in a fetal position and starts to fall asleep.*) Ah, no...I can't fall asleep. I might not wake up. (*Rocks herself.*) Can't fall asleep, can't fall asleep...(keeps repeating this to herself as she does fall asleep on the floor.)⁹⁸

The third scene of *Delia's Race* dramatizes a discussion with Delia and her soon-to-be-married daughter Angie. In it, Delia confesses that she wants to quit the AIDS run in a few weeks because she feels that her life is over. Her fear finally catches up with her and she wishes her daughter and the rest of the world would leave her alone. In prodding her mother for more information about her current condition, Delia finally lashes out to her daughter and screams "AIDS!! Yes I have AIDS! Now go to bed!"⁹⁹ Delia's is now willing to give up the race, both literally and metaphorically. Her despair and newly confronted belief that "By the time they find a cure, I'll be dead" prompts Angie to reach out to her mother:

Angie: Don't push me away...I'm part of this illness too. I live knowing that my mother is dying. I live knowing you might not see your grandchildren. I'm scared every day, sometimes I cry myself to sleep.¹⁰⁰

By the play's final scene, Delia has confronted her fears and is ready to move on with her battle. At the race Delia's supporters, including Angie and Dr. Felix cheer her towards the finish line. As she enters the stage slowly, "both tired and elated," she is met by congratulations and cheers from the cast and audiences alike. Dr. Felix's message to "keep going Delia" serves as a reminder of the legacy of Delia Rodríguez, who Rivera describes as a "warrior I was honored to meet."¹⁰¹ The play itself serves as a culmination

⁹⁸ Rivera, *Delia's Race*, 9.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 12.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰¹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 3 February 2007.

of Rivera's work during this period, integrating her continued desire to give voice to the voiceless but further, to investigate characters on the island of Puerto Rico. Rivera's maturity as a playwright mirrors the Nuyorican desire to return home, to rescue a past which is known only in *cuentos* and the memories of loved ones.

In his *AIDS Testimonial*, scholar Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez powerfully illustrates this dilemma for Puerto Ricans who have migrated to the more tolerant United States mainland. Sandoval-Sánchez describes his own *(s)exile* and battle with AIDS in comparison to the music which was and always will be part of his life. He notes that "The Puerto Rican national anthem should not be 'La Borinqueña' but 'En mi Viejo San Juan,' a song written in 1947. It narrates the intense state of nostalgia since the Puerto Rican diaspora to New York City in the mid-forties of the twentieth century. The migrant's myth was to return to the island, as the song says." Sandoval-Sánchez's proposed reverse migration, from the United States back to Puerto Rico, complements the dramatic work of Rivera, with both authors attempting to understand their desire for a home that denies them entrance; Sandoval-Sánchez due to his AIDS diagnosis and Rivera's characters for their Nuyorican status.

In the end both Delia, as deceased AIDS victim/dramatic character, and Sandoval-Sánchez, as AIDS survivor/performance scholar, come to terms with the disease that ravages their body. Their corpus has been invaded and transformed similar to the assault on Puerto Rican soil by the United States. However the irony which is illustrated in

Sandoval-Sánchez's *Testimonial*, his resistance and improbable island return,¹⁰² serves as a maxim for the work of Rivera, a dramaturgy which represents the bodies of characters inscribed with dual Puerto Rican and Nuyorican cultural scars.

Rivera's desire to confront multiple facets of Latina/o life in the United States precedes and foreshadows her exploration of canonical women of the Caribbean, Julia de Burgos, La Lupe and eventually Celia Cruz. Her professional career is also impacted dramatically as she fights for copyright ownership, funding opportunities and her own health. In this way, *Delia's Race*, a play of survival and reaffirmation is a turning point for Rivera as woman and playwright, strengthening her resolve for battles yet to be waged in the post-millennium New York theatre community.

¹⁰² Sandoval-Sánchez writes, "Yo lo confieso: I never planned to play Puerto Rico's national anthem at my deathbed. So why would I after my AIDS diagnosis? The agonistic and existential obsession with dying or being buried in Puerto Rico, inevitably a required act of abduction for most Puerto Ricans in the United States, never crossed my mind...I decided to stay alive con Puerto Rico en mi corazón while dancing to a transnational salsa beat. I am not afr/AIDS to chant in broken English: 'Mi cuerpo es Puerto Rico, my body is home t/here, w/here I am.'" Excerpted from "An AIDS Testimonial" in *Technofuturos: Critical Interventions in Latino/a Studies*, Nancy Raquel-Mirabel and Agustín Laó-Montes, eds. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 302-03.

Chapter 3: Troubled Times and New Hope: 2000 - 2005

Julia de Burgos: Child of Water, 1999.

La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny, 2001.

Caravan of Death, 2002.

The Next Cycle, 2003.

Ghosts in Brooklyn, 2003.

Under the Mango Tree, 2005.

Julia de Burgos: Child of Water (1999)

This final chapter finds Carmen Rivera at the height of her creative and critical output as she recreates the life of famed Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos. The play entitled *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water* was an “intense experience”¹ for Rivera, as she traveled between New York and Puerto Rico to document the canonical figure while establishing archival connections with those who would later help her to create *La Lupe: Mi Vida Mi Destino*. *Julia de Burgos* completed a successful run at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre in New York under the direction of famed Cuban director Manuel Martín and produced by Artistic Director Miriam Colón-Valle. At the heart of this play is the dramatic integration of dual identities representing the lead character and portrayed by actresses Sol Miranda and Lourdes Martín. Martín plays “Woman,” a metaphysical entity that allows the poet, Julia, to live in a “fantastic” world of reality. Formulaically, this dual identity will be re-visited by Rivera in *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, where Celia Cruz will also be portrayed by two separate actresses representing “Woman” and “Celia.”

As described by *Village Voice* critic Ed Morales, “the Puerto Rican poet seems embroiled in a catharsis with her long-suffering sibling, but playwright Carmen Rivera

¹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

has written the role of Woman as a mirror image of de Burgos – not exactly an evil twin, but the creative inner force of the artist.”² Critic Juan Carlos Martínez suggests that Rivera’s exploration of the two sides of Julia de Burgos leads to the audience’s cultural signification and reception of the character as a Puerto Rican “everywoman,” trapped in the textual world created through her poetry and the reality of existing in a male-dominated literary world, suggested by the appearances of actors playing the roles of Pablo Neruda and Juan Bosch. As Martínez notes:

The most innovative structural point woven by the author is the conception of the central character as spilt into two: the woman and her subconscious self both representing Julia de Burgos, and seemingly divided entities until the metaphysical death written by Carmen Rivera reconciles one with the other, allowing them to transcend as one iconographic cultural Latina of the 20th century. This duality of characters as human, and their own contradictions, validate the empathy constructed between audience and text.³

Rivera thus “splits” Julia de Burgos and in doing so highlights the difficulty of existing as woman and author simultaneously. For Julia to exist and thrive as poet she must give up the feminine conscience of woman, bequeathed by her ancestors in Puerto Rico, and instead impose upon herself the colonized status of lover/ex-patriate, at the will of the men who enter (and frequently exit) her life. To her credit, Julia splits to allow “Woman” to retain the qualities which create her spiritual being, born of the water, that gave birth to her poetry. As “Woman” reminds Julia early in the play:

Woman: I am a part of your life and I was part of you before you were born...I will always be a part of you. It is not possible for us to separate. No matter how hard you try you can not tear us apart. I am your soul! You tried to throw me away but I am still connected to you...I felt your thoughts. I still feel your thoughts. I felt you dream of the river.⁴

² Ed Morales. “Mirror, Mirror,” *The Village Voice*, 22 June 1999, 1.

³ Juan Carlos Martínez, “Criatura del Agua, La Memoria y el alma,” *La Mateodora*, abril/septiembre. (1999): 3. I have translated this, and all subsequent Spanish language reviews in this chapter.

⁴Carmen Rivera, *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water*, unpublished manuscript, 1999, 8.

In his *New York Daily News* review, David Kaufman explains that, “such lines as ‘I threw you out before, and I’ll throw you out again’ and ‘You kept me from love with your poetry dreams’ take on whole new meaning when one realizes that Burgos is speaking to herself.”⁵ Further, the complexities of portraying such an icon at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre heightened the project’s importance as well as the stress placed upon Rivera to complete the project. Since the piece was commissioned by the pre-eminent name in U.S./Puerto Rican theatre, Miriam Colón-Valle, the stakes for the play’s success were extremely high.⁶ Rivera felt that during the creative process she became the soul-mate of the deceased poet, as she attempted to reconstruct her story through her poems. In commemorating this process she included in the opening night program the following author’s note: “This play is a dramatized collage of the life of the Puerto Rican poetess Julia de Burgos. It covers episodes of her youth and development, her loves, aspirations and struggles, and her tragic collision with a society that could not grasp her caliber as a woman and as a poetess.”⁷

The creative connection between Rivera and de Burgos, first examined in her one-act *Julia*; a play which served as an homage to the impact of Julia de Burgos on a young Puerto Rican immigrant in New York City, allowed Rivera to tackle many of the challenges in dramatizing an iconic figure. Upon accepting the commission, Rivera found that she was at a loss in finding archival materials detailing the personal life of Julia de Burgos. Whether it be with scholars at CUNY’s Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños or in

⁵ David Kaufman, “Julia de Burgos conjures poet’s fiery Latina soul,” *New York Daily News*, 11 June 2001, 1.

⁶ As Rivera explained to playwright Caridad Svich, “I received two commissions from the theatre to write about Puerto Rican poet Julia de Burgos and Cuban singer La Lupe, respectively. I really admired these two women but would’ve never written about them, if I hadn’t been commissioned to do so. Caridad Svich, “In Conversation with Carmen Rivera,” *The Dramatist* (March/April 2004): 36.

⁷ *Julia de Burgos: Child of Water* Opening Night program, Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, 12 May 1999, 10.

Puerto Rico, discovering family and acquaintances of Julia willing to be interviewed for the play proved a difficult task. Rivera instead turned to the poetry, using the texts of her writing to locate the woman and poet she believed was represented within them. In creating the structure of the play, Rivera fractures Julia's life with sporadic poetic moments, attempting to find a part of the woman with whom her audience could identify. "Woman," stressing this idea, reminds Julia, "you can go on being a poem, Julia de Burgos; the one that has nothing of the bourgeois, the one who sings without a harp in the gardens and curls even your soul with a storm"⁸

Rivera's own desire to create plays as emblems of herself and her "life journey" are considered by D.J.R. Bruckner of the *New York Times* as he suggests that "Ms. Rivera has a struggle of her own. In seventeen scenes she evokes the whole complicated life (of Julia de Burgos) – in Puerto Rico, Havana, Washington and New York – peppering the dialogue with lines from twenty de Burgos poems and weaving them into many allusions to principal de Burgos themes, mainly a longing for Puerto Rico's independence and the identification of its people with the waters of its rivers."⁹ Just as Rivera's *La Gringa* performs the Puerto Rican desire to return to the waters that purify El Yunque, Julia's poetry investigates this same act by seeking refuge in the waters of birth. It is through the water (and the soil) that both women choose to represent the island; both in their departure from, as well as their desire to, return to this native water. Rivera's act of spiritual cleansing through water, symbolized in *Urashima* as well, becomes a theme of desire and refuge for her characters, as it also serves as a great conundrum for Puerto

⁸ Rivera, *Julia de Burgos*, 3.

⁹ Bruckner, D.J.R., "A Bit of the Ridiculous: In a Search for Her Roots," *New York Times*, 7 March 1996, 1.

Ricans who often choose between the waters of Puerto Rico and those of the Hudson River. This image of Julia de Burgos meditating and praying by the river, while envisioning her own mother's face, helps to understand the peaceful remembrance of familial heritage for both Rivera and her characters:

God I miss you mami...I have something to tell you. Um...don't be worried, but I'm going to New York City...The Nationalist movement is very strong there and I can meet many more artists – and I'll have a bigger audience for my poetry. And Manhattan is also an island – they have rivers...this is not really a goodbye, more like I'll see you later. I'm a little scared, but I know it's the right thing to do. So I'm certain that I'll find you there (*JULIA throws book in the river*).¹⁰

This act of tossing her book into the river while assuring herself that her mother will visit the rivers that surround Manhattan demonstrates Rivera's thematic concerns with birth and renewal as well as cultural baptism through cleansing. This renewal harkens back to a notion of nostalgia present in the works of both Julia de Burgos and the themes of Carmen Rivera plays. Renewal is an antidote for an apathetic nostalgic gaze or false romanticism for Puerto Ricans who long for the island they left behind. Julia de Burgos, as well as other characters in Rivera's plays, is caught in an intermediary state of "longing for and longing to" – attempting to recreate what they had and to break free to form a new identity, both politically engaged and self-actualized. As Rivera explains:

Nostalgia is not part of the Puerto Rican psyche. Puerto Ricans do not look back on a place as a home nor can we return to a golden, innocent time, when we were whole – we are still waiting to become. We haven't been offered the luxury of looking back – so we must look into the future, longing for a place to belong. In the meantime we exist as people in diaspora and that place of belonging resides within us. What I do long for has nothing to do with my heritage – a cultural environment conducive to creating.¹¹

¹⁰ Rivera, *Julia de Burgos*, 16.

¹¹ Caridad Svich and Maria M. Delgado, eds. "E/merging Territories: Latina/o Theatre and Performance," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16/3 (2004): 102.

Julia de Burgos: Child of Water is a play which dramatizes binaries, psychological, geographic and cultural. Julia is torn between the poet and the woman, Puerto Rico and New York, the *jíbara* and the celebrity, desiring varied loci which will stimulate her hybrid identity. While she wishes to “walk on the land/swim in the water” she also claims to be a “socialist [who]...doesn’t want to be a revolutionary.” It was Julia’s pain and suffering that created the artistic poet she was destined to become. Her own cries directed at “Woman,” “We’re two different people wanting different things, traveling different paths,” best describes the complexity of dramatizing this Puerto Rican icon.¹² As Rivera explains, “Julia frequently wrote about being torn in two by her work. She wrote poems about throwing away her soul, because it caused her so much harm. In ‘To Julia de Burgos,’ she writes that the artist will delight in the demise of the woman. I imagined Julia could never synthesize the woman and the artist, and that is where the story began for me.”¹³

It is also the fact that Julia de Burgos was a Latina in a generation dominated by male writers which further complicates her place in the canon of Latin American writers. To read her is to attempt a classification – feminist, Caribbean, political participant – all of which fail to recognize the unique perspective she brought to the literary world during her brief lifetime. Further, to place her as an early icon of Nuyorican literature creates a further rift between criticism and community. As Carmen S. Rivera (no relation to the playwright) proposes in her book *Kissing the Mango Tree: Puerto Rican Women Rewriting American Literature*:

¹² Rivera, *Julia de Burgos*, 24.

¹³ Svich, “In Conversation,” 37.

A dissonant voice from the forties was that of Julia de Burgos, who lived the last twelve years of her life in New York, where she also wrote many of her poems. In contrast to the writings of the Generation of the 40s, Burgos' poems exist in the emotive world of love, death, abandonment, and isolation. There are a few poems lamenting the cold and inhuman atmosphere of the big city, but there is very little in terms of concrete experiences from daily life. On the other hand, her death on a street in New York has transformed her into an emblem of the tragic fate of many Puerto Rican immigrants.¹⁴

The responsibility of creating *Julia de Burgos* becomes even greater once the play becomes a product of re-imagination, with the protagonist creating herself as a historiographic model of self-awareness; playwright to play, poet to poem. The intertextuality of the piece rests in Rivera's interpretation of the poetry in comparison to our own scholarly analysis of Julia de Burgos as poet and celebrity. Furthermore, the complexities of dramatizing any author, whose work is open to the criticism of scholars and audiences alike, limits Rivera's ability to reinterpret Julia in a new way. As Stoppard critically re-envisioned the life of Shakespeare through his characters in both *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Shakespeare in Love*, Rivera must also bring Julia de Burgos to life (as well as Neruda who refers to Julia in the play as "the chosen one...the voice of Latin America") with the realization that literary critics will discount the historical nature of the work, often forgetting that dramatization is a work of fiction.

As a socio-feminist critique, Rivera is also responsible for satisfying the claims of male dominance in both Julia de Burgos's professional and personal life. In multiple scenes, Julia disrupts her education, political views or social beliefs as she adheres to the demands of men. Juan Grullón, who courts Julia while forcing her to live in a convent

¹⁴ Carmen S. Rivera, *Kissing the Mango Tree: Puerto Rican Women Rewriting American Literature* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2002), xv-xvi.

until he wishes to make their relationship known to his bourgeois family, stipulates what society demands upon the free spirit of Julia:

Juan: Do you want to get married?

Julia: Of course I do.

Juan: Then you have to stay there until we are married.

Julia: And when is that going to be?

Juan: I don't know yet.

Julia: What are you waiting for?

Juan: The right time.

Julia: Have you told your family?

Juan: No.

Julia: I've been stuck in that awful prison so that I could become respectable enough for you and you haven't done anything about our marriage! I gave up school...so why am I doing this?

Juan: Julia you have to stay there. And you just can't stay there a couple of months...it has to be a significant amount of time.

Julia: Why can't we get married?

Juan: Because I can't marry someone I was living with – they're certain rules that have to be followed and I can't break them because you don't like them. And you knew what it was going to be like and you agreed to it.

Julia: But it's horrible Juan and it's killing me, my writing is suffering. Please let me come home.¹⁵

Rivera dramatizes the role of women as sacrificial to the desires of men and the moral constructions of society. Regardless of Julia's fame as a poet, she is consistently abandoned by men who dictate her place in their lives. While she often lives as a free woman in social circles which encourage her writing and political opinions, it is her desire to raise a family and be a wife that destroys her creativity, here represented by the character "Woman." Rivera allows Julia to dream of domesticity at the cost of visits from "Woman," who yearns for the two to be joined as one living entity. Once abandoned by Juan and living a fruitful life as middle-class wife in Washington D.C., it is Julia who reaches out to the spirit of "Woman" and implores her to "let me write again." Rivera's depiction of "Woman" as Julia's muse positively activates the reception of the play at the

¹⁵ Rivera, *Julia de Burgos*, 38-39.

Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, chiefly due to the fact that the company had, for years, been dominated by male playwrights and had seen a huge decrease in attendance. With the run of *Julia de Burgos* the theatre saw a 400% increase in advanced ticket sales and a definite commitment from Miriam Colón to produce other Latina themed productions including *La Lupe: My Life My Destiny*, *Ortíz Sisters of Mott Haven*, *Blind Alley*, *The Last of Bernarda*, and solo performances by Marga Gomez, La Bruja and Sandra María Esteves.

Rivera's decision to construct *Julia de Burgos* as a Latina empowerment play does not overshadow the fact that she also provides ample discourse on the appropriation of Puerto Rico's resources by an aggressive United States government, and its Operation Bootstrap policies. Julia's continuous commentary on "what's happening in Puerto Rico," serves as a sounding board for both her own political leanings as well as those of the author. "The government, the United States Army and the 'Church' are all against el pueblo puertorriqueño. Nobody is fighting for the people, no one knows who to trust. Half the island supports the United States – we're colonized, we're divided, we're scared. That's unbelievable to me."¹⁶ Julia's desire to "walk on my land, swim in my river, touch my family"¹⁷ is met with consternation and objection by all, save "Woman," serving as her creative conscience and dual representation of *latinidad*. The two sides of Julia de Burgos, in constant disagreement with each other's handling of life, career, love and hope, finally succeed in their understanding of each other by the play's conclusion as Julia remarks "if only you hadn't pushed so hard" and "Woman" retorts "If only you weren't afraid – I could have given you strength." This resolution between the two finally

¹⁶ Rivera, *Julia de Burgos*, 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

allows “Woman” to exorcize the demons which keeps the poet captive in our physical world:

Woman: Stop being so sensitive! Stop fighting for people – stop feeling the sorrow of oppression around the world; stop feeling the sadness of humanity; the triumph of joy, stop feeling! You can’t no matter how hard you tried you couldn’t stop your feelings. That’s what I used to write poetry. I cannot make poetry without your feelings; your senses. I need you to write. I was broken too Julia! I need your pain, your suffering, your anger, your love, your joy. Without your highs and lows – without your politics and compassion I could not write. I can’t write without you. I’m a poet without words. I am dead without you.¹⁸

Through this exorcism the two entities that create Julia de Burgos are now united, allowing “Woman” to be free on her own spiritual journey and Julia, the physical body, to leave this world and return to the water. Though Julia de Burgos died after collapsing on a New York street at the age of thirty-nine, the play allows her to be symbolically transported for a final swim in the waters of Carolina Beach. For this event, Rivera chooses to, for the only time in the play, break the fourth wall and have the two characters acknowledge the community which has experienced both the play and this spiritual return to Puerto Rico:

Julia: Who are these people? (*Julia looking out into the audience*)

Woman: They came to the river for you.

Julia: For me...

Woman: Yes.

Julia: What are they doing?

Woman: It’s a tribute.

Julia: A tribute?

Woman: It’s a tribute for your life...Julia, it’s time to go.

Julia: Don’t remember me! Feel me!

Woman (*to audience*): The less you think me, the more you love me.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Rivera, *Julia de Burgos*, 32.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The acknowledgment of the audience allows for a moment of *communitas* where proper respects are paid, through the body of actress Sol Miranda, to the late Julia de Burgos. Since the Latino community was robbed of the opportunity to say goodbye to the poet following a hospital error which allowed her body to remain unclaimed for weeks, it seemed fitting that Rivera would give the audience the opportunity to do so in a formalized “release of the soul.” The play remains a favorite among Latino theatre audiences and, notwithstanding the legal circus that was to follow, surely would have become a staple in the repertory of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre.

La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny (2001)

Rivera’s range as a playwright became evident as her hit play, *La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny* dazzled both Latino and non-Latino audiences with its tightly-constructed plot, lyrical writing, and buoyant musical theatre structure. Rivera captured the iconic La Lupe, heroine of Latina culture, both through the artistic lens as well as by highlighting the socio-historical importance of her life and career. The play exploded during the turbulent year of 2001 in New York, where the attacks of September 11th were being felt throughout the theatre community. *La Lupe* also followed on the heels of the Latina/o explosion of the late 1990s, where Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony and Jennifer López, to name but a few, catapulted onto the entertainment scene and subsequently onto the world stage. The experience with *La Lupe*, the real life “soap opera” scenario and litigation brought against Miriam Colón and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, the subsequent backlash against Rivera by the Latino theatre community, and the lessons learned

regarding rights of the author, all led Rivera to reflect upon her strength as a writer and human being.

La Lupe is a folk musical, powerful in its dramatization of Latina/o life within the parameters of American popular culture. Theoretically this proves problematic since scholar Rick Altman notes in his seminal book, *The American Film Musical*, that “the mythical vision of the folk musical is in many ways more complex [than a standard book musical], because it must grapple more seriously with a lived reality.”²⁰ Following the formula of what critics call the “jukebox musical,” made famous by shows like *Jersey Boys* and *Smokey Joe’s Café*, *La Lupe* reconstructs the life of Cuban born singer Victoria Lupe Yoli in two acts and fourteen songs, moving backwards in time to depict the life of Latin soul sensation La Lupe. La Lupe, ordained Pentecostal preacher and Lehman College student, recounts her life story after receiving an F from an English professor who believes her autobiographical essay to be a total fabrication.

Michael Sommers, in his review of the play, believed that the musical became popular due to the fact that “the sorrowful details of La Lupe’s life appeal to sentimental viewers’ worst desires [namely] to cry in the theatre. And...because [actress Sully Díaz] delivers a blazing impression of La Lupe.” Sommers negative analysis that the play is “framed as a series of flashbacks [which] Carmen Rivera [writes as a] rags-to-riches bio-drama, [is] rudimentary stuff, staged in a barebones mode by Luis Caballero”²¹ seemed to be one of the few negative reviews the play received from the New York press. In fact, *La Lupe*’s success was so solid that it was one of the only shows that continued to draw new audiences after the tragic September 11th attacks of 2001.

²⁰ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 272.

²¹ Michael Sommers, “Sudsy Star Bio and Smutty Sex Comedy,” *Star Ledger*, 24 August 2001, 2.

La Lupe: My Life My Destiny was initially conceived following the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre's success with *Julia de Burgos*, *Child of Water* when Miriam Colón offered Rivera the opportunity to retell the story of this Latina icon within the structure of a musical, something that PRTT had recently attempted with Silvio Martínez Palau's *The English Only Restaurant*. As Rivera notes "Miriam Colón said, 'Next is La Lupe.' She wanted these women at her theatre."²² In comparing the two, Rivera notes that "for Lupe it was very different. She achieved great international acclaim and then lost her money, but she was never as destitute as Julia." Rivera was intrigued by the fact that La Lupe was actually two stories. The first, a story of the rise and fall of Lupe after "receiving her saint, as is customary in Santería," and the second, the story of a once famous woman who fails a course for being *extraordinary*. The two stories, in dialogue with each other, caused Rivera to structure the play as she did.²³

Ironically, Rivera's traumatic experience with the play began after she decided to cut ties with Colón following an invitation to produce *Julia* in Paris. Though "the cast was prepared to sleep on floors if necessary," Miriam Colón refused to authorize the production. As Rivera recounts:

She said no and I swore I would never work with her again. She called me for *La Lupe*. I said no but eventually agreed. I went to Paris on my own. I met the guy who was willing to produce *Julia de Burgos*. Miriam got mad and said don't negotiate for me. She didn't own [*Julia*]. I could have taken the play myself. Half the cast wanted to go and the others didn't want me to burn the bridge with Miriam.²⁴

²² Ronald Rand, "Carmen Rivera," *Soul of the American Actor* (Summer 2001): 3.

²³ Svich, "In Conversation," 36-39.

²⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

Colón, well-known for her dedication to the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre as well as her tough leadership during its 41 year history, has been party to many battles with Latina/o playwrights, actors and directors over the years. However it was Rivera's *La Lupe* that provided the public with a glimpse, albeit a scandalous one, into the inner-workings of the most famous Puerto Rican helmed theatre company. *La Lupe* also caused Rivera to take a second look at the management of PRTT and her long association with Miriam Colón, who for the better part of the decade provided both herself and Cándido Tirado with a space to present their work and to participate in the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre's Professional Playwrights Unit.

As Rivera notes, "I think it's always a conflictive relationship between playwright and producer. The best we can hope for is that we both want to make money. It's very hard...all the other conflicts that I had, taught me that we have to protect ourselves. As a playwright you have to learn how to take care of yourself. As a Puerto Rican you learn the same. You have to watch out for yourself."²⁵ This desire to protect herself, combined with the fact that Miriam's reputation for being difficult had peaked with *Julia de Burgos*, caused Rivera to question what seemed like Miriam's unprecedented desire to describe *La Lupe* as a "collective creation" of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre:

Miriam notoriously gives you the contract on opening night. I don't know how she does this since Equity needs the contracts to guarantee that the actors will get paid. A lot of this is conjectural. I heard it through the grapevine that she wanted to take my copyright. For this play I had to do all my own research, I flew myself to Puerto Rico. One guy I had to track down was named Edgar Martínez. He used to tell me how all these people wanted to write on her. I had to use all my skills of persuasion to get him on my side. I let him read an early draft. He introduced me to Julia's niece Consuelo Burgos. I did all of this on my own. At my own expense. Miriam was the producer. She was supposed to do all of this for me.²⁶

²⁵ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

²⁶ Ibid.

Miriam Colón, in response to Rivera's questioning of her authority at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, was quick to point out that "Carmen Rivera has benefited a great deal from this play; her husband has also benefited from the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre."²⁷ Colón's major disagreement with Rivera was the belief that her theatre, not the playwright, owned *La Lupe*. Colón argued in early 2002 that the theatre "conceived this play [and] commissioned its libretto. [Rivera] was involved with us in the process for more than one year, involved in all the aspects of the play. It surprises me that once the play premieres she suddenly begins discussing rights of the author as if we had nothing to do with the project." Rivera's response to Colón's rhetoric is just as simple, "...what has caused this controversy is that Colón states that she has exclusive worldwide rights for life. As a writer, you cannot give your rights to *anyone* forever. A producer can attain rights for six months, a year, depending on the negotiations, but not forever."²⁸ With *La Lupe*, Rivera and Colón exemplify a classic case of what occurs when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object.

The spectacle of *La Lupe* and its subsequent legal woes eclipsed the production itself, now seeming a distant memory in Latino theatre. In addition, the arrival of *Quién Mató a Hector Lavoe?*²⁹ a few weeks after *La Lupe*'s premiere seems to have relegated *La Lupe* to a minor footnote. Ironically, 2001 was a year when three Latino based jukebox musicals premiered, all attempting to capture profits from the same audience pool and all being ultimately affected by the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.

²⁷ Rivera later expressed her ill-feelings and loss regarding PRTT. In a November 2002 interview she stated "[a]s soon as I began demanding my rights the doors of the theatre closed for me. Not only me but also for my husband. We met at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and this was our second home." Juan Moreno-Velázquez, *La Lupe Fiasco*, *El Diario/La Prensa*, 21 Nov 2002, 1.

²⁸ Juan Moreno-Velázquez, "Demandan a La Lupe," *El Diario/La Prensa*, 9 February 2002, 1.

²⁹ The play, a huge hit with Latino audiences, eventually served as the inspiration for the 2007 film *El Cantante* with Marc Anthony and Jennifer López.

La Lupe, *Quién Mató a Hector Lavoe?* and Dolores Prida's *Four Guys named José and una mujer named María* all faced similar economic issues and subsequent closings. At a time where this "Latino musical formula" seemed to be producing a successful audience initiative, friendly to both Anglo, as well as Latino communities, cataclysmic world events and economic downturn negatively impacted what may have been a "renaissance" in the Latino theatre.

Rivera's recreation of La Lupe's life as a "drama with music," confirmed a shared belief of many playwrights, Latino and non-Latino, that the history of a celebrated life can best be captured by the music that creates their celebrity. For critic D.J. Bruckner "the experience is a *concert* by an infectiously passionate singer whose gift for comic innovation is unpredictable and dangerous – with occasional dialogue laced in to supply a narrative theme."³⁰ In two of these intrinsically formulaic productions, the bodies of both Salsa King Lavoe and Queen La Lupe (and later Celia Cruz) are resurrected by audiences who share, as a community, the performance of the soundtracks of their lives, just as Prida's Josés and María tell their stories by singing the songs they heard as children. Altman's premise that "the folk musical projects the audience into a mythicized version of the cultural past"³¹ stands in agreement with that of musical theatre scholar Raymond Knapp who stresses that "images, narratives, and projections that instill belief in people's valued past, that is, mythologies, become a core ingredient of nationalism."³² This basic concept, noted in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*, influence the work of Rollo May's book, *A Cry for Myth*, which in turn serves as a self-defined inspiration for the socio-historical dramaturgy of Carmen Rivera.

³⁰ D.J. Bruckner, "Soul Shaking Power of a Cuban Wonder," *New York Times*, 14 July 2001, 1.

³¹ Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 272.

³² Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 121.

This untapped Latino audience, which in early 2001 flocked to the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre for both *La Lupe* and *Quién Mató a Hector Lavoe?*, was finally supporting Latino-created theatre in a way that Anglo produced musicals with Latino themes could not. Paul Simon's *The Capeman* and Kander and Ebb's *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* were no longer the benchmark upon which to produce "marketed musical *latinidad*," as Latino producers were beginning to create and produce their own stories which, Rick Altman notes, "cannot survive without a sense of community."³³ The conflict that occurred between playwright Rivera and producer Colón seemed a betrayal of faith for the Latino theatre, demonstrating that a time when the community could finally create equal footing with the commercial Anglo theatre, unwilling to acknowledge or produce Latino voices in their theatres, the few Latino artists who were accustomed to doing this were now bickering among themselves. Further, attempts made by Latinos to produce their own original work on the Broadway musical stage were also failing as demonstrated by the never produced *Mambo Kings*, based on the award-winning novel by Oscar Hijuelos.

Carmen Rivera's belief that "Latino/a themed musicals don't work because there are no Latino conceptualists," provides justification as to why a producer like David Maldonado, and for that matter other salsa music producers, have taken to the stage. Rivera argues that both *Capeman* and *Mambo Kings* did not integrate these people into the creation, though Nuyorican poet Pedro Pietri served as the first librettist for *Capeman* and Argentinian director and founder of TeatroStageFest Susana Tubert was its first director. Both "conceptualists" were fired by creator Simon, to be replaced by Guyanese

³³ Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 272.

Pulitzer prize winner Derek Walcott, who Rivera notes “was not a dramatist,” and Canadian Mark Morris, a choreographer by trade.

Regarding *Mambo Kings*, Rivera acknowledges that Hijuelos “did not know how to do theatre” and was replaced by a Cuban writer only one week before previews. She regards the problem as one of misunderstanding between the elitist professional theatre producer and the “cultural narratives” they are trying to re-package to the consumer, as she questions, “Why the Roths, who are theatre producers, do it this way. I know that people believe that Latinos are a burgeoning economic force. People want to be a part of it but they never go at it the right way.”³⁴ Thus Altman’s view that “the folk musical tries desperately to inject folk values and experiences into a world governed by the mass media” and the fact that “in order to achieve this goal, the folk musical must disguise its identity as a commercial, mass media product” demonstrates the process by which a Latino play must recreate itself to be consumed by the commercial American theatre.³⁵

At its core, *La Lupe*, as defined by Miriam Colón, is a “drama with music” celebrating the life of arguably the greatest Latin soul singer of all time. The play, written in Rivera’s self-identified surrealist style, argues for a physical aesthetic devoid of set and the request for “transitions with lights [only].”³⁶ The character of La Lupe was originally played by native Puerto Rican actress Sully Díaz in a critically acclaimed performance which brought her to the attention of mainland critics. D.J. Bruckner of the *New York Times* commented that “Sully Díaz can make you feel you are witnessing a resurrection,”³⁷ while Ed Morales felt that “watching Díaz breathe new life into La Lupe classics such as *La Tirana* and *Que te Pedí* was a surreal trip back in time. Every frantic,

³⁴ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

³⁵ Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 324.

³⁶ Carmen Rivera, *La Lupe: My Life My Destiny*, unpublished manuscript, 2001, 2.

³⁷ Bruckner, “Soul Shaking Power,” 1.

sensual dance step across the stage, every agonized breath capturing La Lupe's trademark vocal phrasing, every entrancing hand gesture rang true. It was as if Díaz was possessed from above.³⁸ Ms. Díaz, a popular celebrity who starred in the telenovela *Coralito*, was joined by an ensemble of four actors who between them portrayed twenty-four roles. In addition, Grammy award winning musical director Oscar Hernández conducted a four piece salsa band accompanying Ms. Díaz on fourteen La Lupe classics including *La Gran Tirana*, *Puro Teatro* and *Fever*.

The play's first scene remains its most important, setting up a series of flashbacks which recount the lead character's life story. For La Lupe this occurs because her English professor refuses to believe her autobiographical essay, giving her an "F on her life." This negation of La Lupe by an Anglo professor immediately creates a shared community between character and audience, allowing them to criticize the educational system which should be aware of their cultural contributions. Since the audience is familiar with the career of La Lupe and her place in Latino culture, they are automatically made to feel superior to the professor, buried in student exams and oblivious to the fact that a "queen" is in his presence. As Tom Sime of the *Dallas Morning News* concludes, "she was La Lupe, the first Latin Soul superstar, a Cuban diva whose star burned brightly but briefly, etching her into the collective memory of her adopted home, New York City, even as she was forgotten elsewhere."³⁹ These multiple layers of exile in the life of La Lupe can be compared to both Julia de Burgos and Celia Cruz, Rivera's next major project. For these Latinas, their displacement from homeland (Cuba/Puerto Rico) is followed by further

³⁸ Ed Morales, "Breath of New Life in Salsa's La Lupe," *The Village Voice*, July 2001, 1.

³⁹ Tom Sime, "La Lupe Burns Again," *Dallas Morning News*, 1 June 2004, 1.

exile (wealth/fame/reputation) but ironically all three find a surrogate home in New York City:

Lupe: You gave me an F.

Professor: Let me see. (*He takes the story and looks it over*) I must say, you are one of my best students. This essay is well-written and it is virtually without any typographical mistakes and it is actually very interesting. But I wanted you to write a story that was based on reality.

Lupe: I did.

Professor: The assignment was based on the difference between “reality” and “fiction”...you wrote a fictional story.

Lupe: Professor, this was my life.

Professor: Gold records, Tito Puente, Carnegie Hall and The Dick Cavett Show? With all due respect, I used to watch The Dick Cavett Show and I never saw a *Guadalupe Yoli* on it.

Lupe: People knew me as La Lupe.

Professor: La Lupe. (*She grabs the essay*)

Lupe: Everything I wrote here is true. (*Reading from her essay*) “I am a singer. I was born a singer and I will die a singer.”⁴⁰

Here again the audience is given a glimpse of the reception of their own *latinidad* by the American popular culture *machine*, which churns out Latina/o celebrities based on hip gyrations, sexuality and foreign-sounding names. The professor does not recognize Guadalupe Yoli in his class because she is no longer the Latina sex kitten “La Lupe,” kicking off her shoes and flirting with Dick Cavett. Instead, by his own admission, the professor has before him an intelligent and articulate middle-aged woman who is more at home in her church than on a stage. This *Barthesian* personification of La Lupe as “a pure effect, a spectacle, a clown,”⁴¹ supports what he has consumed on television as well as what he perceives as *latinidad* through his own experiences at Lehman College. He has been pre-conditioned to believe that this “foreigner” could not possibly be one of the

⁴⁰ Rivera, *La Lupe*, 5-6.

⁴¹ Roland Barthes trans by Annette Lavers. *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1993), 151.

most successful musicians of the twentieth century and therefore, invalidates her life with a failing grade.

For Miriam Colón, the necessity to produce this story becomes crucial in countering these negative cultural perceptions, as she praises La Lupe as “one of the original crossover artists, with tremendous spiritual power. In spite of her personal difficulties she had the ability to get up again and again and not lose faith in herself. This enormous capacity to be reborn again stands as a tremendous example of her indomitable spirit, and we make sure to emphasize that in the play.”⁴² Thus La Lupe’s insistence holds additional significance in the context of cultural acceptance as she pleads with the professor to “Let me prove it to you. It’s my life, it’s my destiny.”⁴³

In an ironic way Lupe, like Colón, is portrayed as a feisty no-nonsense artist who is quick to come to blows with colleagues and friends. Her feud with bandleader Tito Puente is depicted in the play through a series of short vignettes, each demonstrating the difficulty of working with Lupe, and eventually leading to her dismissal. One of the most powerful moments of the first act depicts Lupe’s impossible demands and melodramatic tantrums in the recording studio, where Lupe screams at Puente “Are you rushing me? I hate being rushed, people always think that singing just happens. I am La Lupe, the Queen, por Dios!”⁴⁴ Puente’s ever-increasing anger towards La Lupe festers until they share a heated discussion at the conclusion of Act One in which Puente admits to firing her as a result of a merger with Fania Records and the hiring of Celia Cruz. Lupe, proud to the end, shares her disappointment and resentment with her audience:

⁴² Robert Dominguez, “Play Probes la vida Lupe,” *Daily News*, 28 June 2001, E3.

⁴³ Rivera, *La Lupe*, 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

Lupe: I couldn't believe Tito turned his back on me. He turned my whole world upside down, just like that. Maybe he was right, I did fight too much...but I made a lot of money singing and all these business people, promoters, club owners...producers, they all feel it's their right to take whatever they want.

Madrina (voiceover): Listen mija...your success will be greater than anything you could have dreamed...but you will fall.

Lupe: Shut up! Shut up! Stop making me think about some stupid tragedy! Do you know what it's like living with a prophecy hanging over your head, always waiting for the shoe to drop? I am not going to let the prediction come true. I will not let it happen!⁴⁵

The prophecy that Lupe mentions occurs early in the play and is sparked by her godmother's prediction foretelling her tragic rise and fall.⁴⁶ The structural spine of this play is built upon destiny and the use of spirituality in predicting the future, as Lupe is haunted and ultimately falls at the hands of fate, stripping her of wealth, fame and the title of Queen of Salsa. Her *madrina*'s urgent warning "beware of people who will take from you; do not trust people so easily; beware of people who say they love you and then try to hurt you. It is the people who you trust the most that will steal from you," ironically foreshadows many of the concerns of La Lupe's real life family following the lawsuit. Lupe's children, Rainbow García and René Camano, openly discussed their anger at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and Miriam Colón during a December 2001 interview with Juan Moreno-Velázquez who, as a staff reporter for *El Diario/La Prensa*, covered the Lupe case until its legal resolution.

In the interview, both children describe the betrayal they felt and the lack of insight they had into the legal issues involving the play, particularly once the Rivera lawsuit came to fruition. "Many people have tried to make money by using our mother's

⁴⁵ Rivera, *La Lupe*, 33.

⁴⁶ This scene mirrors one from *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, where Celia, after winning a singing contest, is told she will become a great star but be forced to leave home. Lupe's connection to the life of Celia Cruz is quite ironic and it is obvious that the similarities between the two greatly influence Rivera's structural choices.

name; and the situation with this play has really brought this to light,” explained Camano who felt that the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre did not have their mother’s best intentions in mind when they began creating the play. “The memory of my mother should be respected. At the end of her life she had peace.” In addition, Lupe’s children feel that Miriam Colón went out of her way to produce a show which purposely avoided costly payments for rights and residuals, not only to Rivera and director Luis Caballero, but also to the estate of the late celebrity.

Rainbow García agreed with her brother that Colón declared the family had “no rights to the play,” instead taking them out to lunch, giving them each a check and thanking them for their patience. Further she notes that “It is ironic that with all the songs that my mother wrote none of those were used in the play, limiting, again, our rights to payment.” Both children were very clear in declaring their public support for Rivera, who in their estimation has “presented a proper image of our mother...we are very happy with the play.” Camano concluded that in the end the litigation over the production was all “about money and has nothing to do with my mother, nor the essence of this play.”⁴⁷

Luis Caballero, the play’s director, notes that the lawsuit against the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre had “nothing to do with who should receive thanks, it is a question of professional respect and justice. Carmen, Sully and I worked carefully and passionately on *La Lupe*. I believe it is more than right to pay me for all my work and not to be treated unfairly. They paid us by locking the door to the theatre, without the opportunity to renegotiate a contract.”⁴⁸ In defense of this decision to remove Caballero as director for the third incarnation of the play, Miriam Colón complained that his direction was

⁴⁷ Juan Moreno-Velázquez, “Hijos de La Lupe entran en la polémica,” *El Diario/La Prensa*, 3 December 2001, 1.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

“extremely stylized” and that she chose to hire ACE Award winning director Alba Oms because she viewed her new direction as “more realistic and less symbolic, [forcing] La Lupe [to be] more emotional instead of [just a] visual interpretation.”⁴⁹ Caballero disputes this opinion stating firmly that “the entire concept for the direction of the show was mine.”⁵⁰ Caballero’s complaints echo those of Sully Díaz who, after being criticized for declining to perform in the third incarnation of the play, defended herself by explaining she “worked for slave wages, but there are times when an actress works to portray a great role which could change their career, playing La Lupe meant a great deal to me.” The Actor’s Fund agreed with Ms. Díaz’s assessment of her scale by releasing information that she was paid \$160 per performance during the second run of the show, which their representative believed was “ridiculous considering the size of the role in this play.”⁵¹

Further Ms. Díaz, who had returned to Puerto Rico after co-producer Ralph Mercado replaced her with actress Doreen Montalvo, explained that she had her agent reach out to Miriam Colón, who instead mailed a contract that “did not list a signing date nor a venue for the show.” The contract also had a stipulation that failure to return the contract within 48 hours would constitute Ms. Díaz’s resignation from the show. Díaz did not return the contract since she disagreed with numerous aspects of compensation, negotiation and the fact that “the contract violated the regulations of Actors Equity Association.” Though Max Eisner, Director of Public Relations for the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, added fuel to the fire when he stated that the actress playing the lead role in the play should “kiss the floor of the theatre for all the opportunities this part has

⁴⁹ Greyza Baptista, “Otro rostro para La Lupe,” *Vida Hoy*, 2 December 2001, 1.

⁵⁰ Juan Moreno-Velázquez, “Controversia envuelve a La Lupe,” *El Diario/La Prensa*, 2 November 2001, 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

created for her career,” Sully Díaz responded by choosing to praise the work of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre which she felt “represents many opportunities for actors to perform serious roles and not those of the prostitutes and drug dealers which we are allowed to play in the Anglo theatre. In my case, Mr. Eisner has been a great help in exposing me to many other possibilities during my stay in New York.”⁵²

The fall of Lupe is dramatized as a literal one, as Rivera depicts Lupe’s well-documented accident while cleaning her apartment, which in turn left her incapacitated for months. During that time Lupe lost all possibility of earning a livelihood from performing and became destitute and homeless. This heroic fall from grace, after a life of extreme hubris once again demonstrates Rivera’s interest in Joseph Campbell’s “hero’s journey.” Lupe must lose everything to rise again, and in turn, negate the religion of *Santería*, becoming instead an ordained Pentecostal minister. One cannot help but marvel at the fact that Lupe’s life exemplifies this classical example of the complex tragedy, which Rivera succeeds in illuminating through the use of libretto and identifiable song choices. Lupe’s singing of *Puro Teatro* during her most melodramatic moments with Tito Puente, the use of *La Gran Tirana* when she is most difficult and of course, the selection of the English-lyric performance of *Fever* when flirting with Dick Cavett all attest to Rivera’s wise crafting as well as La Lupe’s real life theatricality.

As Raymond Knapp notes in his analysis of the folk musical, “Within a single audience, there may often be wide discrepancies in reception, so that a particular musical number might be taken by some as high camp and by others as highly pitched but

⁵² Moreno-Velázquez, “Hijos de La Lupe,” 1.

authentic emotion.”⁵³ The spectacle of La Lupe prancing around on *The Dick Cavett Show* highlights this paradox of representations of *latinidad*; as Anglo audiences viewed a dark-skinned *shaman-ess* singing in a frenzied orgasmic state while Latinos were careful to observe the afro-Cuban roots of performance in La Lupe’s rendition of this colonizing song. Peggy Lee’s *Fever*, usually spoken with torch song etiquette and “ice-princess” distance, was here re-appropriated and exorcised by La Lupe, thus leaving scores of television viewers either frightened, or as Dick Cavett joked, sexually aroused.

The show’s culmination is once again a return *home*, a theme that Rivera seems to use as the center of her dramaturgical universe. As Julia de Burgos returned to the water, or María “la gringa” returned home to New York City, Lupe must also return to “the beginning,” which Rivera chooses to represent as the classroom, and to the professor who forced her to retell her story and thus justify her life. The hero’s journey has now come full circle for Lupe, no longer a celebrity but a struggling college student and mother of two. The prediction of her godmother has also come true but Lupe has managed to save herself for what she believed was truly her destiny, namely the Pentecostal church. In the play’s final scene Lupe explains that after a tragic fire engulfed her apartment she finally realized what her destiny was and here Rivera chooses not to have her sing but rather to speak directly to her community:

Lupe: After I watched my children fall asleep I stared at the room and I remembered my house in San Pedrito...look at how far I traveled – to a shelter. I realized I was face to face with my destiny. The prophecy had come true. I was rich and famous and I did lose everything, my husband, my career, my money and those stupid mink coats and jewelry, everything. I had fallen and had landed in that small room in the shelter...From that room in the shelter, I took back my life.⁵⁴

⁵³ Knapp, *The American Musical*, 14.

⁵⁴ Rivera, *La Lupe*, 56.

At the play's conclusion, the professor, whose arrogant stance prompted La Lupe to share her life with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre audience, intimidates Lupe one final time when he informs her that to pass she will need to re-do her assignment. Lupe exclaiming that she "cannot re-do her life," is finally recognized by a Latina professor entering the room. Her excitement at having her childhood idol present at Lehman College, and the acknowledgment that she, as a Latina educator has the responsibility of remembering her cultural heritage, resurrects the coy Lupe of old who turns to the audience and states, "ah...and the music...the music never ends"⁵⁵ before concluding the play with the curtain closer, *Todo*.

Though the play itself seemed to have a happy if not bittersweet resolution, the unfortunate occurrences that led to the feud between Rivera and Colón came to a head on February 1, 2002 when Rivera's attorney, James Sheinbaum submitted paperwork to the Federal Court of the Southern District charging "nine violations against the authorship of the play and request[ing] damages of no less than \$75,000." The legal complaint against the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre stipulated "three charges per violation of the rights of his client, in violation of the Langham Act which stipulates that the use of the name of the author without her prior permission is a violation of that law's Section 1551."⁵⁶ Further, Sheinbaum alleged that the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre collected over \$650,000 in box office profits, "notwithstanding additional monies from fundraisers and donations."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Rivera, *La Lupe*, 57.

⁵⁶ Moreno-Velázquez, "Demandan a La Lupe," 1

⁵⁷ Moreno-Velázquez, "Teatro Rodante pagará," 1.

Lawyers for Miriam Colón were quick to point out that Rivera received a check for \$11,000 which had been returned by the author. Colón once again argued that it seemed odd that Rivera would accept a commission for her work and then ask to keep the play under her own copyright. Colón's expressed her bewilderment to *El Diario's* Juan Moreno-Velázquez, noting that the situation seemed "as if I commissioned a sculpture and after he finished, took his money *and* the piece back home." In addition, Colón went on record with new compensation amounts, stating that Rivera had received not \$11,000 but rather "\$20,000 for this play, she has not worked free."⁵⁸ In turn, Rivera's records show that she received \$1,000 for the work she had performed through the second run of the show and claims that she presented Colón with a copy of a commission contract which was never signed by either party. Rather, Rivera claims that Colón purposely withheld box office receipts as well as discounting a letter sent by the Dramatists Guild "stating that she was in violation of the rights of the author."⁵⁹

Most damaging to Miriam Colón was the fact that Willie Nieves, her Board of Directors President and noted community arts activist, sided with Carmen Rivera before resigning his position. Nieves was extremely vocal during the litigation stating that he believed the "the book belongs to Carmen Rivera, but there are some issues of authorship which need to be sorted out from the past; the discrepancies between these things are what has caused this legal action."⁶⁰ Following his resignation, Nieves further speculated that it was "a shame that this situation has eclipsed what has been a great event for our theatre and community. This play should have run nine to ten months consecutively...but

⁵⁸ Moreno-Velázquez, "Demandan a La Lupe," 1.

⁵⁹ Ruth Hernández-Beltrán, "Dramaturga Carmen Rivera demanda al PRTT," *Primera Hora*, 8 February 2002, 1.

⁶⁰ Juan Moreno-Velázquez, "La Gran Tirana de las tablas," *El Diario/La Prensa*, 27 November 2001, 1.

Miriam Colón decided to instead rent the theatre to David Maldonado for *Quién Mató a Hector Lavoe?* only one month into the run of *La Lupe*.”⁶¹

These complaints against the handling of the authorship question and the power that Colón held at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre prompted an anonymous member of the theatre community to argue that this was “not the first time that this has occurred...at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre you do what Miriam Colón wants and that’s all. [It] is the way that Mrs. Colón operates; reminiscent of a song from *La Lupe*, she is the ‘Great Tyrant’ of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre.”⁶² Further in-fighting was spurred by an anonymous member of the Board of Directors who was quoted as believing a huge mistake had been made by Colón when she moved *La Lupe* out of the theatre for *Quién Mató a Hector Lavoe?* The board’s opinion was such that they felt “changing this winning formula is a mistake which may negatively impact the integrity of this theatre.”⁶³

The culmination of the lawsuit, which resulted in a legal win for Carmen Rivera, seemed to change the perception of how business would be conducted at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. A director, who refused to have his name published in *El Diario* was quick to point out that “the situation will now get better regarding the rights of the author and the Latino theatre.” He went on to remark that “those who question or demand what is rightly theirs often [have] the door shut on them. For many of us, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre is a place that has helped us greatly, giving us opportunities we might not have had, and allowing us to continue our careers and making it into the American market.” The necessity to resist conflicts with Miriam Colón, so aptly demonstrated by

⁶¹ Moreno-Velázquez, “Controversia envuelve a La Lupe,” *El Diario/La Prensa*, 26 November 2001, 1.

⁶² Moreno-Velázquez, “La Gran Tirana,” 1.

⁶³ Moreno-Velázquez, “Controversia envuelve,” 1.

the number of Latino theatre professionals unwilling to give their names to the press, prompted both Carmen Rivera and Cándido Tirado to reassess their future in New York. The decisions they have made following the lawsuit provided new direction, both as professional playwrights as well as business-minded theatre educators; new partnerships with producers would need to be formed and old alliances would need to be re-evaluated.

In the end, a physically and psychologically spent Carmen Rivera was able to sum up her feelings on November 21, 2002 after the legal disputes ended and the court papers were sealed. Rivera remarked to Juan Moreno-Velázquez that she was happy that the process was completed and that she had been awarded damages in the amount of \$20,000, stressing that these damages barely covered the legal fees she had accumulated. Rivera's victory was important because she had "proven that the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre must recognize the rights of the author. This decision will bring to an end many of the abuses of authors who have been victims for many years."⁶⁴ However, as is often the case at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, Miriam Colón delivered the final decree on the subject to *El Diario/La Prensa*, bringing to a close the epic drama that was *La Lupe*, when she declared, "The Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre stopped presenting the play *La Lupe* after it was no longer profitable. We are no longer interested in continuing a relationship with the play, nor the author, Carmen Rivera, neither now nor in the future."⁶⁵ What seemed a dramatic win now served as a daunting challenge for Rivera as she would continue to write Latino theatre sans the possibility of working with its most prominent producer, Miriam Colón.

⁶⁴ Moreno-Velázquez, "Teatro Rodante pagará," 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Caravan of Death (2002)

In 1991, while a student at NYU, Rivera wrote a short play entitled *La Pesadilla*, modeled on the work of Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro. “La Pesadilla” (nightmare) is a term that refers to what political prisoners in Latin America suffer and seemed a worthy topic to revisit because of the recent issue of political detainees held by the United States at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. These detainees, often held without trial, became a new forgotten community which Rivera returned to, hoping to explore the theme of imprisonment and torture. In the play, three characters are held in three separate cells; the first an upper-class woman in her early 50s, the second a graduate student and mother in her early 20s, and finally a male journalist in his early 40s. As Rivera notes in her stage directions, “all the characters are political prisoners in a Latin American jail. There are no real walls separating the prisoners.” *FOOTSTEPS* serve as a fourth character in the piece, which “belong to the guards of the prison. The footsteps are only heard, the guards are never seen.”⁶⁶

In this play, Rivera explores the isolation and torture of political prisoners, paying careful attention to indict those nameless, faceless individuals who imprison others for the sake of a false sense of security. None of the characters are ever given a reason for their detention and when the journalist rises to protest the situation, he is taken from his cell and tortured. Through small hatches in the floor, doors and fly system, cans of brown water and single pieces of bread are given to the three, highlighting the violation of human rights enacted upon these innocent individuals. Woman #1, erudite and

⁶⁶ Carmen Rivera, *Caravan of Death*, unpublished manuscript, 2002, 13.

psychologically damaged, tries to reason with the journalist and explain that they are “not at a prison but a posh spa”:

Woman #1: Finally some good music to do my exercise to (*She jumps too high and hits her head on the ceiling*). Ah! I don’t know why they don’t get rid of these trees. Go slower and take advantage of the music. Remember good exercise and the right food will help you live forever. One-two-three...one-two-three...(the music stops). Don’t take it off! I paid a lot of money to come here. Who do you think you are? I haven’t finished my exercises yet, put the music back on! Do you know who I am? Do you know who I know? (*She waits for response. There is no response*) Very well then, I will get ready for breakfast.⁶⁷

In an obvious nod to Sartre’s *No Exit*, Rivera weaves a narrative which features characters’ imprisonment by an all-knowing, politically motivated, yet unseen hand, and with a great distaste for the bourgeoisie and the educated. During the early 1990s, Rivera’s work was greatly influenced by both Sartre and Jarry, as well as the workshops taught by Argentinian Guillermo Gentile and her future husband, Cándido Tirado, who sought to create theatre by using the illusionary method of *fantastic realism*. Though Rivera abandons these principles at times during her later work, elements of the practice can be found within text and setting, most specifically in *To Catch the Lightning*, but also during her first professional dual-writing experience, *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*. As outlined in her article on the writing team of Rivera and Tirado, Judith Escalona explains:

What is *Fantastic Realism*? Rather than traditional American theatre, Tirado (and Rivera) embraced the European absurdist theatre of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Alfred Jarry. The realism of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller bored [them]. The search for a mode of theatre that would express heightened states of emotion and resonate on an archetypal level brought [them] into contact with Guillermo Gentile, who had developed a form of theatre in Argentina called *Fantastic Realism*, in which the conventions of realism become exaggerated to the breaking point. The rules of what is real and unreal fall away in the quest for a

⁶⁷ Rivera, *Caravan of Death*, 1.

truth that only the theatre can express...people live their lives through fantasies. Fantasy keeps us going, it is the impetus of life.⁶⁸

In the interview, Rivera goes a step further in describing what her theatre attempts to create and her own decision to develop certain plays in a surrealistic mode. “I would characterize my work as surreal. I don’t know if I achieve it all the time but I really would like not to function on one plain. I don’t think the world is on one plain. The surreal is very real. There is an absurdity to life.”⁶⁹ This desire to confront both the surreal and the political drew Rivera back to *Caravan of Death* and sparked her desire to create works similar to Griselda Gambaro’s *The Camp* (1967), which predicted the oncoming political disappearances in Argentina and María Irene Fornés’s *The Conduct of Life* (1985), which was set in an unnamed “Latin American country,” both of which dramatized the abuse of power evident in an oppressive government’s torture of prisoners, particularly women. In the play’s use of utter despair and absurdism, as well as the allowance of psychological and physical warfare for the purpose of “order,” Rivera creates a hybrid dramatic piece, highlighting her strong dedication to both realism and surrealism, or Rivera’s own preferred categorization, *fantastic realism*.⁷⁰

Arguably the play’s best example of this absurd structure occurs when Man #1 is surprised by the appearance of a rat in his cell. The rodent, common in most prisons, becomes a welcome visitor for the prisoners who revel in the fact that the “beautiful, big black rat” becomes, to Man #1, “My treasure. They thought they could keep us locked up here with no contact. You were wrong! Something got in, a thinking breathing being got

⁶⁸ Judith Escalona, “Playwrights Cándido Tirado and Carmen Rivera Represent New Voices in the Theatre that are Attracting a New Audience,” *New York Latino*, May 1998, 14.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Rivera agrees with this summation of her “political” work and cites Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden* as examples of similar dramaturgy.

through your doors.”⁷¹ Dispelling logic, the rat is coddled and stroked by not only Man #1, but for the first time an alert and caring Woman #2, whose baby was taken by guards prior to Man #1’s arrival. Woman #2 reacts to the appearance of the rat through her own latrine hole by crying, feeding and cradling the rat as she would a baby. Her spirit is awoken and she cries out, dancing with the disgusting rat, “My baby! Oh my God, you’re here...my baby...you came back.”⁷²

Unfortunately Woman #1, finally destroyed by torture and mental abuse, becomes jealous of Woman #2 and finally screams at Man #1, “Selfish bastard! I hate you! I want you to leave! They’re going to make you leave!”⁷³ Her cries are met with the opening of a hatch and her disappearance for a new round of torture. Man #1, alone and broken, summarizes Rivera’s political beliefs and her ire towards the post - 9/11 political internment system. “No, no – let her go! Come back...don’t hurt her – she doesn’t know anything. Why the hell do you want her? Let her go! (*Rock music comes on very loudly*) No! (*Static and a female scream is heard. Music resumes*) No...oh God...no...(cries softly) don’t you understand, you’re looking for nothing.”⁷⁴ With these words, Rivera registers her protest against the laws enacted by President George W. Bush in regard to the legality of torture against prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, and his inability to find “weapons of mass destruction.”

With *Caravan of Death*, Rivera continues to create a dramaturgy which includes *To Catch the Lightning*, *Urashima*, and *The Next Cycle* and deconstructs the belief that realism and surrealism, or the mixing of genres, are lacking in Nuyorican plays. Rivera

⁷¹ Rivera, *Caravan of Death*, 8.

⁷² Ibid., 9.

⁷³ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

has attempted to distance herself from the all-encompassing term, *magic realism*,⁷⁵ throughout her career, often stating that it is a myth that Latinos write magic realism into their plays and that she, beginning with her studies with Gentile and the formation of Shaman Repertory, attempted to write *fantastic realism*, not in response to magic realism, but in addition to it. As Nuyorican Theatre scholar John Antush described, the genre is designed to “probe the chaotic structures of the unconscious and to dramatize the inner struggle for self-actualization.”⁷⁶

Nuyorican playwright José Rivera articulates his agreement with this attempt to categorize his colleagues by stating that “magic realism is the new stereotype...(t)he problem exists not with the presence of the images themselves but rather with the expectation on the part of audiences and directors that the existence of such images forms the basis for an ‘authentic’ Latino aesthetic.”⁷⁷ Both Carmen and José Rivera articulate a common concern among Latino writers and playwrights that all literary works written by Latinos must contain elements of magic realism, thereby eliminating opportunities for production and publication of Latino authors whose style does not adapt to this genre.

The Next Cycle (2003)

Rivera’s early attempts at a heightened form of *fantastic realism*, which she utilized in her success with *To Catch the Lightning* and again memorably with *Urashima*

⁷⁵ *Magic Realism*, as described earlier, is most often related to the Carpentier term, *lo real maravilloso*, which was described in opposition to “the presumed artificiality of European surrealism.” However the term is often credited to the wrong critic/theorist. “As María-Elena Angulo makes clear, the association with a conflation of these terms and Latin American cultural production is typically attributed to Angel Flores and his 1954 paper ‘Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction.’ Scholars then used this term to describe the aesthetics of the Latin American boom novels of the 1960s. Ironically, Flores’s category has been picked up by theatrical audiences fascinated with images from the theater that do not conform to the demands of realism. Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 149.

⁷⁶ John Antush, *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), xxvi.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

were re-tooled for her short play *The Next Cycle*, where she re-investigates the theme of reincarnation. As was the case with *A State of Bliss* (1990), Rivera's desire to construct fantastic or "irrational"⁷⁸ narratives based on the human quest for life after death dominates this two-character play, where the character known as FEMALE, a young woman of 30-40, confronts the all-knowing SPIRIT BEING, a non-sexual, non-gendered entity which inhabits a spirit body. In addition, the set, consisting of one chair and the direction of stage lights which "invoke a dream-like state that one might find in the subconscious," set the environment for the type of work that Rivera herself describes as the "twilight zone."⁷⁹

The Next Cycle serves as a return to the work Rivera began with the Shaman Repertory years earlier. Her original intent, to heal the audience through the social interaction of theatre, is reiterated throughout the piece as Rivera attempts to invoke the spirits of Shaman's theatrical past and "heal" the human spirit through the exploration of its own violent history. As noted by Alberto Minero in his article on the origins of Rivera and the Shaman Repertory Theatre, "In a moment of alarming creative paralysis in Latino theatre, it is very important to acknowledge the artistic growth...[which] is very apparent in both acting and directing. The Shaman shows an authentic healing effect in relation to the theatre."⁸⁰ The play is thus inscribed with the author's own pursuit of health and prosperity and her active decision to turn away from the motive of revenge towards those who participated in the "smear-campaign" against her for *La Lupe*. For this reason, Rivera chooses to begin *The Next Cycle* with the following stage directions:

⁷⁸ The "irrational," being a central concern for Guillermo Gentile's fantastic structural scenarios.

⁷⁹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁸⁰ Alberto Minero, "The Continual Growth of the Shaman Repertory Theatre," *El Diario/La Prensa*, 4 November 1990, 3.

Scene: _____

Place: Somewhere between life and death

*A scream is heard on the dark. When lights come up a young woman is lying on the floor. She appears to be in a nightmare – grabbing her chest and gasping for air.*⁸¹

Rivera's own health and distress mirrored the beginning of this scene, often waking to find herself in a similar state of mind and body. Thus Rivera simultaneously attempts to heal the nation of its desire for revenge through torture, in *Caravan of Death*, as well as pursues the process of healing through forgiveness in *The Next Cycle*. In this post-Millennium work Rivera activates an extremely complex pattern of association through the lens of post 9-11 dramaturgy, particularly because of her distinct view of the site of the tragic events from her Brooklyn Heights neighborhood. Both Rivera's pre and post 9-11 work has often dramatized an attempt to "replay" the lives of humans and the decisions, both good and bad, which plague them in the afterlife.

John Fraire also critiques the work of Shaman Repertory and its principal writer; a critique which I believe continues to influence Rivera's "living/dead" characters,⁸² from Uncle Manolo's guiro-playing spirit in her first play *The Universe*, to the angelic Celia and Pedro Knight dancing in the epilogue of her most recent *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*. Fraire notes that "death and ghosts are a recurring theme for Shaman and a lot of Latino theatre. Why so much around death and spirits? I think it has much to do with the pain of the Latino experience in this country and the sense of loss many of us feel by being an internally colonized people. I also think that spiritualism and death, in addition to politics, is a way that Latinos try to maintain our contact with Latin America

⁸¹ Carmen Rivera, *The Next Cycle*, unpublished manuscript, 2003,1.

⁸² This critique can also be made of her husband and co-founder, Cándido Tirado, and his reincarnated, "fantastically real" characters, in particular their joint collaboration on *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz* and his award-winning plays *Some People Have all The Luck* (1990) and *Momma's Boyz* (2004).

and its histories.⁸³ I believe that Fraire's 1990 article identifies the major themes that will influence a continuing arc, both for Latino theatre and its major playwrights for the next two decades. While many critics may believe that the mandatory structure for all plays will be one built upon the tenets of magic realism, I agree with Fraire that the integrated histories of Latinos, and in particular a status of colonization inherent in their shared political governance, has unconsciously manifested itself in the work of post-Nuyorican writers, as well as other Latino playwrights of varied geographies and countries of origin.

The work of Juan Flores and his movement away from the imagination of Benedict Anderson's "nation" to an imagined "nation of *latinidad*" defines the work of Carmen Rivera, particularly in plays which seek to untangle the web of Puerto Ricans "de aquí y de allá." Flores's dissection of "the 'Latino community' [as] an 'imagined community' – to summon Benedict Anderson's well-worn, though useful phrase – is a compelling present day example of a social group being etched and composed out of a larger, impinging geopolitical landscape. The role of the social imagination and the imaginary in the self-conception of nationally, ethnically, and 'racially' kindred groups is of course central, but must always be assessed with a view toward how they are imagined (i.e. from 'within' or 'without') and to what ends and outcomes."⁸⁴

In attempting to analyze this sense of a shared Latino community of playwrights, and their inability to belong to any "specific" geographic home, I submit that these writers become an "imagined community" of Latino playwrights, bereft of history and often denied access to the term "American" playwright. In turn, the attempt to categorize

⁸³ John Fraire, "Shaman Repertory Theater: Journey Inward," *The National Alliance*, 25 November 1990, 1.

⁸⁴ Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 193.

the “nation” of Latino writers becomes impossible as a fixed, predictable group, thus needing fluid interpretation and study. As Juan Flores notes:

The reinterpretation of the nation which informs today’s Latino Studies hovers around the idea of “imagined communities” as formulated by Benedict Anderson in his frequently cited book of that title. The nation as a fixed and primordial territory of inclusion/exclusion becomes a malleable, fluid, permeable construct, a group given form by shared imaginaries. The idea of “imagined communities” lends itself well to the conceptual terminology of Latino Studies today because it helps to describe the “national” experience of Latino diasporas in all its ambiguity. The sense of belonging and not belonging to the nation – driven home to Nuyoricans and Chicanos when they “return” to their “native” lands – confirms that nationality can not only be imagined but actually created as a social reality by the force of the imagination.⁸⁵

In the case of Nuyorican playwrights, and specific to this study of Carmen Rivera, the narrative imagination of the author, her plays depicting returns to Puerto Rico, her anti-colonial stance on U.S. politics, and her attempt to heal the community in the form of a shaman priestess, all help create an audience which constructs their participation in the “dramatic healing” through their imagined social reality. In this way Rivera plays activate a sense of *latinidad* for audiences by creating a system of shared communal images and to a large extent, dramatized memories which qualify as “true” to the experience of Nuyoricans or as both David Román and Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez note, this dramatized form of *latinidad* “circulates as a critical shorthand valorizing seemingly authentic cultural practices that challenge both colonial and imperialist US ideologies in North and South America.”⁸⁶ Further, the complex notion of re-creation through *latinidad* for these audiences is grounded in the experiences of life “off-the-hyphen,” both imposed upon them, as well as by them.

⁸⁵ Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 213-14.

⁸⁶ David Román and Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, “Caught in the Web: Latinidad, AIDS, and Allegory in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *The Musical*,” *American Literature* 67/3 (1995): 558.

As is the case with *The Next Cycle*, Rivera heals her audience by presenting them an ethereal dilemma, namely, the pursuit of divine purpose through the repetitious return to the human state. The character, “Female,” is struck by the fact that she consistently returns to her human form to repeat what she sees as a “well-lived life.” The only fault that “Female” seems to understand, which she believes to be the fault of those who continue to send her back, is that she is continuously placed in a life shared with the same human male, who, though loving her at first, eventually kills her. The male figure, taking on multiple personages and roles in her life, stalks the woman and seems to live, in Female’s opinion, a violent unfulfilled life. The fact that she once again finds herself back in human form and on Earth discourages her greatly as she is well aware of what will follow upon her return:

F: I saw him again.

SB: You knew that was going to happen.

F: He had a knife and he was so angry – he plunged it right into my chest – I heard my sternum crack. I tried to take it out but I couldn’t move it – the tip of the knife touched my spine.

SB: The Masters have reviewed your life.

F: Did they review “his” life?

SB: All lives are reviewed. It’s not his time, it’s yours. They are very disappointed in you.

F: Me? He just killed me!⁸⁷

Because both *Caravan of Death* and *The Next Cycle* were specifically written as plays in collaboration with the Women’s Project, a particular feminist slant is given to the work which I feel is overtly transparent. The necessity to write for a universal audience of women seems to handicap Rivera at times, in contrast to the freedom we sense in her explorations of *latinidad*. These culturally specific Latina plays seem to be more commercially successful, and arguably more aesthetically structured, while the plays for

⁸⁷ Rivera, *The Next Cycle*, 3.

the Women's Project seem to foster an inhibited didactic style of writing. As was the case with *Betty's Garage*, the investigation of women's abuse by men takes center stage literally, and the audience is granted a lens of reception, heavy in spirituality and forgiveness.

Both *The Next Cycle* and *Caravan of Death* feature a secondary focus on the escalation of war and the unethical treatment of civilian casualties. Due to the media blitz during this pivotal time in U.S. military policy in the Middle East, and the brutal images received from Al Jazeera television, which featured beheadings and public retaliation for the U.S. offensive in Afghanistan and Iraq, the issue of revenge and the more complex notion of freedom form a structural backbone for the play. Rivera's careful use of linguistic trigger words, purposefully placed to signify messages of current military action, locate her in juxtaposition to colleagues of the time, who were heavy on wartime rhetoric as they developed similar themes.⁸⁸ To this end, both "Female" and "Spirit Being" play out the fantastic reality of spiritual healing while also debating the ideas of redemption through violent tribulation:

SB: Listen very carefully...you are not fulfilling your mission.

F: I just died for my mission.

SB: Did you shoot a gun and kill people?

F: Yes! It was for survival! How could you ask me that? All those people deserved to die. And him? He killed so many more "innocent" people.

SB: What is it that you really want?

F: What?...Freedom.

SB: Freedom?

F: You're surprised.

SB: It seems that you've been fighting for revenge!

F: No, I am fighting for freedom. There is nothing else to fight for.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Three examples of these types of post 9-11 war plays, seen through the eyes of Latina/o playwrights were the Pulitzer finalist *Elliot: A Soldier's Fugue* by Quiaria Alegría Hudes, *WAC Iraq* by Mel Nieves and *No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy* by Carlos Serrano.

⁸⁹ Rivera, *The Next Cycle*, 3-4.

The Next Cycle is a return to Rivera's early plays, which foray into a quasi-dimensional understanding of karmic awakening while simultaneously attempting to bring light to issues of domestic abuse, terrorism and the need for inner healing of self to cure the ills of a corrupt world. The inversion of the concept of "revolution to seek freedom" is proposed and quickly uprooted by the "Spirit Being" who lectures both "Female" and audience that true freedom comes from the quest for peace and not violence. Her declaration that "Female" is merely "a prisoner of anger," and that she and her comrades must understand that "freedom comes when you give love to all; when you fight for love; when you can feel love for people you hate," is met with understanding and an acceptance of her return to earth. It is this eventual acceptance of reincarnation which allows her to understand that she is returning to save the world, one enemy at a time. This, as the Spirit Being states, is the true "revolution."⁹⁰

Ghosts in Brooklyn (2003)

Ghosts in Brooklyn serves as Rivera's first full-length departure from Latino dramaturgy, centering on the suicide of an Irish-American lesbian named Kathleen, instigated by a disapproving Catholic family. The play is a reflection of the work Rivera was championing with the Women's Project and the stories she was experiencing in her newly gentrified section of Brooklyn. *Ghosts in Brooklyn* can be seen as a move away from the professional Latino theatre, which to a large extent, abandoned Rivera after her legal battle with the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. At a time when Rivera sought refuge with like-minded creative artists, and a great deal of attention was being paid to

⁹⁰ Rivera, *The Next Cycle*, 6-7.

the issue of tolerance for diversity, *Ghosts in Brooklyn* sprung from her desire to tell two stories which were thematically distant from her earlier work; the first being a play which spoke to the difficulties of coming out as a lesbian in a traditional conservative family and second, the despair felt when one is abandoned by partners. This collaboration with the Women's Project, which led to multiple readings of the play at New Perspectives Theatre as well as an eventual production at Songs from Coconut Hill Theatre Festival allowed Rivera to develop the play, first as a five minute short, followed by a twenty minute one-act, and finally as the full length *Ghosts in Brooklyn*.

In Rivera's original five minute monologue entitled, *This Really Happened in Brooklyn*, Kathleen, a nurse in an emergency room, packs for an impending trip to an unknown destination. During this activity she carefully leaves belongings for members of her family and friends, tagged with post-it notes and descriptions as to why this person would either want the discarded item or find it ironic that Kathleen would leave it for them. Her obsessive-compulsive tagging of items, verbal indictments against emergency rooms, and a mishandled breakup with her girlfriend Melissa, are interspersed with references to the arrival of the Dalai Lama in New York and his Central Park communion later that day. It is through this acknowledgment of the spiritual leader's visit that we learn about Kathleen's desire to flee her apartment and seek "truth and peace." Rivera positions the quest for a peaceful co-existence with nature against the rage of the outside world and, in particular, her lesbian-hating brother Danny. Her brother, a classic throwback to gay-hating blue collar ruffians, often refers to Kathleen and her personal items as "hippie-monk" trash.

Rivera pours a great deal of herself into Kathleen, who shares her contempt for the Catholic religion which “starts us out with so many defects,” and lovers “who treat us badly.” What Rivera saw in 2003 as a theatre that no longer spoke to her “fascination with everyday people,” prompted her need “to write about people that most people do not notice. Artists think we have to be so obtuse...that not everyone can understand us. I don’t agree with that. I think we should be profound and philosophical and provocative.”⁹¹ In creating this “non-Latino narrative,” Rivera disconnects from an audience which has, since Shaman, supported her plays because of their connection with a shared culture, and instead makes an aesthetic choice to reach out to a larger audience base. Though the idea of “selling out” or “crossing over” is often a common concern in analyzing any departure made by Latina/o playwrights, Rivera has over the years consistently attempted to reach out to various audiences who have supported her work, particularly women who have found themselves “shut out” from the contemporary theatre. The theatrical collectives that Rivera often frequented now played an important role in a re-envisioning of her work and she began centering her plays on universal themes for all women, regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic prosperity.

Rivera’s position on this departure, as was the case with earlier projects including *Betty’s Garage*, *Delia’s Race*, and *The Next Stop*, and much of her teaching with groups like the Manhattan Theatre Club’s Student Initiative, the Epic Theatre and Danisarte Theatre Company, centers on the belief that her plays do not pit Latinos against other ethnicities, rather, that the lives of Latinos are “running alongside all other cultures and

⁹¹ Priscilla Renta, “Tumbando Barreras: The Journey of a Latina Playwright.” *AHA Hispanic Arts*, (Winter 2001/02): 17.

racess.”⁹² To this end, Rivera’s drama once again presupposes the Latina/o as a complex communal creation, or as Juan Flores suggests:

It is important to recognize that the Latino imaginary, like that of the other oppressed groups, harbors the elements of an alternative ethos, an ensemble of cultural values and practices created in its own right and to its own ends. Latinos listen to their own kinds of music, eat their own kinds of food, dream their dreams and snap their photos not just to express their differences from, or opposition to, the way the ‘gringos’ do it...Latino identity is imagined not as the negation of the non-Latino, but as the affirmation of cultural and social realities, myths and possibilities, as they are inscribed in their own human trajectory.⁹³

The monologue, *This Really Happened in Brooklyn* serves as a vehicle for Rivera’s individual voice, capturing a moment in time when Rivera’s desire to represent *latinidad* was re-positioned to include a glance towards “Brooklyn as an imagined community,” desperate and attempting to mark itself through the eyes of one lone female body. I believe that at this time Rivera makes an active decision to move away from sociological works which attempt to nurture a Latino identity and community for three reasons: first, her continued diagnosis and treatment for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, second, her exhausting battle with Miriam Colón over *La Lupe*, and finally, the post-traumatic stress which pervaded New York after the terrorist attack and destruction of the World Trade Center.

Rivera’s use of a radio announcer in all three drafts of *Ghosts*, is in stark contrast to Kathleen’s calm demeanor. His eerie post-9/11 media enhanced broadcasts serve as an ominous reminder of the tragic events which occurred in 2001. As was the case with many post 9/11 plays written shortly after the event, Rivera captures a “ghosting” of the

⁹² Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

⁹³ Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 200.

tragedy with her play, utilizing Kathleen's Brooklyn apartment which stands in full view of lower Manhattan, as well as her own self-destruction on the Brooklyn Bridge, a location where many stunned New Yorkers viewed the fateful events of that morning:

Radio Announcer: How do you live a peaceful life in such a hostile and aggressive world? By contrast, tragic events this morning on the Brooklyn Bridge. A young woman has committed suicide by jumping into the East River. Police report she was alive when rescued but died from massive internal bleeding at Long Island College Hospital – where she reportedly was employed.⁹⁴

Ghosts in Brooklyn captures the same internal anguish of post-millennium New York and the search for salvation as Anne Nelson's *The Guys*, a play which premiered at the Flea Theater, blocks from the World Trade Center. The drama, another existential exercise of healing "by New York/for New York,"⁹⁵ depicts a fireman struggling to write eulogies for his fallen comrades.⁹⁶ The play's first line, "New York, my beautiful, gleaming, wounded city," captures the same intense pain which Kathleen demonstrates in her final hours of life – lonely, abandoned, and without hope. In her quest to find salvation in Central Park, she finds only a violent death while plunging from the Brooklyn Bridge, leaving behind a dispirited and faithless Brooklyn-side view of Ground Zero.

Rivera revises the final draft of *Ghosts in Brooklyn* as a dramatization which includes Kathleen's family and lover, heightening the tension and depicting the events that led to her suicide, while attempting to enlighten audiences about the mysticism of Eastern philosophy. In doing so, Kathleen becomes a new socio-ethnic construct for Rivera, who chooses to concentrate on both her Irish-American Catholic background as

⁹⁴ Carmen Rivera, *Ghosts in Brooklyn*, unpublished manuscript, 2003, 4.

⁹⁵ Another play on the term FUBU or "for us/by us," mentioned in the *Introduction* of this dissertation.

⁹⁶ The play received critical reviews for its "New York-ness" and its star power, namely celebrities Bill Murray and Sigourney Weaver.

well as on the difficult process of “coming out” as a lesbian. In addition, the integration of music, a staple of Rivera’s plays, becomes a focal point as Laura Nyro’s *The Wind* and Stevie Wonder’s *If You Really Love Me* serve as soundtrack for the piece, reflecting the popular culture appeal of *Ghosts in Brooklyn*, while also signaling the direction Rivera will take with the creation of the “canned” score for *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*.

Throughout the full-length version of *Ghosts in Brooklyn*, Kathleen’s existence balances on an unstable series of lies told to her overprotective mother, homophobic brother Danny and free-spirited sister Bridget. Rivera chooses Bridget as her moral rock. Bridget refuses to judge Kathleen’s choice of Melissa as a partner, while navigating her own extremely complicated life. Bridget serves two purposes for motivating the play’s action: first, serving as Kathleen’s biggest supporter and second, promoting Rivera’s own beliefs on “the universe,” and in particular the role of destiny in our lives. While Bridget ponders the question, “Eastern culture...its ancient age actually...makes you think sometimes you know...what if it’s true that everyone has a destiny,”⁹⁷ we are made aware that her voice is that of Carmen Rivera. Her justification for the presence of destiny, spirituality or as she calls it, “mythology” in every one of her plays, recalls the inspiration she received through studying the work of Joseph Campbell, who stressed that “the power of a well-constructed ritual makes the storytelling terrific.” Campbell’s own belief that “the function of the artist is to have the outer world, which changes with history, meet the inner world, which is the individual’s response to the outer, and thus create mythos,” has prompted Rivera to pursue the “hero’s journey” for her characters

⁹⁷ Rivera, *Ghosts in Brooklyn*, 10.

and the “acclamation of mythos for the purpose of cultural storytelling” in every facet of her playwriting.⁹⁸

Kathleen’s own spiritual journey is uprooted by various visitors along her “life path,” including her girlfriend Melissa, an avid Buddhist who encourages Kathleen to come out to her family for the sake of her own inner peace. Though at first she is unwilling to do so, Kathleen soon realizes that her search for spirituality must not be hampered by fear of losing her family’s acceptance. She eventually begins a secret relationship with Melissa and promises that all will be “made right.” The fact that her brother Danny, an extreme homophobe, has not met Melissa and is unaware of Kathleen’s sexuality provides the climactic moment when, seeing Melissa exit her bathroom, Danny explodes and verbally and physically assaults her. This horrific event and Kathleen’s own shame in coming out eventually cause Melissa to abandon the relationship, which in turn points Kathleen towards a final act of suicide.

Rivera posits Kathleen’s decision as a “spiritual journey,” one which will free her from “the injustices of this world and help her find peace in the next.” As she did with her play *A State of Bliss*, Rivera proposes a release from the cruelty and violence of life through death and resurrection and the Eastern concept of Nirvana. To reflect this better world, Kathleen’s last action in the play is opening a fortune cookie from the bar “Karma,” and reciting its message to the audience, “a new path will open up for you...well, here goes.” Rivera’s final stage tableau depicts Bridget and her mother collecting Kathleen’s personal items while the ominous message of a “jumper on the Brooklyn Bridge” plays into blackout. With the appearance of Kathleen’s lover Melissa

⁹⁸ Joseph Campbell’s feelings on the author’s role in the “acclamation of culture” was discussed at length in his last recorded interview with Bill Moyers, and captured on the two disc series entitled *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* (1988). His theories remain a major inspiration for Rivera’s work and countless other authors who use mythology as a structural focal point.

and the confrontation between her brother Danny, *Ghosts in Brooklyn* presents itself as a kitchen sink drama easily marketed to thirty-something audiences and digestible for multi-cultural New York theatergoers. If music producer David Maldonado had not decided to use Rivera and Tirado for both *Celia*, and the incomplete *Palladium*, perhaps Rivera's work might have moved towards this more-accessible, non-Latino narrative.

Under the Mango Tree (2005)

Following her three draft experience with *Ghosts in Brooklyn*, Rivera returned to writing for Latino specific theatre companies and penned *Under the Mango Tree*, a Met Life Nuestras Voces award-winning play originally commissioned for production by INTAR and eventually scheduled for premiere at the University of Florida. INTAR's founding artistic director Max Ferrá⁹⁹ was originally responsible for this commission, following the fallout from the *La Lupe* lawsuit at the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. During the process of completing the play, INTAR's leadership changed hands from Ferrá to popular Cuban playwright Eduardo Machado. Machado, establishing new policies and procedures at INTAR refused to honor the commission for *Under the Mango Tree* and instead offered Rivera the opportunity to have an in-house workshop production. Rivera did so and then chose to contact Ferrá, who had retired to Florida and

⁹⁹ Though Max Ferrá is often credited as being the founder of INTAR, he was one of seven artists who, in 1966, founded the ADAL Performing Arts Company (Agrupación de Arte Latinoamericano). This group eventually became INTAR (International Arts Relation, Inc.). The "Magnificent Seven," as they came to call themselves, included Ferrá, Frank Robles, Elsa Ortiz Robles, Oscar García, Benjamin Lopez, Gladys Ortiz and Antonio González-Jaen. The group's place in Latino theatrical history has, to a large extent, been overshadowed by the Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Lab (founded 1981) housed at INTAR and its founder María Irene Fornés. INTAR, Repertorio Español, Thalia and the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre remain the four most dominant Latino theatrical producing organizations in New York City, and arguably, the country.

promised a production of the completed work at the University of Florida. As of this writing, *Under the Mango Tree* is still to be produced by Ferrá or INTAR.¹⁰⁰

In 2005 Rivera completed the play and entered it into the Repertorio Español MetLife Nuestras Voces Series, the competition which launched her successful career with 1996's *La Gringa* and later with *La Próxima Parada* (*The Next Stop*). Repertorio had also awarded Rivera's husband, Cándido Tirado, the 2003 prize for his play *Momma's Boyz*. Rivera felt that a return to her roots might be a positive reaction to the experience with *La Lupe*. This volatile time had a great impact on Rivera and the theatrical connections and reputation she had established for over a decade. As Rivera notes:

I expected there to be a bigger fall-out. During the lawsuit I was iced. But my story was getting out. There were two camps of gossip. Max Ferrá got me a grant for *Under the Mango Tree* at INTAR. Repertorio also stayed true. Lots of actors and writers wanted to work but I didn't think it affected my work. It did affect the momentum that *Lupe* had though. The business end was affected. Many people didn't want to touch a writer that would sue a theatre company. American Place Theatre called but then didn't want to touch the lawsuit.¹⁰¹

Under the Mango Tree is a return to the structure and narrative of *La Gringa*, with Rivera setting the play in Puerto Rico and focusing on the struggles of a young Nuyorican tomboy and her aging grandmother.¹⁰² Rivera returned to the development of

¹⁰⁰ Rivera, in a late 2003 interview in *The Dramatist* noted the following, though the Women's Project production never occurred. "*Under the Mango Tree* was originally the monologue 'A Kiss Under the Mango Tree,' which I wrote for the Playwrights in Performance series that director-playwright Michael John Garcés produced at Aaron Davis Hall. Max Ferrá saw the monologue and wanted me to develop it as a full-length. INTAR has been very supportive of the piece and they have written several grants for the play's development. In 2002, an early draft received a workshop production at INTAR's New Works Lab. It was then that Max invited Julia Miles from Women's Project and Productions to see the play for a possible co-production. She also liked it, and a co-production was born. Caridad Svich, 'In Conversation,' 37.

¹⁰¹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 8 December 2006.

¹⁰² As described on Repertorio Español's website, *Under the Mango Tree* is a play focusing on "Lena [who] is sent to her grandmother's house in Puerto Rico for the summer. Always at odds, the two come to an understanding under the ominous specter of the mango tree that can't be chopped down, forever bears "poisonous" mangoes and holds many mysteries." (<http://www.repertorio.org/opportunities/index.php?area=winners&id=4&contestid=2>)

a Latino play with Latino characters and engaged the storytelling narratives of her early dramaturgy. The irony of the title and theme, a return to the mango tree, is striking when we recall the words of iconic Latina writer Nicholasa Mohr, who says that she writes the way she does because “she must have kissed the mango tree.”¹⁰³ C.S. Rivera, in turn, reminds us that the work of Latina writers is “not a choice, but an urgent need.”¹⁰⁴

For Mohr, Judith Ortiz Cofer and other Puertorriqueñas, “writing becomes the tool, the weapon, the magic wand enabling them to authorize themselves in a literary tradition that up until the second half of the twentieth century denied them access. It is through writing that these women can create space of their own, can rescue themselves from the borderlands of literary canons and stand at the epicenter of their own imaginary community.”¹⁰⁵ Through this analysis a direct connection can be made from the writing of poet Julia de Burgos to the drama of Carmen Rivera, and further, postulating the claim that Rivera is creating a sense of the Latino, outlined by Juan Flores, where writers might “call attention to the premise that ethnicities, like nations, are ‘imagined communities’ rather than peoples connected by any essential, natural, or unchanging relations. What connects these communities is a set of ‘collective fictions’ that, far from being themselves stable, are ‘intensely debated’ and continually reinvented.”¹⁰⁶ This desire, always present in Rivera’s writing and discussions on playwriting, seems to infiltrate the responses of audiences to her work, always quick to comment that Rivera’s plays are shared experiences, where the walls between play and theatergoer vanish and the often invisible lives of Latinos become three dimensional.

¹⁰³ Juan Flores, “Back Down These Mean Streets: Introducing Nicholasa Mohr and Louis Reyes Rivera” in *Revista Chicano-Riquena* 8.2. (1980): 52.

¹⁰⁴ Rivera, *Kissing the Mango Tree*, 149.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 3.

As in many of Rivera's "Puerto Rico" plays,¹⁰⁷ memory serves as the catalyst in the world of *Under the Mango Tree*, uncovering the effects of secrets hidden over generations as well as those currently hidden by families. To prompt this nostalgic gaze, Rivera provides us with the opening stage setting: "Although the play is realistic, I would like to [see] the set designed in a minimalistic fashion."¹⁰⁸ The play also enacts a form of Puerto Rican schizophrenia, particularly in relation to the intergenerational difficulties of translating language and culture when "airlifting" oneself from New York to Puerto Rico. As scholar C.S. Rivera notes in relation to the life of fellow Puerto Rican author Judith Ortiz Cofer, "cultural schizophrenia"¹⁰⁹ developed as the family lived two completely different lives [where] the father insisted on them acting and looking like Americans, afraid of the prejudicial stereotypes of Puerto Ricans."¹¹⁰

As in *La Gringa* and in relation to Rivera herself, the themes of these memory plays seem to instantaneously and meta-theatrically activate the reception of the author; the Nuyorican playwright stuck in a futile attempt to reclaim a home which does not accept her as "organic." In this way the Nuyorican is, as scholars Jorge Huerta and Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez argue, like the post-Castro Cuban, dreaming of a way to return to a home which no longer exists, or as Cuban-American playwright Kimberly del Busto notes, "you can pack up and fly to José Martí International [Airport] but you can't pack up and fly to 1958."¹¹¹

For the women in this family, including 12 year old Lena, her unseen mother, and Lena's hardened grandmother Fela, secrets from the past cause a rift that disrupts

¹⁰⁷ The three important "Puerto Rico" memory plays in my opinion are *La Gringa*, *Plastic Flowers* and *Under the Mango Tree*.

¹⁰⁸ Carmen Rivera, *Under the Mango Tree*, unpublished manuscript, 2005, 83.

¹⁰⁹ Reminiscent of José "Papo" Márquez's play, *Puerto Rican Schizophrenia* (1977).

¹¹⁰ Rivera, *Kissing the Mango Tree*, 150.

¹¹¹ Kimberly del Busto, *Hurricane in a Glass*, unpublished manuscript, 2008, 49.

tradition when returning to the island, just as they had for the sisters of Rivera's *La Gringa*. This perception of an internal rotting of the core values of the Puerto Rican family, often present in second and third generation "Americanized" Latinos, activates a downward spiral of false identification with "la tierra" for Nuyoricans, who cannot escape the ever-present power of memory and its ability to distort what was from what actually was. The socio-dramatization of Puerto Rican return, more often desired than needed, is ever present in the life of Latino authors dealing with issues of identity, and for this case study, ingrained in the plays of Carmen Rivera.¹¹²

While simplistic connections can be made to the earlier *La Gringa*, comparing the character of Lena to a younger version of María on a summer vacation with her difficult grandmother Lena or a second comparison to the frustrated Tía Norma, Rivera demonstrates a strong desire to have *Under the Mango Tree* be its own story. Though thirteen-year-old Junior and fifty-year-old Felix are present in the play, they remain in a subservient role to the "women of the house," their goals and central plotline. It is instead the absent male role of Fela's cheating husband and the cuckolded next door neighbor, Don Santos that, as theorized by Marvin Carlson in his book *The Haunted Stage*, "ghost" the lives of these anguished women, in direct comparison to the husband of Bernarda Alba and the philandering Pepé el Indio; all four having destroyed the sanctity of these houses.

Under the Mango Tree attempts to "haunt" the stage by addressing similar themes of male abandonment as dramatized in Lorca's classic *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, arguably the best known Spanish language play of the twentieth-century. Reworking

¹¹²As Juan Flores explains in his book, "Memory fuels desire: the past as imagined from a Latino perspective awakens an anticipatory sense of what is, or might be, in store." Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop*, 199.

Lorca seems a popular choice for Latino playwrights, as Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre and INTAR alum Oscar Colón has attempted with both his *Preface to Bernarda* (2002) as well as *The Last of Bernarda* (2005), as has Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and contemporary Nilo Cruz, and his *Lorca in the Green Dress* (2001) and *Beauty of the Father* (2004), both featuring the character of Federico García Lorca as a “living ghost.” Cruz’s use of this device could be considered a foray into the world of *fantastic realism*.

The mango tree represents all the flaws and secrets which have destroyed the lives of those involved in a sordid affair and which eventually led to the suicide of Fela’s neighbor Don Carlos. The literal manifestation of the tree, solitary and dead yet still sprouting “poisonous mangoes,” activates a notion of loss and the inability to proceed with life, reminiscent of Beckett’s own tree. Rivera’s note to the set designer, asking for “a single tree onstage,” serving as the play’s locus for suicide and existentialist questioning, enacts the playwriting choice to have the late Don Carlos be successful where *Godot*’s Estragon was not. Further, early in Act One Lena and 15 year old Gloria first propose the notion of the fantastic “zombie tree,” which they agree holds dark secrets from the past, and possibly the reason why Abuelo deserted Fela many years earlier:

Lena: These are strange mangoes, huh?

Gloria: Don’t touch them!

Lena: Why?

Gloria: They’re poison.

Lena: Poison? They just look rotten.

Gloria: Yuch, uui...I’m not kidding you can’t eat them- the tree is haunted.

Lena: How can a tree be haunted? I’ve seen a lot of books and movies and there’s never a haunted tree.

Gloria: That tree is...the mangoes just keep growing – dead...even the drought hasn't finished them off. Isn't that strange? And nobody can knock down the tree. That's only possible if there's a spirit in there.¹¹³

Rivera's strength is her ability to capture the linguistic patterns and conversations of her characters as she utilizes the two teenage girls to describe the history of the tree, the heightened level of gossip that surrounds the two homes and the possibility that Fela and *abuelo* and their neighbors, Don Santos and his wife, may have brought a curse upon all who live in the vicinity. This curse is illustrated by the drought that plagues the pueblo. Belen, Fela's best friend, describes the drought and its effect on all of Puerto Rico, hinting at the tourists' inability to deal with such matters:

Belen: Una mierda mija – that's what it is...ay this drought is killing me! I can't wait for the rains. On the news this morning they said even the hotels are having problems with the water. The tourists must be mad, you know, they take five showers a day.

Fela: Ay, and my leg has been bothering me for weeks. When it does, it usually means that it's going to rain. But nada. Mira look at my garden...all my peppers and tomatoes have died. I tried to keep them alive but...the sun is too hot.¹¹⁴

Rivera, in her signature style, uses the drought to integrate spiritual and religious beliefs and to transport the “audience/community” to the natural aesthetic of the island. In doing so, she once again utilizes Rollo May's dramatic structure of myth and transubstantiation, recalling her earlier play, *La Gringa*. Through Belen, Rivera prompts this interweaving of folk narrative and parable while discussing the miracles of Puerto Rico:

Belen: Mira I heard a story about a lake by Ciales. This jíbaro goes fishing and he takes his boat out into the middle of the lake. He sees something, he gets closer and it's a cross. Imagínate! The whole town went crazy. They probably thought

¹¹³ Rivera, *Under the Mango Tree*, 11.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

that Jesus was coming or something. A miracle! People were coming from all over to pray; they were going in the water...you know to bathe in holy water. Somebody even said the Pope was gonna come and bless the town. Well the drought starts to get worse and the lake really starts to dry up and guess what they found? A church. Right there in the middle of the lake. Everybody was so upset – the Pope never went to Ciales. No miracle.

Fela: And nobody knew it was there?

Belen: Not even the oldest person in town knew about it – and the news said he was 102 – mira eso, the church was in the lake for more than a hundred years. They cleaned it and painted it, and now the people are praying there again.¹¹⁵

In a nod to the 1954 American classic *The Rainmaker*, by N. Richard Nash, hope arrives in the form of a widowed male suitor named Felix, a Nuyorican who has arrived after being swindled by a realtor, adept in the bait and switch which confused pictures of Fela's home and her next door neighbor's abandoned one. Felix, at first angry and threatening legal action, later discusses the possibility of cutting down the infamous mango tree which separates their property to install new piping for a water line. The women, knowing that every attempt to chop down the haunted tree has failed are all shocked when Fela gives her blessing. As in Nash's play, Felix serves as a substitute for Nash's Starbuck, the wild eyed outsider who promises rain for drought-stricken farmers while Fela becomes a stand in for the jilted country girl Lizzie, and the two develop a romantic tension which culminates in the possibility of a future relationship.

Rivera chooses not to designate this romance for the older couple but rather for Lena and Belen's grandson Junior, another Nuyorican "outsider," equally matched with Lena in both of their desires to consummate their first relationship through basketball. Rivera, simultaneously attempting to capture the emergence of adolescent love, layers

¹¹⁵ Rivera, *Under the Mango Tree*, 4-5.

Under the Mango Tree with a strong amount of homosexual tension,¹¹⁶ portraying Lena as a tough, Nuyorican tomboy who is able to defeat Junior on the basketball court and portraying Gloria as a prissy, fashionable lipstick lesbian. It is not until the embarrassing arrival of Lena's first menstruation, limiting her ability to go swimming with Junior, that Lena is forced to take on the role of the "traditional" woman and begin wearing dresses as ordered by her grandmother.

Through these actions Rivera is able to posit a strong social critique on the role of woman in Puerto Rican society, abandoned by men and often dismissed from male dominated activities, including sports and vocations. Ironically, Lena's "curse" follows her attempt to eat a rotten mango from the "cursed" mango tree. Menstruation, often a joyous celebration of womanhood in films depicting Latinas, is here the beginning of the loss of independence for her, forced to give up what she wants and to conform to the maternal role within the family. Lena, in conflict and confident that she will not end up like this, finds it ironic that in Spanish "the same word for handcuff is the word for wife – esposa." She exclaims "I'm not gonna let anybody put any esposas on me".¹¹⁷

Gloria: Hey Lena, it's okay. You get used to it. Serious you do. I got mine when I was 12 too. I was the first one of my friends to get it. It was kind of cool. I felt like a grown-up.

Fela: But you're not grown-up yet. I was 14 when mine came but in my time a woman didn't need a period to be a woman.

Belen: Fela mira, when a young woman gets her period, that's it, she's a woman, everything changes.

Lena: When my friend on the basketball team got her period her parents made her quit the team.

Fela: Well, she's growing up and you girls can't go around playing with boys. Women don't have time to play games Lena. I was working washing clothes and cleaning houses by the time I was 10 years old to help my family.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Gloria and Lena discuss the possibility that Lena may be a lesbian when they dissect the fact that "girl basketball coaches are lesbians" as well as Lena's close relationship with her.

¹¹⁷ Rivera, *Under the Mango Tree*, 9.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

Though the play serves as a vehicle for Latinas' desire to reclaim their lives after the abandonment by men, it is Felix who motivates Rivera's frequent theme of "imagined nostalgia" in the play. The fifty-year-old Nuyorican widower buys the former home of Don Santos in search of an unknown Puerto Rico whose magic seems to have been promised to him by family, friends and particular to this study, an imagined community of Nuyoricans who have re-imagined Puerto Rico based on a past that may have never existed. Felix, appropriating the role of María in *La Gringa*, confesses to Belen that he was swept up in the desire to reclaim a Puerto Rico which belongs to all, both native well as diasporic second and third generation Puerto Ricans raised in the United States:

Felix: I'm retired and I tried Arizona and Florida. But it wasn't for me. My son brought his children to Puerto Rico last year on vacation and they loved it. I had never been to Puerto Rico in my life. I used to hear wonderful stories from my grandmother about her childhood here. She made it sound so romantic and beautiful. Like paradise. What little Spanish I know is because of her. I guess I was expecting to find the Puerto Rico she was always talking about.¹¹⁹

Once again the imagined past controls the actions of Rivera's characters and their actions, carrying a college-aged María or a retirement-aged Felix from New York to Puerto Rico without the least bit of knowledge as to how the "community" works. As Suzanne Oboler recounts this common practice among transplanted Puerto Ricans, "The effort to search and affirm their identity, together with a renewed sense of cultural nationalist pride, led many...to make the return voyage to Puerto Rico – although most were invariably disappointed when their mythical version of Borinquen was confronted

¹¹⁹ Rivera, *Under the Mango Tree*, 40.

with the harsh reality of the majority of Puerto Ricans' daily life on the island."¹²⁰ For Belen and María's cousin Iris, Puerto Rico is no more than the promise of an unattainable dream for those who wish to visit and a curse for those who are forced to stay.

The juxtaposition of Felix's dream of Puerto Rico with 15 year old Gloria's exclamation, "You're so lucky to live in New York," is more often the case with Nuyoricans and their winter retreats to the island, and it is this great contradiction of ideologies that helps create the theatre of Carmen Rivera. The comparative binaries of geographic locations serve as a dramatic spine for Rivera's recent work including Puerto Rico/New York, Brooklyn/Manhattan, Cuba/United States. These geographic conflicts seem to become a substitute for earlier socio-dramatic and familial works which included parent/child, husband/wife, gentrification/neighborhood.

Under the Mango Tree attempts to reconfigure this sociological work into a cohesive argument including these disparate aspects of Rivera's dramaturgy or what she refers to as "riffs," creating a narrative which utilizes the standard inter-generational conflict infused with *fantastic realism* and post-colonial identification of "Puerto Rico's problem," namely characters who can never find home. Blanca Vásquez notes the very exercise which the drama of Rivera re-constructs in regard to the struggles of Puerto Ricans attempting to straddle both Puerto Rico and New York and more importantly, the necessity to create an imagined identity:

¹²⁰ Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 57.

As Puerto Ricans, we grew up with contradictions and in contradictions. Are we Americans? Well, not really. Are we Puerto Rican? Well, we may never have been to Puerto Rico... There are parts of here that are us and parts of there that are not us. So we grow up with ambivalence, a sense of belonging to neither place until we begin a more conscious process of finding out who we are, where we come from, why we are here, and what we choose to be, until we begin to struggle it out and name ourselves.¹²¹

This naming of self is at the center of Carmen Rivera's theatre. In the very act of naming oneself Latina/o, the various notions of what that means become problematic, particularly for those dramatized in Rivera's play, namely the Puerto Rican who has either left the island as a child or has never visited. Though there is a certain pride present in calling oneself Nuyorican, it is the return that initiates the dramatic conflict, whereby one must defend their *naming*. Felix cannot bring himself to acknowledge the absurd notion that as a fifty-plus Latino he has never visited the island and the further embarrassment of being "turned on" to the island by his children and grandchildren, thus causing "Nuyorican guilt." This guilt, which often includes parents who have not taught their children Spanish,¹²² Puerto Rican culture or the history of the commonwealth status of the island, creates a situation where the desired return can never be fulfilled, since one arrives in Puerto Rico as an enemy, forced to appropriate the symbols of Rivera's plays; flag (jacket), music (bomba) or for the more economically successful, homes.

In the end Rivera's forced happy ending is just that. Felix's purchase of Don Santos's home, his flourishing relationship with Fela and the notion that Lena will be

¹²¹ Blanca Vazquez's comment is from Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's "La identidad especular del allá y del acá: Nuestra propia imagen puertorriqueña en cuestión," *Centro Bulletin* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 28-43. This exact quote was borrowed from Oboler's *Ethnic Labels, Latin Lives*, 58.

¹²² Oboler confronts this issue of language and *latinidad* by stating that "Nuyoricans whose English language skills placed them in competition with the local labor force... confronted the discrimination and rejection of the island populations." This, serving as a major issue for the diaspora and to a large extent, a central concern which caused many to decry "damned if I do [speak Spanish/English], damned if I don't!" *Ibid.*, 57.

happy giving up basketball and pursuing a relationship with Junior all reflect a myth of return. Fela's final line "We're all ready...let's go," signals a warning for the future as well as a conclusion to the events of the play. As an audience we are left with a clouded feeling since it seems everyone has conformed to life in the pueblo *sans* their dreams. Felix will own this house but realizes that Puerto Rico is not the paradise he believed it would be; Fela seems to have lost passion for life after the discovery of her husband's betrayal and though she displays interest in Felix it seems, at best, lukewarm; Lena's kiss under the mango tree with Junior, though exciting, seems to have awakened in her an inner contempt for the idea of becoming a woman, having to abandon her basketball for a frilly dress and the acknowledgment that she will return to her newly divorced parents in New York, afraid and vulnerable.

This play, though at first seeming to dramatize a joyous coming of age, is actually a bittersweet example of return. It is the loss of innocence, which each character independently suffers, that activates moments of *fantastic realism* and highlights the inescapable curse brought on by the suicide of Don Santos. The unraveling memories all illustrate the "negative" image of a nostalgic photograph, with each character having his/her own tragic history, including events where Junior's father shot a thief, the infidelities of Lena's father, the death of Felix's wife from cancer and the first marriage of Fela to an elder butcher. Rivera explains this pattern of bad luck through the lens of the fantastic and the curse of the mango tree, whose branches forever loom due to the impossibility of its removal.

As noted earlier, *Under the Mango Tree* bears a striking resemblance to Nash's *The Rainmaker*, utilizing characters whose lives are broken because of hurtful memories

and an ever present drought which slowly destroys any hope for fertility. Unlike the water that gives birth to literary creation in *Julia de Burgos*, or the rain that purifies Manolo and María in *La Gringa*, Rivera inverts water here through drought and designs a play where characters metaphorically thirst for forgiveness and understanding while they simultaneously wallow in self pity and regret. In both plays our heroine tomboys, Lizzie and Lena, are left to succumb to the responsibilities of socially induced maternal roles after being seduced by promises of prosperity. In turn, Rivera provides the audience with an unachieved resolution and ambivalent conclusion, turning instead to the prospect of a future where “rain may come,” though possibly too late.

The final stage direction of the play, “The wind picks up and rain drops are heard...then the rain becomes heavy...a storm is heard,”¹²³ while directly mirroring the conclusion of *The Rainmaker*, also presupposes a new direction for the drama of Carmen Rivera. *Under the Mango Tree* signals a move away from minimalistic domestic drama towards a desire to document “larger” stories of *latinidad*, as well as the decision to begin co-writing her plays with her husband Cándido Tirado. Her newest work, commissioned by producer David Maldonado, utilizes large scale budgets, sets, costumes and musicians worthy of international salsa extravaganzas. Thus the era of Rivera’s particular style of Latino theatrical representation may have seen its final curtain with *Under the Mango Tree*, a post 9-11 play of lost hope and the struggle to keep moving forward during difficult times.

¹²³ Rivera, *Under the Mango Tree*, 81.

**Conclusion: “Theatrical *Latinidad*” into the Future -
Carmen Rivera, Latina/o Musicals and the Canon**

A catalyst for pursuing this project on the dramaturgy of Carmen Rivera sprung from the belief that her theatre, popular and resonant in the Latino community for nearly two decades, had failed to gain mainstream popularity in regional theatres and was virtually unknown in universities across the country. Upon investigating her exposure in classrooms, I found Rivera’s work was often categorized as either “Spanish” theatre or relegated to a week of the semester entitled “Hispanic American theatre.” These mislabeled terms failed to reflect the universal appeal of the Latina/o experience in the United States, not to mention the incorrect assumption that many Latino playwrights, Rivera included, wrote their plays in Spanish. Instead these writers were often incorrectly placed in the same literary category as Spain’s Federico García Lorca, Colombian Gabriel García Márquez or Golden Age playwright Lope de Vega. The need for a classification of writers who depict the experiences of Latinos in the United States is still an issue with many theatre and English departments, whose outdated canons of literary study are unwilling to accept the nation’s move towards the promise of 2050, a year that predicts a “majority voice for this minority group.”¹

¹“Minorities, now about a third of the population, are expected to become the majority in 2042 and hit 54 percent in 2050. Hispanics, who make up about 15 percent of the population today, will account for 30 percent in 2050, according to the projections.” This stunning prediction frightened many Americans during the 2008 Presidential campaign, prompting California to seek new legislation on Medicare and immigrant voting rights. The arguments were even more frightening when poll numbers showed that Los Angeles county had a 54% Latino population as of June 2003, with numbers increasing 1.7% per four year Presidential campaign. “America in 2050: Even Older and More Diverse,” MSNBC online, 14 August 2008.

In relation to this invisibility of Latinos in academic content Virginia Sánchez Korrol states “Before the social reformations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, if Puerto Ricans appeared at all in college syllabi, it was usually in courses that perpetuated a deficit model in analyzing the group’s myriad adjustment ‘problems’ in urban settings. Moreover, Puerto Ricans appeared as victims or perpetrators of their deplorable situation, as isolated, ahistorical beings. The repercussions of the colonial relationship between island and mainland were not mentioned, and the burning issues of racialized groups in white America fell between the cracks.”² To this end, scholars attending institutions like Korrol’s own Brooklyn College were made to regard the deficient nature of intellectualism among Latinos in the United States as self-imposed rather than an active distortion of their contributions to the field.

Rivera’s plays are about families, neighborhoods, sexuality, education, culture, and yes, Latinos. The successful playwrights who preceded her, including Miguel Piñero (*Short Eyes*), Pedro Pietri (*The Masses are Asses*), Reinaldo Povod (*Cuba and his Teddy Bear*) and José Rivera (*Marisol*) created an opportunity for new and innovative works which hoped to create a legacy for future writers. The above list, completely subjective, begs the question: Other than contemporary Migdalia Cruz, where are the Latinas? Was there room on this extremely “short list” for the work of Carmen Rivera, and consequently, those playwrights whose careers seem representative of the “cultural dramaturgy” which she dramatizes in her plays? Rivera’s own understanding of the marketplace presupposes her desire to write plays for public consumption. She notes that when theatres decide to hire a Latino playwright, they feel the play also needs to have a

² Virginia Sánchez Korrol, “The Star in My Compass” in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 197-98.

Latino theme, “which is a completely subjective decision, because no one can really say with absolute certainty what a Latino play is. If a Latino writes a play that has nothing to do with Latinos, is that still a Latino play? If a non-Latino writes a play about Latinos, is that a Latino play?”³

The prospects for minority playwrights have always been limited and the difficulties they have encountered finding mainstream producers and audiences have only been further complicated by the complex issue of alienating their Latino base by “crossing over.” With the exception of a few scholars,⁴ Latino theatre as a critical study remains undervalued and, as mentioned earlier, “lumped in” with national theatres including Spain, Caribbean island nations, Mexico, South America and even a small theatre in Vancouver which specializes in “Spanish border plays.” This concept of “lumping” was articulated by Rivera’s husband Cándido Tirado in his essay, “On Nuyorican Theatre” which defined lumping as the process “When the white American tries to combine all those people who come from different countries into one group, hence, creating the new identity...*lumping* is a clean and effective way where the Anglos can put us in a nicely packaged box.”⁵ Tirado, a proponent of eliminating Pan-Latino labels and encouraging the use of the terms Nuyorican and Chicano to define playwrights, stresses the importance of self-produced work in lieu of the necessity to seek commissions from “Anglo” theatres. In other words, by seizing the monetary power of

³ Caridad Svich, “In Conversation with Carmen Rivera,” *The Dramatist* (March/April 2004): 38.

⁴ I would say that the work Professor Jorge Huerta has done with Chicano theatre, specifically the work of Luis Valdéz and Professor John Antush with Nuyorican theatre clearly stands out, though Antush was also incorrect in calling the New York born playwrights he studied, “Puerto Rican.”

⁵ Cándido Tirado, “On Nuyorican Theatre” in *Boletín del Archivo Nacional de Teatro y Cine del Ateneo Puertorriqueño: Teatro Nuyorican y Teatro Puertorriqueño en Nueva York*, Roberto Ramos-Perea, ed. (San Juan, PR: Ateneo Press, 2006), 54.

production, playwrights can avoid being “lumped” in with groups who may write from differing histories, sociologies and languages.

The commercial theatre of the 1970s and 80s, quick to classify authors as either Hispanic or Spanish, often neglected countries of origin or geopolitical boundaries in defining their artists. This issue, a recurring theme in the work of Rivera, remains a central concern for the generation of playwrights, and to a large extent, second-generation Latinos born in the United States. As noted throughout this study, the term “Latino” has served as an “all-inclusive” categorization of many playwrights, though I have been careful to note those who do not wish to be defined as “Latino.” Juan Flores acknowledges this conundrum by stipulating that “most savvy commentators now disavow (at least explicitly) the notion of an essential Latino identity - after all, by now we know that even gender and national identities are not ‘essential’ (there is no defining female ‘soul’ or inherent American ‘spirit’) – even though those same commentators often follow up by sneaking in suspiciously ‘essentialist’-sounding statements about Latino identity through the back door, in the guise of comments on ‘Latino culture.’ *But that does not mean that Latino identity ‘doesn’t exist,’* for, as is frequently pointed out, social constructs still exist and can exert a strong force. Perhaps a better question would be, ‘Is there such a thing as a collective, pan-ethnic Latino identity – one that Latinos themselves generally recognize?’”⁶

Throughout her career Rivera has acknowledged this “generalization” by noting that she is considered Latina because “America” considers herself to be so. She argues that she is an “other,” born in New York but unable to use the term American to define

⁶ Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 4.

herself since “For North Americans the only type of American [is Anglo]. The South American, Central American or Mexican are Latinos. The words Latino or Hispanic are a North American creation used to separate and maintain “other” types of Americans.”⁷ To this end, Rivera has called her work either “Latina/o,” noting that her multi-cultural audience feels most comfortable with this term or “Nuyorican,” which she feels best describes her political inclinations against US intervention in Puerto Rico and its colonial practices towards Puerto Ricans in the United States. Carmen Rivera’s theatre becomes a space discussed by Flores as a “momentous pan-Latinization” since both the author and the characters are centered or influenced by major urban centers, here, New York. Thus her plays may be considered “Latino” more so than “Nuyorican.”

A second reason for Rivera to classify herself as “Latino” would be the necessity to exist as a viable playwright in the eyes of producers and literary agents, whose acceptance of “Latino” allows them a homogenizing entrance into her narratives. As noted throughout the study, the commercial success of a Latino playwright is based on the universality of their plays as well as an “access point” for non-Latino audiences. Rivera remains in total agreement with her husband that “cultural specific is out and cultural general is in.”⁸ Tirado assesses the needed identification with “the Latino tag when it comes down to the electorate,” by postulating that “Latino” demonstrates the large number of Spanish speaking people who are gaining political power and therefore becomes a classification that encourages solidarity among these culturally specific groups. However, both Rivera and Tirado are quick to agree that they are “Puerto Ricans in exile,” developing their own work through the imposed categorization of “Latino” and

⁷ Carmen Rivera, “*Una Ciudadana entre dos Mundos*,” unpublished manuscript, 2002, 2.

⁸ Tirado, “On Nuyorican Theatre,” 54.

consumer driven lens of Anglo producers. As Frances Negrón-Muntaner notes “Historian Benedict Anderson has famously argued that nationalism imagines the nation as a horizontal brotherhood, but most Caribbean nationals discovered that in the end we are at the mercy of strangers.”⁹

Rivera’s declaration that she belongs “to two groups – the world of the American and the world of the Latino”¹⁰ complicates her desire to break free of imposed classifications of playwrights. Rivera addresses this concern by noting that she “spend[s] a great deal of time contemplating, discussing and arguing my *latinidad*¹¹ in the United States...I am a playwright and my perception of self in this American society is proven from experiences and observations made over my 37 years of life.”¹² To this end, *Anna in the Tropics* by Nilo Cruz or *Short Eyes* by Miguel Piñero, while dramatizing a Cuban or Nuyorican experience, must also function as mass consumption of universal culture if the goal is mainstream success. *Short Eyes*, originally developed by Piñero in prison under the auspices of The Family Support Initiative,¹³ depicts both a specific experience of *latinidad* while also serving as a “universal” play which dramatizes the American penitentiary system. Without this cross-cultural appeal, Joe Papp’s production would have closed at the Public Theater, never receiving a Broadway run.

In reference to Piñero (as well as Carmen Rivera and her husband Cándido Tirado), scholar Jon Rossini proposes that he was, as Antonio Gramsci theorized, “an

⁹ Frances Negrón-Muntaner, “Looking Good” in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 429.

¹⁰ Rivera, “*Una Ciudadana*,” 6.

¹¹ As argued by Arlene Dávila, “As one of the oldest Latino subgroups in New York City, Puerto Ricans are considerably familiar with *latinidad*, a category that they have long helped further and use strategically for political purposes.” Therefore Rivera’s argument becomes, through Dávila’s analysis both political and artistic. Arlene Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ The group allowed artistic initiatives including writing, job training and performance for transitioning convicts in New York State.

‘organic intellectual’ whose sensibilities and political projects arise directly from the circumstances that developed his consciousness. Understanding Piñero as an organic intellectual helps displace the dangerous representational practice of reading ethnic cultural production as...merely autobiographical, or slice-of-life from the spaces he inhabited.”¹⁴ In much the same way, Rivera creates worlds in which she lived and through the exploration of these places, finds solace within the narratives of her characters, or what I term an “intercultural exorcism,” achieved through the healing process of the Shaman.

Rivera’s declaration of love for both worlds of inhabitation, one, the Latino/a, and the other, the “American,” often causes a rift in reception of her work by scholars. Rivera’s attempt at understanding the negation of one over the other caused her to declare at the Latin American Theatre Festival in Bolivia “If I choose one I kill the other. I do not look for citizenship in two worlds, I know I will not find it there...citizenship is an artificial construct that does not define me. I believe that since I do not fit into any one world [either Latino or American] I have been liberated. I am happy wherever I go. If I am at peace with what I am, I take the two worlds wherever I go.”¹⁵ Thus the process outlined by the Shaman Repertory Theatre, healing through intercultural exchange, continues to serve as the motivation for Rivera’s socio-historical dramaturgy, whether it be reconstructing her own fractured past (*La Gringa*, *Under the Mango Tree*, *A State of Bliss*), or the histories of those that came before her (*La Lupe*, *Julia de Burgos*, *Celia Cruz*).

¹⁴ Jon D. Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrighting Ethnicity* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 30.

¹⁵ Rivera, “*Una Ciudadana*,” 8-9.

Negating the processes of those playwrights that followed the Nuyorican movement of the 1970s, or as Tirado called them, “second generation,” Rivera instead substitutes the despair of these earlier archetypes with her own sense of hope through healing and faith. In rallying against the earlier Nuyorican drama, which often moved towards a form of minstrelsy and provided audiences with a fabrication of the “*authentic*,” Rivera established a post-Nuyorican drama which allows for new-age solutions to abandonment, in contrast to the availability of the appropriated “Latin” experience which has become a recent development with non-Latino playwrights.¹⁶ Rivera’s goal is to have audiences reject work that “appropriates stereotypical *latinidad*, while promising an “authentic” experience akin to “hopping a #5 train to the Bronx.” Early plays that included this form of “illicit *latinidad*” capitalize on a “street-wise” or “Latino-lazy” sentimentality that was often misinterpreted by Anglo producers as “raw and real.”

Her own story, which is to a large extent reminiscent of the American dream - a Catholic school elementary and private college education, a mother who became a school principal, a business-minded father who retired comfortably - all form a biographical mythos for Rivera which fosters her individual Latina voice. Rivera’s position, that her “parents and grandparents are American citizens, even though they were born in Puerto Rico,” becomes problematic for many of her audiences, noting that this “paradox[ical] American citizenship...did not guarantee them entrance to the American way of life.” Rivera writes from the experience of a Latina unwilling to accept stereotyping of her characters as well as the negative repetitive cycle of “marketed *latinidad*.”

¹⁶ The decision by popular non-Latino playwrights, including Stephen Adly Guirgis’s *Our Lady of 121st Street* and *Jesus Hopped the A Train*, to write Latino characters who are closer to minstrelsy than realism, has begun to infiltrate the collective conscious of American theatergoers, causing what I believe will become a revival of the “*Latin-ploitation*” of the 1970s.

Rivera's belief that these earlier "street" plays often led to Hollywood film representations of Latinos as drug dealers, pimps, junkies and prostitutes¹⁷ is further complicated by the writing of non-Latino playwrights (most notably Stephen Adly Guirgis) who create Latino characters closer to minstrelsy than realism. This trend has begun to infiltrate the collective conscious of American theatergoers, causing what I believe will become a revival of the "*Latin-ploitation*" of the 1970s. As Edna Acosta-Belén notes "The concepts of 'street' or 'outlaw' poetry were frequently used...to describe an artistic movement that came from the margins to denounce the racism and inequalities of US society, and give a voice to the experiences of Puerto Ricans born or raised in the barrios of New York."¹⁸ In my opinion, these narratives are misappropriated by hip hop, television and video games which downplay the violent nature of crime and drugs in minority communities.

Acosta-Belén's analysis extends to plays which "document the trials and tribulations of mostly working-class families struggling to survive in a racist and alienating environment."¹⁹ For economic as well as political reasons, theatrical icons like Joe Papp at the Public Theater, sought plays which contained hard-edged *latinidad*, as exemplified by his backing of works by Piñero, Povod and Pietri, while distancing his audiences from the sentimentality of plays like *The Oxcart*. Carmen Rivera, viewing these plays as a child and young woman, was inspired by the individuality of the

¹⁷ Though the list is unfortunately too long to mention, I believe that *Fort Apache The Bronx* is arguably the best example of this "burnt out South Bronx tenement cinema verité." The film, which featured Miguel Piñero as a homicidal drug dealer also featured an Irish-American police chief exclaiming "leave all the Puerto Ricans smelling each others farts." Add to this formula the Anglo hero cop, ready to save *them* from each other, and you have a successful Hollywood representation of Latinos.

¹⁸ Edna Acosta-Belén, "Latina/o Cultural Expressions: A View of US Society Through the Eyes of the Subaltern" in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, Juan Flores and Renato Rosado, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Nuyorican poet's voices but was also committed to mediate her characters with political and social resistance achieved through spirituality.

At the present time the professional landscape has a variety of companies, including LAByrinth, Manhattan Theatre Club and the New York Theater Workshop that are "Latino friendly" and have become more accessible to these playwrights. LAByrinth, now famous for producing the (often *minstrelized*) works of Stephen Adly Guirgis and the artistic directorship of Philip Seymour Hoffman, began as an "offshoot" of the INTAR Theatre and two of its members, John Ortíz and Gary Soto. The LAB was an acronym for Latino Actors Basement, where they "worked out" until securing a permanent space at the Public Theater. The LAB continues to produce work by Latino playwrights, most notably the plays of José Rivera, with director Felix Solís and actors Rosie Perez, Bobby Cannevale and David Zayas, while maintaining an active multi-cultural audience.

However, these seem to be casualties in the Latino theatre, as demonstrated by the problems facing the five most recognized companies in New York, formed during the cultural funding boom of the late 1960s. Today this lack of general funding, in addition to the downturn in the economy, has directly impacted each of the five and their ability to produce full seasons of new plays. Corporate sponsorships, save the long standing Repertorio Español's affiliations with both Met Life Insurance and Target, have "dried up," prompting the possibility of the disappearance of these theatres. At this time, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, INTAR, Thalia, Pregones and Repertorio Español have all made public their inability to remain commercially viable entities in New York City.

Arguably, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre has the worst case scenario of New York's "Big 5." Artistic Director and founder Miriam Colón has lost her longtime tenant, the off-Broadway hit *Forbidden Broadway*, which vacated the theatre in February of 2009. With this development came a power struggle with a newly elected Board of Directors who seem to desire an overhaul of the theatre and its programs, which include the Professional Playwrights Unit, the Raúl Julia Actor Training Unit and the Summer Tour of the Boroughs. The retirement of longtime Playwrights' Unit Mentor Allen Davis III and the disenfranchisement of the Playwright's Unit itself, who claim to have received limited funding for their critically acclaimed *InSight* series, in addition to the Board's desire to lease the 47th Street Theatre to "paying tenants" have all caused a critical crossroads for the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre. Since the theatre has not achieved a fiscally viable season since 2001's run of *La Lupe*, Miriam Colón caused a stir in the community with her 2009 internet appeal to "pledge \$1 to save PRTT." This worldwide appeal demonstrated that the Latino theatre was in serious danger of closing in its current structure.

Repertorio Español's Associate Producer and Director of Audience Development and Public Relations, José Antonio Cruz, has also gone to the internet to appeal for audience donations to the theatre, which still remains the best funded of all Latino theatres in the United States, boasting a \$1,000,000 budget and an equally large endowment. Recently Repertorio has increased their production of Latin American plays on their mainstage, featuring playwrights Isaac Chocrón, Mario Vargas Llosa and Jorge Amado in the hope of attracting new audiences from these parts of the world, while relegating "Latino" works for the corporate sponsored competitions and reading series

sponsored by the Jerome Foundation Trust. The matinee performances, geared specifically towards high school audiences, continue to be the economic lifeline of the group, which still sells out performances of *La Gringa* after 14 years of production. In addition, the hiring of celebrities, including soap opera star Francisco Gattorno and former Miss Universe Denise Quiñones, has prompted a greater interest in Repertorio's season. The Met Life Nuestras Voces Competition, which has produced winning plays by both Rivera and Cándido Tirado, continues to highlight new voices with a marked increase in Chicano plays, which now double the entries of Puerto Rican and Cuban writers.

INTAR, now headed by Cuban playwright Eduardo Machado and Latina performance icon Alina Troyano (*aka Carmelita Tropicana*), has also made public their own financial struggles which include limited seasons and most damaging, the loss of two theatre spaces in 1999 and 2004. The group has administrative offices on 52nd Street but performs a shortened season of two works in several rental houses. Machado has made clear to the repertory of actors and resident playwrights housed at the theatre that INTAR's vision must change and become inclusive of Anglo artists if they are to survive.²⁰ Though the group continues to maintain the *Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Program*, which provides playwrights with a \$2500 stipend for one year's residency, the struggles of the group and its lack of audience have prompted multiple discussions about the closing of the theatre. In 2008 a new Board of Directors was solicited but changes to the structure of the group remain stalled.

²⁰ A meeting was held for all INTAR artists in October of 2008. At the meeting Machado clearly delineated the economic difficulties of the theatre and his resolution to change its composition within the next year. The 2009 season featured a play by Machado and a non-Latino playwright, both of which were directed by non-Latino directors. Machado himself, for the first time in decades, wrote *In Paradise*, a play in the style of Tennessee Williams, which was openly marketed as "non-Cuban."

Pregones, housed in an entirely new theatre in the South Bronx, seems to be thriving, having received corporate support and public funding from the Bronx Borough President's Office. The group continues to attract audiences with the help of their neighbor, Hostos Community College and its resident theatre company. The group's programs include "Asunción," an "LGBT" playwriting competition and a repertory of actors who seem content to work on all aspects of production, including technical and administrative duties. However, with the appointment of Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrión to the Obama administration, it will be interesting to note if Pregones's funding is drastically slashed, as has been the case with other cultural theatre groups who have lost local political support.

Thalia, founded by actress/producer Silvia Brito in the late 1970s, continues to produce Spanish language plays and zarzuelas as its chief source of revenue. With the appointment of Angel Gil Orrios as Artistic Director in 2000, Thalia began to pursue an experimental style, creating new works based on multi-visual performance and modern works from Spain. The location of the theatre in the heart of Queens has been positively impacted by its neighbor PS 1, whose merger with the Museum of Modern Art in 2003 brought new upwardly mobile Manhattan-ites to the community. Thalia, another company known for its "distance," both in location and collegiality, has recently made a concentrated effort to interface with the other theatres, joining TeatroStageFest's Latino Theatre Festival.

Playwriting labs including the Lark Play Development Center, Playwrights Horizons, Mabou Mines, and California's "Inside the Ford," are targeting Latina/o playwrights for development and production, though a major blow was dealt to the

development of new Latino playwrights when the South Coast Repertory Theatre chose to terminate its mission of commissioning Latino plays. Latino theatres outside New York have also begun to produce work and invite playwrights (ironically, many from New York) to participate in workshops, festivals and production seasons. The most successful of these include Miracle Theatre of Portland, Oregon, East L.A. Rep and LATC of Los Angeles, Teatro Avante of Miami, La Luna of Chicago, Breath of Fire Latina Theatre Ensemble of Santa Ana and Teatro Bravo of Arizona.

An interesting dilemma arises from this splintering of theatre groups which seem to provide an outlet for Latino playwrights unable to break into the mainstream commercial theatre of New York and Chicago. The problem stems from the fact that the term “Latino play” has allowed many of these groups to solicit work which may be “inappropriate” for their particular audience. For example, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre may show interest in producing a “Latino” playwright, but may deem this term to mean Puerto Rican or Cuban. Milagro Theatre, though representing itself as a group which produces “Latino” work, mainly produces plays that are either Chicano or have a proven commercial viability, for example the work of Nilo Cruz or Melinda López. Teatro del Pueblo, though requesting plays which fulfill a “Latino political agenda,” is unwilling to produce full-length plays, thus preventing submission from the vast majority of Latino playwrights who work in the long form. Rivera analyzes the business end of the theatre with empathy towards both producer and artist. “We can’t avoid the market – we live in a fiercely capitalistic society and market pressures are a reality. But we, fortunately or unfortunately, are making art. When I write I do not really think about how

much money I will make, but I understand that producers need to look at a bottom line.”²¹

The development of these disparate Latino groups around the country prompts the question: Why has the Latino theatre still not “crossed over? Large scale productions are planned, yet their fate is usually sealed by poor advance ticket sales (note the fate of Luis Valdez’s classic *Zoot Suit* and Oscar Hijuelos’s *Mambo Kings*), and subscription holders unwilling to support Latino narratives.²² These examples of poor box office returns for Latina/o productions continued during the first decade of the new millennium as exemplified by the financial losses of the 2003 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Anna in the Tropics*. In discussing Nilo Cruz’s *Anna in the Tropics*, Jon Rossini believes since the Pulitzer committee only read Cruz’s oeuvre, never seeing the original Miami production, they were guilty of placing “it in the familiar realm of something to be read rather than fully produced, as too often happens with Latino theatre, but also avoided dealing with the real complexities of casting and representing Latino bodies on the stage. The Latino body could stay safely in the space of the imagination.”²³ The turning point for mass consumed *latinidad* came with the 2008 Tony Award winning musical *In the Heights*.

The production, with music and lyrics by New York born Lin-Manuel Miranda, was originally a twenty minute piece created at Wesleyan College in Connecticut. Miranda, the son of upper-middle class parents, was educated in the highly competitive Hunter High School in Manhattan and felt equally at home with salsa music and hip-hop as he did with the American Musical canon. His desire to create a theatre piece which

²¹ Caridad Svich and Maria M. Delgado, eds. “E/merging Territories: Latina/o Theatre and Performance,” *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 16/3, (2004): 107.

²² During the run of my own play *Passing Judgment* in 2005, Manhattan Theatre Club’s Literary Manager, Paige Evans, informed me that though interested, the play “would never work at MTC” due to the fact that they “had only a handful of Latino subscribers.”

²³ Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 18.

captured his life growing up in the Inwood section of Manhattan (also known as upper Washington Heights) was in direct response to the lack of *latinidad* on the Broadway stage of his youth. Therefore Miranda, as a twenty-something musical connoisseur, brought up on *Rent* rather than *La Boheme*, thought to create a musical which paid homage to his own neighborhood, his people and his music. Raymond Knapp argues for the shared experience of “cultural” *communitas* as an integral part of being “present” in the audience when he proposes “The American Musical has always been deeply involved in questions of race and ethnicity, with racism and other forms of xenophobia continuing to constitute one of America’s most contentious and persevering problems.”²⁴

However, for all his posturing and promises, I believe *In the Heights* proved incapable of capturing the promised, yet always impossible notion of, “authenticity” of a day in Washington Heights,”²⁵ though critics rushed to praise this very attribute of the “real.” I propose that Miranda failed because he underestimated two major considerations as he created his “all-inclusive pan-Latino” spectacle; the first being the representation of diversity among the inhabitants of Washington Heights, known for its multi-ethnic composition as well as its above-average crime rate. The “*Sesame Street* meets *Do The Right Thing*” environment which Miranda created, namely happy Latinos dancing and singing without intercultural exchange between Latinos and Anglos, offered an extremely simplistic, if not altogether misleading representation of this Dominican-American enclave. Though the characters are quick to remind the audience that a gentrifying force

²⁴ Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 181.

²⁵ The final lyrics of the opening number, performed as a rap by Miranda, sums up this attempted authenticity: “You’ll see the late nights/You’ll taste beans and rice/The syrups and shaved ice/I ain’t gonna say it twice/So turn up the stage lights/We’re takin a flight to a couple of days/in the life of what its like/In Washington Heights.”

is buying up the neighborhood, we are never given the opportunity to see the face of these intruders. The reason for this is simple...they are Miranda's audience.

I would argue that the musical is more a product of *latinized* mass consumption, aimed chiefly at the economically *advantaged* audiences who can afford the \$120 ticket and *hungry* to see "Washington Heights on stage," rather than just "taking the A train to 181st Street."²⁶ Thus the celebration necessary to achieve a true experience of *communitas* between the audience at the Richard Rodgers theatre and the Latino artists who make up the cast of *In the Heights* seems fractured; neither moving towards an understanding of each other, except for moments when the characters seem to appease, through their "Latin-flavored" song and dance. This performance of *latinized minstrelsy* for the Broadway audience is reminiscent of scenes from 1980s hip hop films which featured urban youth breakdancing and graffiti-writing for both the older "white folks" in the art gallery as well as the younger "white folks" in the movie theatre.²⁷

A second consideration stems from Miranda's frequent acknowledgment that his two inspirations for creating the play were *West Side Story* and *Capeman*, both of which have been considered by Latino scholars as extremely poor attempts at representing *latinidad* on the Broadway stage. In fact, one year after the success of *In the Heights*, the spectre of *West Side Story* reared its head once again as it began previews at the Palace Theatre on March 19, 2009, directed by 91-year-old librettist Arthur Laurents. The musical which has historically received negative criticism from Latino scholars, chiefly

²⁶ Miranda's exact lyric in the song *In the Heights* is: "Now you're prob'ly thinking/I'm up shit's creek/I've never been north of ninety-sixth street/Well you must take the A Train/Even farther than Harlem to northern Manhattan and maintain/Get off at 181st and take the escalator/I hope you're writin this down I'm gonna test ya later." After having seen the show three times, and speaking to many audience members as well, I can attest to the fact that Miranda purposely directs this line to a member of the front row who might seem like an Anglo "visitor" to Washington Heights.

²⁷ *Wild Style*, *Krush Groove* and *Breakin'* stand out as "the best of the worst."

spearheaded by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's brilliant treatise, "A Puerto Rican Reading of the 'America' of *West Side Story*," is now marketed by Laurents as "a different *West Side Story*."²⁸

The "difference" that Laurents praises is based on the fact that the new production features Puerto Rican characters who code-switch between English and Spanish, with the non-Spanish speaking audience members given the opportunity to follow along with the help of "surtitle" displays above the proscenium. As critic Harry Haun explains, "Spanish is spoken here for the first time [giving] the Puerto Rican Sharks added authenticity, [and] putting them on a more equal footing with the Jets, their turf-war rival." Laurents goes on to explain that his partner Tom Hatcher saw a production of the play in Colombia and realized that "when the hometown is Spanish (as if "Spanish" were a country) and the production is in Spanish, the Sharks become heroes and the Jets become villains." This narrow-minded simplicity, though seeming culturally sensitive, is yet another example of appeasement by an Anglo producer that fails to question whether it is the linguistic choices made by the original production that are problematic or, as I would argue, the misrepresentation of the Puerto Rican experience in New York City.

In fact it is this very call for urban "authenticity" which Latino scholars have attempted to debunk for years, arguing that cultural authenticity through performance is an unattainable dream - particularly when the production is unaware of the customs which the represented group itself may perceive as "*imagined*." Again, Juan Flores notes the difference between an approach which "breaks down [in order] to identify not the sum total but the constituent parts" and the "conceptual space of pan-group aggregation"

²⁸ Harry Haun, "Author Arthur: "Repaving *West Side Story*," Playbill online, 26 February 2009.

or what he calls a “Latino imaginary,” where the Pan-Latino proponents can identify their representation in comparison to a larger whole.²⁹

Raymond Knapp’s analysis of the music from *West Side Story* perfectly describes this “imagined *latinidad*” when he stresses that “Bernstein used a hard-edged jazz-blues idiom for the Jets and a rhythmically charged but generalized “Latin” style for the immigrant Sharks, truer to what Americans would recognize as “South of the Border” or generally Caribbean, than to the music specifically native to Puerto Rico. This strategy was in line with Broadway musical conventions – of setting ethnicity according to what a projected audience will recognize and accept, *without much concern for authenticity*.”³⁰ This attempt by the original creators of *West Side Story* – Laurents, Bernstein, Sondheim and Robbins – towards an even playing field for both sets of immigrants was never actualized as audiences of the musical seem to project their own prejudices onto the Sharks as well, who are symbolized as foreign interlopers or worse, “un-American,” during the post-McCarthy era. Knapp insists that “the pattern for American musicals in recent decades has been to criticize prejudice on both sides, advocate tolerance, and remain smugly entrenched in the notion that, while West is better than East, it can learn to be better.”³¹

The perception of the Puerto Rican Sharks is and never will be one of equal footing since the envisioning of the group always remains, as Alberto Sandoval-

²⁹ Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 195-99.

³⁰ Knapp, *The American Musical*, 206.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

Sánchez remarks, that of the “Latin-foreign other.”³² The fact that Laurents pays attention to a power struggle between characters based on language exemplifies the fact that he, and other “sacred cow” producers, used Latinos as vehicles for stereotypical consumption for decades. Furthermore, as noted during the Washington D.C. previews of the show, audiences became distracted while viewing “surtitle” technology prompting Laurents to remark “They're terribly distracting because the audience doesn't know where to look...it pulls them out of the scene. I think the answer would probably be to do what they did in the old days. You put the libretto in the program of those two scenes, which are heavily Spanish. Let them read them or not. It's up to them.”³³ Once again, Laurents finds himself debating not the cultural misrepresentation of the Sharks but rather the audiences’ inability to consume this outdated presumption of *latinidad* based on language.

Ironically, Rivera’s decision to mark her plays by using English instead of Spanish has plagued her throughout her own career as artists have openly criticized her use of English to represent Puerto Ricans who, in their estimation, should be speaking Spanish. In this regard, Gloria D. Prosper-Sánchez notes “In the decades that have passed since Tomás Navarro Tomás’s foundational linguistic atlas of 1948, *El Español en Puerto Rico*, the size, significance, and constancy of the Puerto Rican diaspora have transformed Puerto Rican Spanish into a dialect that can no longer be described accurately as such. Puerto Rican Spanish is a gelect in transit; its practices exceed most

³² The term becomes the basis upon which Sandoval-Sánchez builds his argument of the perception of Puerto Ricans in musicals, namely that they will always be viewed as foreign, regardless of their status in the United States. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See? Latinos On and Off-Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 1999.

³³ Haun, “Author Arthur.”

geographical criteria.”³⁴ One can argue that, as proposed by Iris in *La Gringa*, Rivera’s characters speak Spanglish because Rivera speaks Spanglish. María is a mirror image of the woman who created her and therefore cannot assume a knowledge of the Spanish language which is foreign to her own identity.

Playwright Ricardo Bracho analyzes these concerns by stating that, as earlier deconstructed by Sandoval-Sánchez as an “octopus with eight legs,” the “U.S. Latina/o [theatre is] a multi-headed beast that cannot decide on a direction...performed mainly to the middle classes with a pitch towards building a subscriber base and a nod towards multiculturalism, hip hop teatristas and spoken word artists who spit spectacle to each other, performance artists, avant-gardists, feminists, pop futurists. Like lull water we are simultaneously stagnant and regenerative.”³⁵ Rivera seems to fit into every category of Bracho’s definition, whether it be as a writer, producer or teacher; attempting to build a budding Latino audience while criticized for English language dominance. Ironically, though Rivera was born in New York, it seems that foreign born playwrights share the same problem with their critics.

During the XXIII International Hispanic Theatre Festival I was privy to an exchange between the festival’s founder and Artistic Director of *Teatro Avante*, Mario Ernesto Sánchez and playwright Nilo Cruz, both Cubans who immigrated to Miami as children. Sánchez was a Pedro Pan child, one of 14,000 children who left Cuba under the protection of Catholic Charities and Father Bryan Walsh during the turbulent political years of 1960-62. His was an upper-middle class childhood while Cruz, born into a hard-working family which often bought and sold on Cuba’s black market, arrived as a child

³⁴ Gloria D. Prosper-Sánchez, “Transing the Standard: The Case of Puerto Rican Spanish” in *None of the Above: Puerto Ricans in the Global Era*, Frances Negrón-Muntaner, ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan Publishers, 2007), 184.

³⁵ Svich and Delgado, eds. “E/merging Territories,” 98.

of the Freedom Flights of the 1970s. During a bilingual panel entitled, “Staging Nilo Cruz,”³⁶ the guest of honor was abruptly challenged (some in attendance might say attacked) by Sánchez’s vehement questioning as to why his guest “writes in English and not in Spanish.”³⁷ Cruz, eloquently rebutted that though he was born in Cuba and speaks Spanish fluently, he is more a product of the American theatre and his prose stems from the fact that he “thinks in English.”³⁸ Though the dramatic tension was extremely high, the audience seemed to agree with Cruz and defend his actions as a playwright often noting that Cruz was “their playwright,” regardless of the language he chooses to use in writing his plays. In comparison Rivera recounts her own reception by critics who often question her use of English in lieu of Spanish when she notes, “I don’t know how many times I have been asked ‘*Do you write in English or in Spanish?*’ Educated people, who consider themselves progressive, have come to my plays and seen printed in the program – Written by Carmen Rivera, Translated by ‘whoever.’ When I say I write in English these same people look at me as if I was a Martian.”³⁹ This conflict among Latino artists unfortunately allows non-Latino producers to recreate the Latino experience in theatre and film and adapt it to their own stereotypical *latinized* reality, thus seizing the power of representation from the community and re-envisioning it for their own “marketplace.”

Counter either the “appropriated” communities of *West Side Story* or Miranda’s “happy” *Heights* with that of La Lupe’s struggle in the South Bronx or the disheartened Brooklyn subway riders of *The Next Stop* and one can observe that while both *West Side*

³⁶ This panel occurred as part of the *Programa Educativo* of the conference entitled “Paradigmas recientes en las artes escénicas Latinas y Latinoamericanas,” 26 July 2008. The panel was moderated by Beatriz Rizk and participants included Teresa Marrero, Teresa María Rojas, Kimberly del Busto, Rafael de Acha, and Nilo Cruz.

³⁷ This was, of course, my own translation of Sánchez’s Spanish.

³⁸ This quote by Cruz was spoken in Spanish.

³⁹ This quote is excerpted from “Una Ciudadana entre dos mundos” which Rivera wrote in Spanish and I have ironically translated into English.

Story and *In the Heights* adapt their environments for their audience, the theatre of Carmen Rivera makes the audience “adapt themselves” to it. Rivera is careful to have her Nuyorican environment celebrate “the cultural and linguistic forms that emerged from an identity tied not to the island of Puerto Rico but to a diasporic identity reflected through the urban realities of New York neighborhoods.”⁴⁰ Scholar Jon Rossini, one of a handful of scholars articulating the differences between Nuyorican drama and the Latino theatrical movement of the last 40 years, notes that “Spatial politics gains a different valence when articulated through a Nuyorican lens. The Puerto Rican diaspora reflects a larger politics of movement and migration that cannot be neglected in any account of Puerto Rican identity.”⁴¹

Since musicals continue to be the most profitable form of theatrical entertainment in the United States, and highest in visibility, Rivera’s decision to continue writing projects which include both *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz* and *The Palladium* seems a wise choice. Raymond Knapp concedes “the American musical [has proven] to be one of the most effective venues for cultural negotiation and renegotiation.”⁴² Further, the “Latino invested funds” sought to bring these productions to the stage now generate from music promoters rather than traditional theatre producers. Rivera’s professional relationship with salsa music pioneer David Maldonado has allowed her great visibility as a “commercially viable” artist in musical theatre though ironically, her base audience still views these productions as Latino “plays with music.” Though the success of *In the Heights* serves as an indictment of the “all-Latino creation” concept (Miranda and librettist Quiara Alegría Hudes being 1 ½ Latino respectively as opposed to the entire

⁴⁰ Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 29.

⁴¹ Ibid, 44.

⁴² Knapp, *The American Musical*, 284.

Anglo creative team), Rivera's own musical foray of 2008, *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, a work which garnered little support from non-Latino audiences and seemed to survive purely on the word-of-mouth recommendations of Latino audiences, succeeded in actualizing the notion of Latino production power claimed by Miranda.

Silvio Torres-Saillant argues in "Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall" that Latinos accept "a representation that relegates them to the realm of body and feeling in contra-distinction to whites who inhabit the sphere of mind and thought. As a result, a situation emerges that often allows the status quo to get away with including Latinas/os only symbolically, granting them space primarily in the realm of expressive culture."⁴³ Therefore *In the Heights* becomes a representation of what one creator "imagines" when allowed to express his/her individual vision; in this case the upper-middle class composer, Lin Manuel-Miranda, nostalgically gazing upon the Washington Heights he "remembers" as a child but imposing that creation onto the present upper-Manhattan landscape.

For Rivera, *Celia* serves as a departure, not simply due to the fact that the work was co-written by Cándido Tirado, but also based on the media campaign and initial budget raised to have *Celia* perform at Off-Broadway's state of the art complex, New World Stages. While *In the Heights* boasted a Broadway budget of \$10,000,000, this relatively small off-Broadway piece, featuring approximately 15 performers and musicians was able to extend its limited run twice, accumulating 25 previews and 269 regular performances leading up to its "World Tour," which included performances in

⁴³Silvio Torres-Saillant, "Afro-Latinas/os and the Racial Wall" in *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, Juan Flores and Renato Rosaldo, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 370.

Spain, Puerto Rico, Colombia, Mexico and several cities including Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles and Boston.

As examined in previous Rivera productions, critics often felt the need to market the performance of Latina icons as a “reincarnation of the magnificent star adored by millions.” This comment, taken from a Miami Beach tourism website,⁴⁴ preceded *Celia*’s arrival at the Adrienne Arscht Center in Miami and served as one of many public relations sound bites that heralded the performance of Celia’s body as a miraculous event of resurrection, similar to the comments from critics regarding the performance of Sully Díaz as La Lupe, Sol Miranda as Julia de Burgos or even Jennifer Lopez in the film *Selena*.⁴⁵ To this end, Myra Mendible argues that “In the United States, the Latina body has signed in for somatic differences (body type, coloring, facial features) and differences in culture, class, language, religion, and sexuality. Consistently, its sign value has been linked to ideological currents, economic conditions, and political expediency.”⁴⁶

Mendible’s interpretation of the Latina body as “bananas and buttocks” illuminates the notion that Latina performance serves to titillate audiences who desire a nostalgic gaze of the colonial image of Latinas (Carmen Miranda, Rita Hayworth, Dolores del Rio) while also enacting the political and economic rape of post-1898 Latin America. For Mendible, these two symbols function “as commodities, and thus by definition as fetishized objects, consumed within an economics of desire that obscures the

⁴⁴ The website can be found at <http://www.miamibeach411.com/eventsarchive/index.php?/events/detail/celia-the-life-music-of-celia-cruz-6-18-7-6>.

⁴⁵ The 1997 film directed by Gregory Nava and based on the life of Tejano music sensation Selena Quintanilla Pérez catapulted Bronx born Jennifer Lopez to Hollywood star status and secured the first ever \$1,000,000 contract for a Latina actress.

⁴⁶ Myra Mendible, *From Bananas to Buttocks: The Latina Body in Popular Film and Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 7.

social relationships of its producers...inflect[ing] the Latina body as transnational signifier.”⁴⁷

Thus, not only does the body of the Latina icon become resurrected through its theatrical performance, but further, these bodies are also made to enact *latinidad* for the popular culture machine that re-appropriates their socio-historical significance in relation to an American ideal. Sandoval-Sánchez notes that these bodies (resurrected or live) “put into question who is Latino/a, what is Latino identity, and which images of *latinidad* predominate and circulate.”⁴⁸ To this extent Latina images become fair game for consumption, including that of five-year-old Dora the Explorer, whose 6 month - 8 year old demographic audience are made to share this desire for a grown, over-sexualized Latina. In 2009 the popular bilingual cartoon character was revamped for mass consumption, aging ten years and having sprouted curves, long black hair and a shortened skirt to accentuate her long legs. *Nickelodeon*, the parent company responsible for the multi-million dollar Dora franchise, was quick to note that their decision to remake “one doll in the Dora series” was based on marketing the Dora character to “young girls who have grown up to become young women.” Dora, fully sexualized, is now perceived as “more womanly”⁴⁹ and ironically, *more Latina*, substituting baby fat for “buttocks.”

Rivera’s stance on the perception of images and artistic creations centers on the necessity to remove power from those who control the means of production and the ownership of those same images. Whether a cartoon character, television show or play, self-creation and self-monitoring within the Latino community seems crucial to the continuance of a Latino theatre and its desire to break free from negative representations

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, *Encrucijada/Crossroads* I, no. I (2003): 16.

⁴⁹ The news story was featured on *My 9 News* in New York on March 6, 2009 following two months of speculation.

based on ignorance and media imposed exaggerations of culture. Rivera argues that “we have no control over how we are perceived but we do have control over what we create and that is power. Waiting for acceptance, respect, and representation is a waste of time and energy and is better spent in writing, producing, directing and marketing our own work. Reconfiguration of how our work is disseminated begins with *us*, not with *them*.”⁵⁰

Rivera’s future projects focus on a diversity of narratives and genres, reminiscent of her work in the early 1990s. While *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz* has become her most commercially viable project, the prospect of *The Palladium*, a musical which Rivera began writing with her husband prior to *Celia*, and now funded by David Maldonado, remains a project which could easily replicate *Celia*’s success. Rivera notes that both *Celia* and *The Palladium* are plays which create journeys for their characters. The theme of *The Palladium* moves from a celebration of *latinidad* to one of integration, highlighted by the nightclub’s stance on intercultural mixing, both in music and diversity on the dance floor. As Rivera reminds us, “The Palladium was the first. Integration happened at the Palladium.”⁵¹

In April of 2006 a multi-racial cast performed a reading of the play at the Manhattan Theatre Club’s rehearsal space on West 37th Street. At that point the musical lacked a score but the libretto by Rivera and Tirado had been completed to focus on multiple stories of workers and guests partying at the world famous nightclub. After two drafts, the musical was abandoned by producers who could not agree on the direction of the songs and the extent to which they would use pre-existing compositions by artists of

⁵⁰ Svich and Delgado, eds. “E/merging Territories,” 99.

⁵¹ Personal interview with Carmen Rivera, 10 December 2006.

the era to advance the story. With the commission of *Celia*, the musical was dropped and left to re-visit at a later time.

Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz is Rivera's most commercially popular work to date. The musical was a collaborative effort between Rivera and Tirado and therefore not examined in this study.⁵² However the direction that Rivera took with *Celia* reveals her maturing dramaturgical process. To a large extent, *Celia* is a continuation of *La Lupe* – a play which focused on the meteoric rise of a Cuban singer, born into poverty and eventually consumed by the popular music industry of the United States and its surrounding territories. Rivera decided to re-enact Celia's life as a "drama with music" with a skeletal structure built on the dramatization of the love story between Celia and her husband Pedro Knight. This depiction of their relationship, while utilizing the music of Celia's life, allowed audiences a glimpse into both worlds; the celebrity and the woman, as successfully achieved by the corresponding structure of *La Lupe*.

Celia serves as a culmination of Rivera's attempt to break the fourth wall and engage the audience as the living community of the play. We are Celia and Pedro, Celia and Pedro are Carmen and Cándido or as Myra Mendible believes "with (if not entirely in) Celia's shoes it is possible to walk through her unique career as a Cuban female singer in the nearly all Puerto Rican male club of salsa, examine how a self-described 'ugly woman' became a pan-Latino icon, and string together the ways that style tells stories of hardship and triumph differently enjoyed – and sometimes disowned – by Latinos as part of their public 'ethnic' body in the United States."⁵³ This creation is achieved through the understanding that Latinos, as a community, support and represent the stories of their

⁵² As was the case with 2003's *XY Stories*, a play which was co-written by Rivera and a host of Latino playwrights to investigate sexuality in the Latino community.

⁵³ Mendible, *From Bananas to Buttocks*, 96.

own people, both ancestral and contemporary. Rick Altman's analysis that "the folk music posits a fundamental continuity between performers and audience [and] does this by borrowing the interchangeability of role and space characteristic"⁵⁴ is achieved through this exchange between the Latino audience, who amounted for 85% of all pre-ticket sales for *Celia*, and the all-Latino creative team which put the show together – writers, producers, actors and musicians.

While *In the Heights* boasts of being the first successful New York run of a Latino musical, the producers, choreographer and director – arguably the three most important components of a musical - were non-Latino. A decade earlier, the controversy with the *Capeman* illuminated the false notion of calling a musical "Latino" when in fact the entire work was designed by creators "looking in" at the culture instead of "envisioning themselves." In accordance with earlier points made both in this study and those that have preceded it, *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz* serves as the first successful New York/Latino production created "For US/By US."⁵⁵ In contrast to the list of musicals or "plays with music" which have featured Latino characters in the role of domestic servant, Latin lover or queer entity *La Lupe* and *Celia* both attempt to recreate *latinidad* through the perspective of the community, fully aware that "American musicals play to American audiences, who will be acutely aware of anything that challenges their notions of what or who America is or stands for, or of its place in the world."⁵⁶

Rivera's desire to document history remains a relevant trope as noted at a reading of her latest play, *Dictator: The Fall of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo*.⁵⁷ The piece was

⁵⁴ Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 317.

⁵⁵ The Chicano "drama with music" *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez, though successful in Los Angeles was a commercial flop in New York.

⁵⁶ Knapp, *The American Musical*, 103.

⁵⁷ This reading occurred at Shetler Studios in New York on March 2, 2009.

presented for producers and intimate friends and received critical praise from those in attendance. The play documents Trujillo's regime from 1930-1961 and highlights three storylines at once; first, the American Intelligence agent known as "The Diplomat," who was stationed in the Dominican Republic, and tried in vain, to reign in an increasing out-of-control Trujillo; second, Trujillo's relationship with his puppet president Joaquim Balaguer and finally, Trujillo's mistress, with whom he supposedly shared a genuine love and who predicts his eventual assassination.

Based on the structural choices which have come to mark her recent work, Rivera also uses Boal's "Joker" in the role of a one-man chorus based on Paco Escribano, a famous comedian who frequently commented on the Trujillo regime and who survived a tortuous evening in one his many prisons. Rivera once again provides live music as a driving action for the plot by integrating a small merengue band that was known to travel and perform original compositions written for and about Trujillo. *Dictator*, while depicting similar themes as those dramatized by Mario Vargas Llosa in *La Fiesta del Chivo*, attempts to capture the man and his intimate circle of confidantes in Rivera's particular voice, as it hasn't been heard since her co-writing partnership with Tírado began in 2005.

Prior to the creation of *Anna in the Tropics* and *In The Heights*, Latino artists and producers clamored for an opportunity to demonstrate to mainstream audiences the richness and creativity experienced in the Latino theatre. Willie Nieves, former President of the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre's Board of Directors heralded *La Lupe* as a "wonderful example of how we can tell our stories and histories in an exciting way. We no longer have to try and make it on Broadway. *La Lupe* and *Quién Mató a Hector*

Lavoe? are examples of how we can create powerful, legitimate theatre and also attract our own community audiences.”⁵⁸ However, once economics met reality, following the tumultuous drop in attendance prompted by the September 11th attacks, Latino producers realized that large scale Broadway and off-Broadway productions remain the best marketing tool for Latino plays regardless of the aesthetic arguments; the Latino theatre is still invisible to the eyes of “multiple-visit” theatergoers.⁵⁹ With the limited number of Latino theatre productions, how exactly do Latino actors and artists expect to work in a business that views them as janitors, bus boys and prostitutes? According to Manny Alfaro, Executive Director of the Hispanic Organization of Latin Actors, membership in HOLA “fluctuates between 400 and 530, although we believe there are at least 800 – 900 Latino actors in the metropolitan area [alone].”⁶⁰

My argument for continued attention to writer Carmen Rivera and the promotion of her work to Anglo and non-Anglo audiences is based on the recognition that this theatre – her theatre - will foster the creation of a solid base for Latino theatre in the twenty-first century. The existence of a repertory of plays, actors, playwrights and designers can only be attained through the public’s acceptance of the Latino theatre as viable and representative of professional and exciting work. Best Musical Awards and Pulitzers, though a wonderful achievement, only provide limited accessibility to Latino companies which are often closed due to lack of audience development and lack of public funding. As Jon Rossini notes, the desire to “understand theatricality and ethnicity as products of the intersection of subjectivity and spectatorship, clarifies the importance of

⁵⁸ Juan Moreno-Velázquez, “Controversia envuelve a La Lupe,” *El Diario/La Prensa*. 26 November 2001, 1.

⁵⁹ These “multiple visits” are defined as three or more shows per year, according to the League of Professional Theatres and Actors Equity Association.

⁶⁰ Simi Horwitz, “Latino Theatre Artists: Opportunity and Challenge,” *Backstage*. 3 August 2001, 21.

Latino theatre as a means of exploring the operative dynamics of spectator, actor, and event.”⁶¹

This study provides an opportunity for further discourse, as it reconciles Rivera’s vision of *fantastic* theatre with the commercial Latino theatre. Rivera has said the following about the future of the genre: “Instead of defining Latino plays, the market has to be redefined. I’m still naïve enough to hope the market will adapt to the wonderful complexities of the Latino world and recognize that Latino stories are very commercial.”⁶² My own vision of a new Latino theatre is rooted in an appreciation of Carmen Rivera’s theatre, of her unique perspective and her sociological representation of Latinas/os on the world’s stage.

⁶¹ Rossini, *Contemporary Latina/o Theater*, 9.

⁶² Svich, “In Conversation,” 38.

Appendix 1 – List of New York productions

CELIA: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF CELIA CRUZ

Co-written with Cándido Tirado

Director: Choreographer: María Torres

Producer: The Cardenas Group and David Maldonado

New World Stages – New York, NY

Aug. 2007 – May 2008

Adrienne Arscht Performing Arts Center – Miami , FL

June 2008 - July 2008

LA GRINGA

Director: Rene Buch

Repertorio Español, New York, NY

Feb. 1996 - Present

Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Spanish Voices Series

June 1998

Repertorio Tour – Connecticut / New York State.

1997 - Present

International Tour – Bogota, Colombia

March 2002

International Tour – La Paz, Bolivia

April 2002

LA LUPE: MY LIFE, MY DESTINY

Commissioned by Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, New York, NY

Director: Luis Caballero

Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre

June – August 2001

THEATRE 4

August – October 2001

Martice Enterprises – Dallas, Texas

May 2004 – June 2004

Director: Rene Moreno

THE NEXT STOP (LA PRÓXIMA PARADA)

Director: Michael John Garcés

Repertorio Español, New York, NY

April 1999 – April 2001;

INTAR, New York, NY

Dec. 1997

JULIA DE BURGOS: CHILD OF WATER

Commissioned by Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre

Director: Manuel Martín

Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, New York, NY

May 1999

TO CATCH THE LIGHTNING

Director: Max Ferrá

Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre, New York, NY

May 1997

THE POWER OF WORDS

Director: Gloria Zelaya

LATINOTEATRO 2000 Festival –La Tea / L.E.F.T
La Tea / L.E.F.T. , New York, NYApril – June 2000
June 1995***BETTY'S GARAGE***

Director: Gloria Zelaya

INTAR / L.E.F.T, New York, NY
Theatre at St. Clements, New York, NY
The Women's Project, New York, NY
Tour of Community Centers and Schools (NYC)
La Mama E.T.C. / L.E.F.T., New York, NYJune 1999
March 1999
Feb.1999
1999-2000
May 1996***DELIA'S RACE***

Director: Gloria Zelaya

INTAR / L.E.F.T., New York, NY
La Mama E.T.C. / L.E.F.T., New York, NYMay 1999
April 1998***THE NURSE***

Director: Lisa Portes

SOHO Repertory, New York, NY

July 1997

A SONG IN THE HEART

Director: Gloria Zelaya

La Tea / L.E.F.T., New York, NY

June 1995

PLASTIC FLOWERS

Director: Cándido Tirado

La Mama E.T.C., New York, NY
 Nuyorican Poet's Café Theatre, New York, NY
 Director: Gloria Zelaya

May 1994
 June 1993

ameRICAN

Director: Cándido Tirado

Shaman Repertory, New York, NY
 Henry Street Settlement, New York, NY
 Theatre 22, New York, NY
 Julia de Burgos Café Teatro, New York, NY

January 1993
 March 1991 & Nov. 1990
 Dec. 1990
 October 1990

JULIA

Director: Gloria Zelaya

Theatre for the New City; P.S. 122, New York, NY
 Aaron Davis Hall, New York, NY
 Toro College, New York, NY

1992 - 1993
 1992 - 1993
 1992

ELENA

Director: Gloria Zelaya

Shaman Repertory, New York, NY

Oct. 1990

THE UNIVERSE

Director: Cándido Tirado

Shaman Repertory, New York, NY

May 1990

A STATE OF BLISS

Director: Gloria Zelaya

Shaman Repertory, New York, NY

May 1990

Appendix 2 - Theatre for Youth

- 2/05- ***Enemy of the People*** – Adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s play for workshops with students from the High School of Writing and Communication Arts, Epic Theatre Center, New York, NY
Director: Ron Russell
- 7/01 – ***Ancestors’ Breath – The Story of Enslaved Africans of 1828*** – Commissioned by City Lights Youth Theatre in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY
Director: Susan Sterman-Jones
- 7/00 – ***Forward Into Light – The Story of the First Women Voters of 97 Orchard Street***
Commissioned by City Lights Youth Theatre in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY
Director: Susan Sterman-Jones
- 7/99 – ***To Dream of Fresh Air*** – Commissioned by El Puente: Academy of Social Justice and Peace, Brooklyn, NY
Director: Deborah Nitzberg
- 7/99 – ***Right Makes Might – The Story of the Civil War Draft Riots in New York City and the Mysterious Disappearance of Julius Gumpertz***– Commissioned by City Lights Youth Theatre in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY
Director: Susan Sterman-Jones
- 7/98 – ***Caro Diario – The Story of Josephine Baldizzi*** – Commissioned by City Lights Youth Theatre in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY
Director: Deborah Nitzberg
- 7/97 – ***The Lower East Side Story*** – Commissioned by City Lights Youth Theatre in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY
Director: Deborah Nitzberg
- 7/96 - ***HOPE: An Immigrant Story*** - Commissioned by City Lights Youth Theatre in collaboration with the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, New York, NY
Director: Deborah Nitzberg

Appendix 3 - Festival productions

4/07 – ***La Gringa*** – Repertorio Español at El Ateneo in Puerto Rico – Festival of Nuyorican Theatre
Ateneo Theatre Festival
San Juan, PR
Director: Rene Buch

3/05- ***Ghosts in Brooklyn***
Songs from Coconut Hill Festival
New York, NY
Director: Ariel Nazryan

8/04- ***This Really Happened in Brooklyn***
Latino Theatre 04 Festival
New York, NY
Director: Ariel Nazryan

3/03 – ***The Next Cycle***
The Women’s Project / Theatre Against War (THAW)
New York, NY
Director: Debbie Saivetz

2/03 – ***The Next Cycle***
The Women’s Project – Tandem Acts Festival, New York, NY
Director: Debbie Saivetz

10/02 – ***Caravan of Death***
Annual Perform-a-thon at New Georges, New York, NY
Director: Alex Aron

5/02 - ***Julia de Burgos: Child of Water***
Centro de Bellas Artes
Festival de Teatro Puertorriqueño at the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña
San Juan, Puerto Rico
Director: Paolo Paoli

4/02 - ***La Gringa***
Repertorio Español - The 3rd International Theatre Festival of La Paz (FITAZ)
La Paz, Bolivia
Director: Rene Buch

3/02 - ***La Gringa***
Repertorio Español - The 8th Iberoamericano Theatre Festival of Theatre
Bogotá, Colombia
Director: Rene Buch

3/02 - ***Betty's Garage***

Songs from Coconut Hill at HERE
New York, NY
Director: Gloria LaMorte

4/00-6/00 – ***The Power of Words***

La Tea/L.E.F.T. - LATINOTEATRO 2000 Festival
New York, NY
Director: Gloria Zelaya

2/99 – ***Betty's Garage***

The Women's Project Festival of Theatre
New York, NY
Director: Gloria Zelaya

6/98 – ***Delia's Race***

First Annual Theatre Festival at *The Point*
Bronx, NY
Director: Gloria Zelaya

6/97 – ***Delia's Race***

Latino Theatre Festival at Flushing Meadows Park
Queens, NY
Director: Deborah Nitzberg

2/97 – ***Plastic Flowers***

¿Y Qué? Series at Dixon Place
New York, NY
Director: Gloria Zelaya

12/96 – ***The Next Stop***

Just Add Water Festival at New York Theatre Workshop
New York, NY
Director: Michael John Garcés

9/94 – ***Plastic Flowers***

Curtain Up North/South Festival for the International Center for Women
Playwrights
Buffalo, NY

6/94 – ***Plastic Flowers***

Presented at the 12th World Congress of the International Federation for Theatre
Research
Moscow, Russia.
Presenter: Eva López

Appendix 4 – Awards

- 2008 – HOLA Award for Excellence in Playwriting – ***Celia: Her Life and Music***
- 2001 – ACE (Association of Journalists and Writers) AWARD – Best Production –
La Lupe: My Life, My Destiny
- 2001 – Semi-Finalist - International Latino Film Festival / MTV Screenplay Competition
screen adaptation of ***La Gringa***
- 1999 – LO MEJOR DE NUESTRA COMUNIDAD (The Best of Our
Community) - Comité Noviembre – Puerto Rican Cultural Organization.
- 1997 – Nomination – ACE AWARD – Best Production – ***To Catch the Lightning*** –
Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre
- 1997 – LEGACY AWARD – Achievement in Playwriting –
Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre
- 1997 – Finalist – Eugene O’Neill Playwrights Conference –
To Catch the Lightning
- 1996 – OBIE – ***La Gringa*** - New Voices Program at Repertorio Español
- 1995 – 1997 – Van Lier Fellowship – New Dramatists
- 1995 – 1996 – Writing Fellowship – New York Theatre Workshop
- 1994 – ***ameRICAN*** – Best Screenplay, College of Staten Island.

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