

Art in America, Con Acento

Author(s): Cherríe Moraga

Source: *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (1992), pp. 154-160

Published by: University of Nebraska Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3346648>

Accessed: 25-09-2018 17:03 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*University of Nebraska Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*

## Art in America, Con Acento

In the life of the writer, if we are awake and developing, we reach various critical junctures in our evolution, where we are forced to take stock and reevaluate our purpose, our mandate as artists. This is what I would like to speak to you about today — those recent events that have catapulted me into reconsidering my work/my role as a Chicana artist living in the United States.

I write this on the one-week anniversary of the death of the Nicaraguan revolution. We are told not to think of it as a death. But I am in mourning. It is an unmistakable feeling. I know death when I taste it. The Sandinistas lose the election. Why? Because “el pueblo,” in secret with a piece of paper, not bullets, oust Ortega. But it was bullets and bread (the U.S.-financed Contra war and its economic embargo) that forced their hand. A nation is once again brought to its knees. A nation, on the brink of stating to the entire world that revolution is the people’s choice, betrays its own dead. Imperialism makes traitors of us all, makes us weak and tired and hungry. Look around you, how severely have our loyalties been tested living here in las entrañas del monstruo?

Ideology doesn’t feed the stomach. Revolutionary fervor can’t be taken to bed. But, my God, we live in a country that, short of an invasion, stole the Nicaraguan revolution that the people forged with their own blood and bones. What is my responsibility in this? I am a writer. I am a U.S. citizen.

---

*Frontiers*, vol. XII, no. 3, © Cherríe Moraga.

Excerpt from a talk given at California State University Long Beach, through the Department of Mexican American Studies, March 7, 1990. This speech is part of a longer essay to be completed in 1992 that incorporates discussion of the impact of the Gulf War on the bodies and imaginations of people of color (especially indigenous peoples) in the United States.

Days later, George Bush comes to town. He arrives at the St. Francis Hotel for a \$1,000-a-plate fund-raiser dinner. There will be a protest. We, my compañera and I, get off the subway. I can already hear, from a great distance, the voices chanting. We can't make out what they're saying, but they are Latinos and my heart races to see so many brown faces. They hold up a banner. I can't read the words as I come closer, closer to the circle of my people. "Viva la paz en Nicaragua," it reads. "Viva George Bush! Viva Uno!" And my heart drops. Across the street, the "resistance" has congregated — less organized, white, young, middle-class students. *Dónde 'stá mi pueblo?* I am Latina, born and raised in the United States. I am a writer.

I am trying to understand history in the hopes that I can better understand my own miniscule, yet essential, role in it. Revolution isn't won by numbers, but by leaders, visionaries and if writers aren't visionaries, then we have no business doing what we do. But what is my vision? *Vivimos en las entrañas del monstruo* and the morning after the Nicaraguan elections, I wanted to flee this country in shame and despair.

A few months earlier, I was in another country, México, when the United States invaded Panama. Gratefully, I could stand outside the United States, read the Mexican newspapers, get a perspective on the United States that was not monolithic. I am in San Cristóbal, Chiapas. I stand around in a library waiting for a tour of the grounds of the Nabolom Center. The waiting room is filled with *norteamericanos*. They are huge people, the men spread their thick legs, the women lean into them on couches. They converse. It is days after the Panama invasion. "We," they say. "When we invaded Panama . . ." I grow rigid at the sound of the word, "we." They are progressives (I know this from their conversation). They oppose the invasion, but identify with the invaders. "Cómo qué we?"

When the ruling Arena party and its death squads kill six Jesuit priests, the housekeeper, and her daughter, the people of El Salvador do not say, "Nosotros los matamos." When the military tortures actors, artists, guerrilleras, the people of Guatemala do not assert, "Yes, with our own hands we did it, we stripped and raped them, we mutilated them with all the greed and odio we possess." In the United States, however, we live under the "myth" of democracy and as such are told that "our leaders" represent us, that they do what "we" the voters tell them to do. This myth-making is more insidious than we realize, coercing us into identifying with the government's power. The result is a liberal, weak-kneed "we" that never fully reckons with our own culpability as participants in consumerist Amerika.

This poses a special problem for Latinos in the United States. How

can we identify with those who invade our people's land? George Bush is not my leader. I did not elect him, although my tax dollars pay for the guns. We are a living, breathing contradiction, we who live en las entrañas del monstruo, but I refuse to be made to identify. I am the product of invasion. My father is white. I am the product of the dissolution of blood lines and the theft of a language. *And* I am a testimony to the failure of the United States to wholly anglicize me.

I wrote in México, "Los Estados Unidos es mi país, pero no es mi patria." It is my land, but not my country. I cannot flee this country, my land resides beneath its borders. The question of nationhood and nationalism emerges all the more viscerally in the face of the advancing robbery of the nations of Latin America. This is the Mexican-American War all over again. We stand on land that was once the country of Mexico. And before any conquistadors began to stake out political boundaries, this was Indian land and in the deepest sense remains just that. A land sin fronteras. Chicanos with memory banks like our Indian counterparts understand what colonization of the spirit and flesh means. We are an internally colonized people. A nation within a nation. An internal nation whose existence defies borders of language, geography, race.

The painful irony is that the United States' gradual consumption of Latin America is bringing the Americas together. The United States is changing face. What was largely a Chicano/Mexicano population in California is now guatemalteco, salvadoreño, nicaragüense. What was largely a Puerto Rican and Dominican "Spanish Harlem" of New York is now populated with Mexicanos playing rancheras on the corner of 3rd Avenue and East 116th Street, drinking cerveza, their women . . . where are their women?

Latinos are not a homogeneous group in this country. Some of us are native-born, whose ancestors precede not only the arrival of the Anglo-American but also the Spanish. Most of us are immigrants, economic refugees coming to the United States in search of work. Some of us are political refugees, fleeing death squads and imprisonment, others fleeing revolution and the loss of their wealth. Finally, some have simply come here very tired of war. And in all cases, their children (many of whom now fill the Chicano studies classes I teach) had no choice in the matter. U.S. Latinos represent the whole spectrum of color and class. There are those who firmly believe they can integrate in the mainstream of American life — the more European the mestizaje, the higher the class status, the more closely they identify with the powers that be. They vote Republican. They stand under the U.S. flag and applaud George Bush for bringing "peace" to Nicaragua. They hope one day he'll do the

same for Cuba, so they can return to their patria and live an “American-style” life as first-class citizens. But in this country, they remain second-class (“spics, greasers, beaners”), brown faces in white Amerika. How to organize my people? I am a writer.

As Latino artists we have the choice to contribute to the development of a docile generation of would-be Republican “Hispanics” loyal to the United States or to the creation of a force of “disloyal” americanos. I call myself a Chicana writer. Not a Mexican-American writer, not a Hispanic writer, not a half-breed writer. Chicana is not the mere naming of one’s racial/cultural identity, but it is a politic, a politic that refuses integration into the U.S. mainstream, a politic that recognizes that our pueblo originates from, and remains with, those who work the land with their hands, as stated in “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.” The cultural nationalism of the Chicano movement still resonates for me today: the Chicano’s identification with our indigenous antecedents, our refusal to recognize the “capricious” political boundaries imposed by the U.S. government. The current struggles on this globe are for sovereignty of nations, not states; that is, people bound together by spirit, land, language, history, and blood. Living on this side of the border did not turn Chicanos into “Amerikans.” The art and literature that we produce must be one of “resistance,” resistance to domination by Anglo-America, resistance to assimilation, resistance to economic exploitation. An art that subscribes to integration into mainstream America is not Chicano art.

Since 1984, I have seen theater as my chief vehicle for expression and as a potential political catalyst. I turned to theater from poetry when my own single voice as a poet could not incorporate the voices inside me that insisted on being heard — voices with their own tone, rhythm, their own special blend of English, Spanish, Mexican *caló*, American slang. Ay! They wanted to sing rant rave *crave*. And I just let ’em come. Having spent the first ten years as a poet and essayist with a fixed relationship to autobiography, it was a great revelation and relief to discover that I was not limited to my own personal biography as a writer, but that a much larger community of people could inhabit me and speak through me: La Raza.

Theater for me has much to do with the recuperation of the language of the Chicano as an act of cultural resistance and affirmation. The language of middle-class America has lost its resonance. This language invades not only the mainstream of America, but even the language of progressive movements. The Left, Third World, feminist, and gay movements still employ the language of the dominant class and as such culturally bind one’s way of conceiving of revolution. But the

language of the poor and working classes is *otra cosa*. It is rooted in the experiential, not the theoretical. As an educated writer of working-class origin, the ideology I learned in order to name our oppression can be translated into the language of my original people and, as such, can speak to my people and hopefully transform them.

Theater happens in the flesh. After the voices began to speak to me, they insisted on being physicalized. And in this lies the transformative potential in theater. She who has been made invisible and dismembered — the bent back in the fields, the rough hands in the garden, the rigid body beneath him in bed, the deep lap to the child on the bus bench, the assembly-line fingers, the veiled face above the rosary beads — begins to assume full dimension on the Chicana stage. She becomes the subject of the work, she moves downstage into the light and opens her mouth to speak. She is no longer invisible nor silent. You cannot be ignored.

I say the “Chicana” stage, although for the most part, this does not exist except in the occasional work by a Chicana playwright. The woman from a woman’s perspective remains for the most part an alien concept in Chicano/Latino theater. To this date, all the major Latino theater organizations in California (whether they are Chicano theater or Latino projects within a mainstream theater) are headed by men. To this date, there is not a single Latina director working consistently in Latino theater, and the number of produced women playwrights in Latino theater can be counted on one hand.

The history of Chicano theater was built on a system of “familia,” a kind of extended family where theater artists often worked together collectively to create work socially relevant to Chicanos. Our families are a source of support, *comunidad*, and *cariño*, as well as murky reservoirs of *secretos*, male dominance, and heterosexism. With “la familia” as paradigm, the structure of Chicano teatro companies saw the patriarch (father figure) on top (even in a collective) and women at best serving as modern-day *adelitas*, performing the “three f’s” as a Chicano colleague refers to them: “feeding, fighting, and fucking.” The structure also saw the censorship of certain themes on the grounds that they were not “socially relevant” to Chicanos/Latinos, themes typically not sanctioned in the Latino household. This included female sexuality in general and male homosexuality and lesbianism in particular, as well as incest and violence against women — all of which are taking place between the sheets and within the walls of many a Latino family.

Throughout most of the 1970s and early 1980s the bulk of Chicano/Latino theater was collectively written; however, in recent years the individual Latino playwright has emerged and found voice for the articulation of some of these taboos outside the “familia” of Chicano/Latino

theater. As we move into the “mainstream” of U.S. theater, the integrity of Chicano theater comes into question. The seduction of doing theater under U.S. capitalism is that the individual playwright *can* make it, but at what cost? What does it mean to be doing a play that describes a young Chicana losing her virginity as an act of rebellion against her mother when that same rebellious teenager may never get into the door of the theater? When we use our people without giving them back to themselves, we betray them. And ultimately we betray ourselves. In conscience I cannot be a playwright unconcerned about how theater is created and for whom. The act of producing the theater, reaching the communities for whom it was intended, and the content of the work are fundamental to my purposes as an artist.

There is a longing inside me that resists the individualism of the Western artist. I seek a new structure, new paradigm for Chicano/Latino theater, neither rigid Latino familia nor capitalist individualism. The act of making theater must be an act of creating comunidad. The origins of Chicano theater as catalyzed by Luis Valdez and his Teatro Campesino was one of taking the theater to the people. We can still learn from the best grassroots elements of that tradition in theater, but our definition of Chicano/Latino theater must expand in structure as well as content.

As poet Jimmy Santiago Baca calls us, Chicanos are a “de-tribalized” people. The act of making theater must be about the recreation of tribe, clan, a community of resistance entre las entrañas del monstruo. Like the indigenous origins of tribe, the indigenous origins of theater are that of ritual and myth, whose ultimate goal is to teach and spiritually heal its participants. It is a theater both deeply personal and political. A theater of taboos *and* tradition.

As a Chicana lesbian, I know the heart of the taboo resides in the subject of Mexican female sexuality. In my most recent play, *Heroes and Saints*, the main character is a young Chicana who has no body. Like Luis Valdez’s Belarmino character of *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*, Cerezita is only a head. Like Belarmino, she seeks a body to form a revolution, but unlike the Valdez character, her revolution is revolt not only against Anglo domination but male domination. As she states, to her male counterpart, “I don’t have a body. I was denied one.” This is the condition of the Mexicana woman. We have no body to be. There is no body to inhabit between the polarized figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Chingada. Cerezita is not a lesbian, but a lesbian sensibility has created her. The lesbian Chicana writer insists on the reclamation of our colonized female body. She sees the liberation of Chicana sexuality as intimately tied to the liberation of nations. She strives to unravel how la chicana has been formed and deformed by both

## FRONTIERS

racist/sexist Amerika and our own machista/católico/colonized  
mexicanidad.

I am a woman nearing forty without blood children.  
I am an artist nearing forty without comunidad.  
I am a lesbian nearing forty without a partner.  
I am a Chicana nearing forty without country.

And if it were safe, I'd spread open my thighs  
and let the whole world in  
and birth and birth and birth and birth life.  
The dissolution of self/the dissolution of borders.

But it is not safe.  
Ni for me.  
Ni for El Salvador.

So we resist and in resistance, hope is born. A theater of hope.  
Dreams die. Crush and die. I have known the death of love that I had  
once believed would ferment a revolution. I still seek that love, that  
woman writer in me who is worth her salt, who is relentlessly hopeful,  
who can create a theater that dares to expose that very human weakness  
where we betray ourselves, our loved ones, even our own revolution.

All writing is confession. Confession masked and revealed in the  
voices and faces of our characters. All is hunger. The desire to be known  
fully and still loved. The admission of our own inherent human vulner-  
ability, our weakness, our tenderness of skin, fragility of heart, our  
overwhelming desire to be relieved of the burden of ourselves in the  
body of another, to be relieved of our ultimate aloneness in the mystical  
body of a god or the common work of a vision. These are human  
considerations that the best of writers presses her finger upon. The  
wound ruptures and . . . heals.

The theater I seek is a theater of healing, one that not only touches  
the source of the wound but inspires its participants to act in the  
material world; to penetrate barriers of race, class, sexuality, geogra-  
phy; to refuse to identify with the "we" of this America sin acento. We  
are citizens of an America con acento. An America sin fronteras. This is  
the new American theater.