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2015

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**Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage**

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**Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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## **Dedication**

To my nephews Andrés, Sebastián, Lucas, and Daniel,  
a pesar del tiempo y la distancia, jamás menguará el amor de Titi Lali por ustedes.

And  
to the memory of Jennylin Duany  
gracias por encontrarme.

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## **Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage**

Beliza Torres Narváez, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Deborah Paredez

Co-Supervisor: Omi Osun Joni L. Jones

In *Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage* I analyze the performances of Jennylin Duany's *Cabaret Unkempt*, Nancy Millán's *La Mujer Invisible*, and Victoria Grise and Irma Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues* in order to illustrate how, by performing their subjectivities as fat women of color, Duany, Millán, and Grise empower themselves. I argue that by sharing personal stories in performance, these artists critique and challenge weight-based stereotypes. Furthermore, they reveal the intersections between the construction of fatness and gender, race and sexuality. Further, I investigate how these performers utilize autobiographical performance to open spaces for critical dialogue about how the fat body is constructed in the U.S.

These artists illustrate the ways in which autobiographical performance is uniquely suited to alliance building. More specifically, in *Cabaret Unkempt* Duany elevates Jenny, her performance persona, to diva status, thereby accessing an alternative and subversive space where the typically devalued Black fat body is centered, desired, and unattainable. Then through poetry, confessional monologue, and dance Duany invites the audience to see her body as whole, beautiful, and virtuosic. In *La Mujer Invisible*, a confessional rock concert, Millán shares personal anecdotes about growing up and

becoming a professional actress that imbedded in her the belief that she needed to lose weight in order to achieve her personal and professional goals. She goes on to trouble ideas of race, mental health, and worthiness. Grise and Mayorga use the *panza* (“belly”) as a metaphor for the body that reveals the socio-political realities of being Chicana. I assert that by sharing personal stories and placing their fat, racialized bodies center stage, these performers reclaim their value as artists and human beings. In so doing, they make themselves visible and reveal the intersectionality of the construction of fatness with gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Finally, they become transformative agents by encouraging the audience to recognize and examine their own prejudices, and to become allies against fat stigmatization.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### DOES OBESITY HAVE A RACE

On October 19, 2012 Latina fat activist Virgie Tovar appeared on the KPIX-TV (CBS Local Affiliate, San Francisco) news show Bay Sunday to promote the book she edited called *Hot and Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love and Fashion*. Host Frank Mallicot asked her questions about her life, growing up as a fat girl, how she came to the realization that she was different, and when she decided it was time to accept herself for who she was. The charismatic Tovar answered his questions and engaged in a lively conversation, sharing her story and further talking about the book project. Mallicot looked genuinely interested and praised the book's relevance.

Immediately after footage from the interview appeared on YouTube, users filled the website's comments section with insulting vitriol. These comments referred to Tovar as morbidly obese, grotesque, gross, lazy, and unhealthy. These are not just common assumptions people make when they see a fat person, but words that are used to harass and attack them, as if a person's physical appearance and assumed physical condition deserve humiliation. One of the comments stood out since it was especially degrading. It was from a person under the alias of ANTIHAES<sup>1</sup> who allegedly had sat next to Tovar during a flight.

The person refers to Tovar's body odor, her appearance, and even to what she ate during the flight, making her seem abominable, despicable, and loathsome.<sup>2</sup> In the midst of the lengthy comment, one sentence stands out: "She smelled like a wet diaper filled

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<sup>1</sup> This person has no personal information on their GOOGLE+ profile, which is solely used to post insulting comments on fat-affirming videos.

<sup>2</sup> I decided not to reproduce the hateful posting in its entirety. The video and comments can be accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2QVeRigbi8>.

with rotting Mexican food, and feet.” In the interview there is no reference to her ethnicity, however Tovar’s Brown skin, round face, dark hair, and almond-shaped, dark eyes mark her as non-white, or as a woman of color. Aside from her Spanish last name, the video contains no identifiers of her ethnicity or race; she could easily be a Pacific Islander or Native American. This odd reference to Mexican food appears to allude to Tovar’s ethnicity as a Latina, whether this person knows it as a fact or assumes that she is of Mexican ancestry because of her last name. Most importantly, it highlights what Tovar calls “stigma loading,” or the intersection of stigmas related to fatness, gender, race, and class. Thus, it refers to the various markers of excess and deviation from the norm that marginal bodies experience, in Tovar’s case: womanhood, *Latinidad*, and fatness. This example highlights the extreme de-valuation of fat Latina bodies in American media and culture.

### **THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF FATNESS WITH GENDER, SEXUALITY, RACE, AND ETHNICITY**

My dissertation examines the work of fat Latina performers who delineate the emotional and political dimensions behind the construction of fatness as undesirable and unhealthy. In the last decade, public and private institutions have been strongly invested in the “war” against obesity. The fat body is understood as unhealthy, undesirable, ugly, and out of control. However, fatness has cultural and social meaning that refers to the body’s value.

In this dissertation I analyze the performances of Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga’s *The Panza Monologues*, Jennylin Duany’s *Cabaret Unkempt*, and Nancy Millán’s *La Mujer Invisible* in order to illustrate how, by performing their subjectivities

as fat women of color, Grise<sup>3</sup>, Duany, and Millán empower themselves. I argue that by sharing personal stories in performance, these artists critique and challenge weight-based stereotypes. Furthermore, they reveal the intersection between the construction of fatness and gender, race, and sexuality. Further, I investigate how these performers utilize autobiographical performance to open spaces for critical dialogue about how the fat body is constructed in the U.S.

These artists illustrate the ways in which autobiographical performance is uniquely suited to alliance building. More specifically, in *The Panza Monologues* Grise and Mayorga use the *panza* (“belly”) as a metaphor of the body that reveals the socio-political realities of being Chicana. *Vicki*, Grise’s persona, claims her identity as Tejana/Chicana, and becomes the medium through which the collective memory of her community is performed. *Cabaret Unkempt* elevates *Jenny*, Duany’s stage persona, to diva status, thereby accessing an alternative and subversive space where the typically devalued Black fat body is centered, desired, and unattainable. Then, through spoken word, confessional monologue, and dance, Duany claims her Afro Latina identity and invites the audience to see her body as whole, beautiful, and virtuosic. In *La Mujer Invisible*, a confessional rock concert, *Nancy*, Millán’s persona, shares personal anecdotes about growing up and becoming a professional actress that imbedded in her the belief that she needed to lose weight in order to achieve her personal and professional goals. She goes on to trouble ideas of sexuality, mental health, and race, and claim her Blackness as part of her Puerto Rican identity. I assert that by sharing personal stories and placing their fat, racialized bodies center-stage, these performers reclaim their value as artists and human beings. In so doing, they make themselves visible and reveal the intersectionality of the construction of fatness with gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. Finally, they

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<sup>3</sup> I do not include Mayorga here since I am concerned with the performers/authors on stage.

become transformative agents by encouraging the audience to recognize and examine their own prejudices, and to become allies against fat stigmatization.

My dissertation is located at the intersection between Performance, Latina/o, and Fat Studies. The subjects of this study are performances by *gordas*: fat Latina women embracing their large bodies. While Performance Studies offers a method of analysis, Fat Studies provides a lens through which to study how these performances address weight-based stereotypes, specifically as they relate to women, and how these artists perform fat acceptance. Latina/o Studies provide a critical lens to further examine and understand how those constructions affect and relate to the diverse material realities the artists experience as women of color. Not only are their bodies marked as excessive because of size, but also because of gender, skin color, hair texture, cultural background, queer sexuality, class, and mental health. Through (re)presenting the fullness of their selves in performance, these artists illuminate the excessive and intersecting oppressions that *gordas* navigate both on and off the stage.

Some of the questions that guide my inquiry include: How do these pieces represent fatness and how do these representations address multiple assumptions and oppressions? How do they engage, confront, and seduce audiences into relations with women of size? What insights do they bring to the intersections of fatness, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity? How do they challenge racial constructions of Latinidad that erase Blackness and Afro Latina/os? How do these performances provide important interventions or contributions to the fields of Fat Studies, Performance Studies, and Latina/o Studies?

## JUSTIFICATION AND SCOPE

In the last twenty-five years, Latinas have contributed to the rich development of Latina/o Performance. Despite, or because of, the lack of access to theatre spaces and financial support, as well as the underrepresentation of the Latina voice across all cultural forms, these artists have been resourceful in producing their work. Like other marginal groups such as Black feminist and queer artists, they have claimed alternative spaces—cultural centers, university classrooms, living rooms, bars—and have preferred experimental and devised performance as their approach to creation. Duany, Millán, and Grise affirm what Anthropology and American Studies scholar Dorinne Kondo explains in “Bad Girls: Theatre, Women of Color and the Politics of Representation:” since avant-garde theatre is in the margins itself, it has functioned as a space and a medium for women of color to develop performance art. “The stage is the place where we can be ‘bad girls,’ to invoke Donna Summers, not as ‘sad girls’ but as women of color daring to be outspoken and outrageous, uniting to fight the sources of our common oppression” (64). Thus, performance is an effective medium for Latinas, who are marginalized because of their gender, race, and ethnicity, to stage their own bodies as evidence of their existence. As the U.S. Latina/o population continues to grow, so does the artistic work of Latinas in performance, even as their narratives remain marginal. Only a few Latinas, like playwrights Josefina López<sup>4</sup> and Quiara Alegría Hudes,<sup>5</sup> have gained national recognition on contemporary mainstream stages and in theatre history books. Nevertheless, since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century performance scholars have paid special attention to the growing body of work of Latina Performance. These works are still not included within the U.S.

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<sup>4</sup> Chicana playwright and performer Josefina López, who will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, is best known for her play (later adapted to a movie) *Real Women Have Curves*.

<sup>5</sup> Jewish Puerto Rican playwright and composer Quiara Alegría Hudes is best known for the book of the acclaimed Broadway Musical *In the Heights*. Her play *Water by the Spoonful* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2012.

theatre canon or even the U.S. Latino theatre canon, which remains male-centered and starts with Luis Valdez<sup>6</sup> as its father and the appearance of El Teatro Campesino<sup>7</sup> as its origin. However, scholarship, script compilations,<sup>8</sup> and focus groups with special interest in Latina Performance have surfaced in Academia.

*Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage*<sup>9</sup> is an effort to document Latina performance, thereby expanding the archive and scope of Performance Studies scholarship. Furthermore, it focuses on the embodiment of the fat female body and representations of fatness—a scope few Performance Studies scholars have assessed. While some performance scholarship, like Theatre performer and scholar Melissa C. Thomson’s dissertation, *Size On Display: The Dynamics Of Female Fat In Contemporary Performance Art*, addresses issues of race and ethnicity in their analysis of fat performance, there is no extensive study that focuses on performance and the intersections of fatness and Latinidad, or how the “process of Latina/o identity making,”

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<sup>6</sup> Chicano director, actor, and playwright Luis Valdez is the founder of El Teatro Campesino. Even though in its origins the group worked as a collective, usually Valdez is credited as the genius and the father of Chicano/Latino theatre. This perspective erases not only the body of work preceding the group’s creation, but it doesn’t give credit to the other artists, specifically women, who were part of El Teatro Campesino. For more on this read Yolanda Broyles-González *El Teatro Campesino: Theatre in the Chicano Movement*.

<sup>7</sup> Founded in 1965, El Teatro Campesino (“The Farmworkers’ Theatre”) was founded as part of the United Farm Movement during the Delano Grape Strike. Since then, their work has been dedicated to create theatre and popular art for social justice. There is a body of scholarship dedicated to the work of this important group. For general information go to their webpage: [www.elteatrocampesino.com](http://www.elteatrocampesino.com).

<sup>8</sup> Some important scholarly books and compilation of scripts are *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* by Alicia Arrizón, *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance* by Caridad Svich and María Teresa Marrero (eds), *Puro Teatro: A Latina Anthology* by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach (eds), *Embodying Difference: Scripting Social Images of the Female Body in Latina Theatre* by Linda Saborio, *La Voz Latina: Contemporary Plays and Performance Pieces by Latinas* by Elizabeth C. Ramírez and Catherine Casiano (eds). It is also important to recognize the role the Hemispheric Institute of Politics and Performance has had in documenting, archiving, studying, showcasing, and promoting the work of Latina performers as part of their conceptualization of the Americas.

<sup>9</sup> The title of this dissertation pays homage to the Introduction of *La Voz Latina*, titled “Latinas Take the Stage” by Elizabeth C. Ramírez and Catherine Casiano.

is performed and witnessed (Paredes XIII). Investigating gorda performance brings to light fat Latina narratives, and reclaims fatness as a gendered and ethnic political identity.

While Latina/o Studies is invested in Latina performance scholarship it has yet to invest in studying the work of gordas through the lens of Fat Studies. By the same token, even though Fat Studies has developed as a robust field in the last decade—a development I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter—it needs to expand its scholarship that specifically addresses race, as well as performance by women of color. By focusing on the performances of Latina women who are fat and investigating the issues they, as radicalized subjects, raise through performance, my project brings together the fields of Fat, Performance, and Latina/o Studies in unprecedented ways.

I examine three of the few representations of fat Latinas in theatrical performance and investigate how these gordas reclaim agency through performance. There are other examples of representations of fat women on stage created by Latinas, such as playwright performer Josefina Lopez's play *Real Women Have Curves* and performer Nao Bustamante's *America the Beautiful*. Later in this chapter, I will briefly discuss these artists as examples of gorda performers. These performances raise questions about standards of beauty in the U.S., how they relate to race, and how Latinas' realities fit or don't fit within these constructions of womanhood. Comparing these performances to my subjects, *Real Women Have Curves* follows the traditional linear and climactic plot, and presents its story through multiple characters performed by different actresses. While it is based on López's experiences, she is not a character or performer in the play. This makes it distinctly different from the performances I study, which follow multiple narratives, and only have one main performer. Bustamante's *America the Beautiful* is a non-narrative solo performance. Its grounding in the performance art tradition resembles

*Cabaret Unkempt*'s structure and form; however it does not, at least directly, expose personal or autobiographical narratives.

The three autobiographical live performances I study are made by fat Latinas who directly and unapologetically address the stigmatization of the fat female body. *The Panza Monologues* is a one-woman show written by Chicanas Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga and performed by Grise. Grise is an activist, performer, educator, and playwright who met director, playwright, and theatre scholar Mayorga in 2002 when both were working in their native San Antonio. Mayorga started collecting stories about panzas—which the authors also refer to as stories from the core—from Latinas with whom she worked. She also urged Grise to write her own panza story and eventually they created *The Panza Monologues* in which *Vicki*, the narrator and Grise's stage persona, mixes her own personal stories with those of the other women interviewed. The play maintains that, if asked about their relationship to their panzas or belly roll, the material realities of these women of color will be revealed. Fifteen vignettes tell candid, funny, romantic, nostalgic, and tragic stories about childhood, body image, domestic violence, queer sexuality, and health. They construct the memories and stories of a group of women with heterogeneous life experiences, united by their ethnic background, their panzas, and their love for and commitment to their community. The play ends with a manifesto in which *Vicki* hails power to the panza, and calls for solidarity from the audience.

*Cabaret Unkempt* is a multimedia two-woman performance developed by Cuban American performer Jennylin Duany in collaboration with performer Elizabeth Doud and other artists. Through confessional monologue, slam poetry, dance, and ritual, Duany pays “homage to the ‘excess’ parts of me that have been there for such a long time” (Duany). It mixes elements of dance, slam poetry, film art, music, ritual, and performance

art. Duany first appears on stage as *Jenny*, an exuberant and eccentric diva who Doud, the *Ballerina* dressed in a tiny tutu, will later help strip. *Jenny* is not only stripped of her dress, but she is also stripped of her public persona to reveal her insecurities, secrets, and vulnerabilities. Duany uses experimental dance, showcasing her poetic and virtuosic movement abilities to challenge ideas of the fat body as undesired, incompetent, and out of control. The show ends with *Jenny* confessing her love for her flappy, big arms or “sapphire wings,” and inviting the audience to look at her as a human being.

Nancy Millán’s *La Mujer Invisible* (“*The Invisible Woman*”) is a confessional rock neo cabaret. Millán is an actress, singer, producer, and educator from Puerto Rico. Tired of playing the same secondary characters or going to castings that did not specify size only to learn that no size specification means slender, she decided to write her own show and become the protagonist of her story. *La Mujer Invisible* revolves around Millán’s experiences growing up, coming of age, and pursuing a career as an actress. It reveals the ways she learned, through messages from loved ones and society, that if she was fat she was not worthy of love or success.

*Nancy* is a woman who has always dreamed of becoming a singer and an actress, but as she grows into womanhood, she realizes that her corpulent body is an obstacle for her hopes of stardom. Through song and storytelling, *Nancy* shares anecdotes of experiences that led her to the conclusion that her body was inadequate because of its size, weight, gender, and hair texture that marked her as an Afro-descendant. Onstage *Nancy* is the lead singer of a rock band made up of three musicians and two back-up singers. The performer wrote all the songs, and they frame the show and respond to or introduce the anecdotes from *Nancy*’s life. As she shares her story she also reflects with humor and sarcastic, poignant critique on other issues of self-loathing she learned growing up such as hating her curly hair, considered a marker of Blackness in Puerto

Rican culture. The show ends with *Nancy*'s declaration that she embraces and loves her body and hair, and will not accept anyone's criticism or social standards of beauty that expect her to change.

I focus on *The Panza Monologues*, *Cabaret Unkempt*, and *La Mujer Invisible* not only because they are positive representations of fatness, but also because they are written and performed by fat performers using autobiography as a radical configuration of identity. As performer scholars Lynn Miller, Jacqueline Taylor, and M. Heather Carver explain in the introduction to their book *Bodies Made Flesh: Performing Women's Autobiography*: "women's autobiography is the story of resistance to the disembodied, traditionally masculine that presents an 'universal subject,' whose implicit denial of skin color, gender, sexual orientation (other than heterosexual), and economic disparity constrained many women as 'others' with no voices or physicality" (4). Thus, autobiographical performance facilitates the performance of the gorda subjectivity, which lives in a liminal space where her race, size, sexuality, and gender intersect. Also, these performances explicitly and overtly address the contradiction of the gorda's social invisibility and hyper-visibility. Furthermore, Grise, Duany, and Millán all make a specific request of their audience at the end of each performance, creating the opportunity for action and social change through solidarity.

In addition to underscoring the power of autobiographical performance, these three performances illuminate the depth and breadth of Latinidad. Grise, Duany, and Millán represent the three most populous ethnic Latina/o groups respectively: Mexican American, Cuban American, and Puerto Rican. Their performances are significant because they underscore the similarities and differences among their individual experiences within their ethnicities, portraying the richness and heterogeneity of the Latina experience. Firmly rooted in Latina-ness these performances highlight the

differences and similarities among fat women from other ethnicities and races, creating the possibility of coalition building. More specifically, Grise questions authenticity as she reveals her Chinese and white ancestry, while at the same times claims her Chicana working class identity. Duany, a Black woman born in the U.S., claims her *Cubanidad* thus troubling the general conception of Latina/os as light-skinned (Dávila 130-131). Last, Millán claims her Afro-descendancy, refusing to conform to Puerto Rico's racial constructions that devalue Blackness and deny the existence of racism based on the fact that we are a mixed-race country (Quiñonez Rivera 163).

A question that often arises when discussing this research is, given the health risks associated with obesity, isn't it problematic that these performers are promoting fat-acceptance and affirmation? While I can discuss, at length, scientific research that challenges the correlation between body mass and health, this dissertation is not concerned with these medical debates. Instead, it is interested in unpacking the misconceptions and stereotypes of fat female bodies and examining how they are (mis)represented or erased in popular culture. More specifically, this study concerns itself with the ways in which Latina performers challenge these stereotypes and address their bodies' erasure. No one should be stigmatized, bullied, and made invisible for having the body they have. Fat—like thin, tall, short, one-legged, Black, Brown, redhead, etc.—is and always has been part of our diversity as human beings, and we should love our bodies and support a culture of health at any size.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of this reductive question of health, the questions that drive this project are the ones that propelled Grise and Mayorga, Duany, and Millán as artists: Why am I

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<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion on how fat can actually protect people suffering chronic illnesses and older people from death, as well as why being active is more important than being thin, read *The Obesity Paradox* by Carl J. Laive, M.D.

and my community not represented on stage? Why am I only cast to play supporting stereotypical characters? Why are there no stories about fat women? Are there no fat women who find love, who live tragedies, who go to the theatre? Why are we as fat women and Latinas invisible? What can audiences learn if they listen to fat women of color and their subjectivities? These questions are especially relevant if we consider that while fat men may also be subject to the same stereotypes and stigmatization, they are not erased at the same rate as fat women. As cultural critic Shelley Bovey asserts in *The Forbidden Body*: “In straight drama, as opposed to character acting or comedy, fat men can be seen in normal situations, playing normal people—mirroring life, in fact” (1999). These gorda performers defy a culture that seeks to render them invisible and unworthy. By becoming the protagonists of their performances and by writing and presenting their stories on their own terms Grise and Mayorga, Duany, and Millán, mirror their own lives, and those of many others.

### **RESIGNIFYING “FAT” AND “GORDA”**

I am aware that the words “fat” and “fatness” may resonate as pejorative. Instead of these, I could use other politically correct words or less negatively charged terms, such as: big, buxom, chubby, corpulent, curvy, flabby, fleshy, full bodied, heavy, heavyweight, large, obese, overweight, plump, podgy, portly, pudgy, robust, round, rotund, rubenesque, thick, stout, tubby, queen-size, plus-size, of-size, full-size. It can be argued that there are subtle or big differences between some of these terms. For example, curvy may refer to a slender woman who has an hourglass figure, or a woman who is overweight,<sup>11</sup> and is usually still considered as attractive by contemporary standards.

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<sup>11</sup> Browsing through internet fashion web pages and other social media, I have seen “curvy” used to describe women of very different weight, usually with big breasts and rears and smaller waists. For

Thus, it has a positive connotation.<sup>12</sup> A corpulent woman usually refers to someone who has a significantly bigger, heavier body. However, all terms are used in urban and popular language as euphemisms or synonyms for a body weight that is bigger than the Western beauty standards. Another option would be the word *phat*, from urban African American slang; depending on its context, the term means excellent (thing), attractive (person), or of rich texture (music). I prefer to align with Fat activists' reclamation of the semantic meaning of "fat" as simply a descriptive word for size. This use of the word challenges its pejorative connotations, which have been alive in Western societies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and equate fatness with undesirability or immorality (e.g. ugly, unpleasant, out of control, deviant, sick, nasty, gross).<sup>13</sup> Similar to Black Pride and Gay Pride movements reclaiming the words "Black," "gay," and "queer" as positive words, this choice attempts to change ideas about the unattractiveness and threat of fat bodies while working towards social justice for fat people.

The Spanish word *gorda*, like the word fat, is an adjective that describes excess of flesh or greater than average thickness or size.<sup>14</sup> Due to Spanish gender rules, however, its ending with the vowel "a" suggests it specifically describes a feminine subject or

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example on March 23, 2013 [www.examiner.com](http://www.examiner.com)'s pop culture critic Neda Habib published a list titled "Dangerously Curvy: 38 Photos of the Curviest Women in the 'biz'" with celebrities such as Salma Hayek, Scarlett Johansson, Queen Latifah, and Melissa McCarthy. Virgie Tovar, Marcy Guevara, and other plus-size fashion bloggers also use it to describe themselves.

<sup>12</sup> I would argue however, that because fat women are using it to describe themselves in a positive way, navigating the cyber world you will find forums discussing the definition of the terms or people opposing the use of the word curvy in relationship to fat women. Some discussion are respectful, others are derogatory.

<sup>13</sup> In their information guide, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, states: "[Fat] is an adjective, like short, tall, thin, or blonde. While society has given it a derogatory meaning, we find that identifying ourselves as 'fat' is an important step in casting off the shame we have been taught to feel about ourselves" (Farrell 138).

<sup>14</sup> The definition is not really accurate and may change from time and place. While the body mass index is used widely to determine who is overweight and obese, the accuracy of this measure is also considered debatable and has changed through time.

noun.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the English word, it does not function as the noun that describes the bodily fluid (i.e. saturated or unsaturated fat), which instead is *grasa*. In Spanish, *gordo* and *gorda* have both negative and positive connotations. *Gordo* and *gorda* can also be used to refer to something of high quality (*premio gordo*, “fat prize”). When referring to infants it means beauty and health (¡Qué bebé más gordo! “What a fat baby!”), possibly a remnant from when child malnourishment and mortality were high. Also, depending on context, it is used as a term of endearment for a loved one of any age and size (*mi gorda* “my fat girl” or *gordita* “fatty”). Thus, I argue that because of its ambiguity, *gorda* offers the possibility of a positive connotation that may signal empowerment and a fat-affirming attitude.

In this dissertation I use the term *gorda* as a body and character affirming word, echoing queer feminist Afro Cuban Hip Hop performers Las Krudas Cubensi. In their song “La Gorda” (“The Fat Woman,”) Las Krudas directly reference their position as feminist Black Cuban artists who are fat, who refuse to accept shaming for their size and weight:

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<sup>15</sup> *Gordo* has the same meaning, but refers to a male noun.

*A mí que me digan gorda, redonda, esfera.  
A mí que me digan gorda.  
¡Soy gorda!*

...  
*¡Qué me señalen,  
porque existo!  
Peso gladiadora como es justo,  
ah, y no me resisto.  
El silencio no me protege,  
¡no me voy a callar!  
Vivan las gordas sin domesticar:  
¡las pasá's, las pesá's, las que no creen en na'!  
¡Soy gorda!:  
Negra, bella; gorda, más bella.*

*Call me gorda, rounded, sphere.  
Call me gorda  
I'm gorda!*

...  
*Let them point their fingers at me,  
because I exist!  
Gladiator's weight, its fair.  
I won't resist it.  
Silence does not protect me,  
I'm not staying quiet.  
Hail to the undomesticated gordas:  
the talented, the heavy, the fearless!..  
I am gorda!:  
black, beautiful! Fat, more beautiful!*

In this song<sup>16</sup> Las Krudas embrace gorda not only as the adjective that best describes their body shape, but also as an emblem of their self-confident, unapologetic, fearless resistance to oppression based on race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

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<sup>16</sup> Lyrics of Las Krudas' "La Gorda":

¿Quién ha visto una gorda con sentimiento?  
Soy talento, puro terrenal.  
Abundantes carnes, lo siento, voy a pinchar (trabajar).  
Me quieres callar, por gorda hacerme sentir inferior.  
Que si los nervios y la falta de control  
¡Qué horror!  
Yo experimento un profundo placer  
en un mundo lleno de muchas formas de mujer.  
A la alegría de la vida tenemos derecho  
las de más de 40 de cintura y 52 centímetros de pecho.  
¡Mira, la gorda llegó a tu casa!  
180, ¡avanza!  
Me tengo confianza, y a partir de ahora,  
disfruta de la danza de esta gorda con su panza.  
Panza cruda que nunca tranza.  
Ésta es la gorda que llegó a tu casa, ¿oíste? ¡Vamos!  
Coro:  
Llegó la gorda, la gorda llegó,  
Llegó la gorda, la gorda está aquí.  
A mí que me digan gorda, redonda, esfera.  
A mí que me digan gorda.  
¡Soy gorda!  
Nenas flacas sexis, en la TiVi siempre lo mismo.

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Siliconas, y hay aquí torsos perfectos, ¡qué lindo!  
Anorexia en tiempos de guerra  
Pualina, Jennifer, Beyoncé, ¡qué perras!  
Pasando hambre, haciendo dietas.  
mono pa' las tetas.  
Y las niñas sofocás por ser Barbies, por ser muñecas.  
Aquí, bola pero, no de nieve, ¿qué tiene?  
Hermosa, y cilíndricamente misteriosa.  
Cuando paso por los gimnasios más llenos que el camello  
en la vidriera, los súper fuertes, los súper machos  
rompiéndose el cuello, mirando ¿qué?  
¡Mi cuerpo bello!  
Gigantesca, exceso, volumen.  
A quienes consumen cuerpos colonizados los tengo estresados  
¡Ven! ¿Me vas a cargar? Chico, te vas a herniar.  
No me escondo pa' comer. Tengo amor de mujer.  
Estoy en paz conmigo misma?  
Sabía de mi cuerpo, y mira a través del prisma.  
¿Qué ves? El reflejo de la luz que dejo al caminar,  
rolletes de grasa en mi cintura, no me voy a operar,  
ni embutirme en una faja, ¡ataja!  
La gorda se reveló, rimó, sintió, se confesó, explicó  
y una vez más y como siempre, te la echó.  
Baja de peso tú, porque yo, ¡yo no! ¿Oíste?  
Fatty, Fatty, Fatty, papi, ¿oíste? ¡Esto también es pa'ti, mami!  
Coro (x1)  
Redonda como la tierra que tantos mitos y leyendas encierra.  
Redonda como acetates pa la old escul, las novatas y los novatos.  
Redonda como CiDi que contiene este background que se hizo para mí.  
Circular, como las monedas, como el pan.  
Redonda como hasta donde quiera, como las millas que están como están.  
Y mira ya por dónde van.  
Resistiendo como gorda, como negra, como guerrillera  
Yo, ballena, más espacio en el mundo, más se ve sin pena.  
Las de talla 40, 50, las que no se inventan.  
Gordura en tiempos de Guerra.  
Sinfonía que se aferra a la más real vital poesía  
Imposible de ocultar, gorda  
Y flotante, como mi Cuba, en medio del mar  
Peso bloque mi'jo, ¡pa' que te sofoques!  
Esto es 90 kilos, ¡ven, ven y dilo!  
Coro (x2)  
La gorda de la Habana llegó a tu casa, ¿oíste?  
A mí que me digan gorda, redonda, esfera  
A mí que me digan gorda  
¡Soy gorda!  
Ésta es la gorda haciendo escuela  
¡Negra, bella, gorda, más bella!



Figure 1: From the Krudas Cubensi's (Las Krudas) My Space page. From left to right:  
Odaymara Cuesta (Pasa Kruda), Odalis Cuesta (a.k.a. Wanda Kruda), and  
Olivia Prendes (Pelusa MC).

I use *gorda* to specifically refer to Latina performers who are fat and who use their performance to bluntly and unapologetically address issues of the fat female racialized body. Thus, Virginia Grise, Jennylin Duany, and Nancy Millán are examples of *gorda* performers. All three take the stage to assert their existence, womanhood, and value, and to give visibility to larger issues such as the material inequities fat women of color face. The three performances analyzed in this dissertation end with a declaration or manifesto in which the artists clearly state they will not accept discrimination and invite their audience to consider where they stand in their Fat politics.

### **THE STIGMATIZATION OF FATNESS IN U.S. AMERICAN CULTURE**

Fatness refers to the materiality of the body and the relationship between the amount of lean and adipose tissue. However, the term also has cultural and social meaning attached to it that refers to the value of the body. Ideas about the value and meaning of corpulence change through time and among cultures. In order to undo the contemporary stigmatization of fat bodies, it is vital to understand the ways in which fatness has been constructed throughout history.

For example, before industrialization in Western countries, food supply was limited, living conditions were unhealthy, and the general population was vulnerable to malnutrition and hunger (Farrell 27, Frazer 12, Stearns 3). Due to poor hygiene, misinformation about how diseases spread, and retrograde medical practices, even the privileged classes were vulnerable to infectious diseases like tuberculosis that resulted in loss of fat and muscle mass. In this society, fatness was associated with beauty, healthiness, and affluence, and it referred to abundance of weight and worth. In his essay “Fat Beauty” cultural critic Richard Klein looks at art history from pre-modern times

through the 20<sup>th</sup> century to outline how “Fat ha[d] always been the shape of Utopia” (35). Historian Peter Stearns claims in his book *Fat History*<sup>17</sup> that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century U.S., “Women on stage were supposed to be voluptuous, and if they used corsets, it was to accent their roundness ... Costume indeed, intended to rearrange fat [rather] than to minimize it” (9). Through history—and still today in cultures where access to food, health, and nourishment are at stake—a body with flesh and a belly is the ideal of beauty and the marker of prosperity.<sup>18</sup> However, after the Industrial Revolution, which brought economic growth, made food more accessible, allowed for better living and housing conditions, and also brought about many advances in medicine, Western ideals of beauty changed. Historian Laura Fraser argues that as industrialization made larger amounts of processed food available, “for people of modest means, being fat was no longer a sign of prestige” (12). Where being fat previously signified high social status, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the slender, fit body with less adiposity was slowly becoming fashionable. Fraser further argues that by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century consumer culture in the U.S. had established a complex obsession with weight—especially in regard to women’s bodies—and this obsession infiltrated fashion, medical, pharmaceutical, T.V. , and film industries, among others (14).

A “good” American citizen is controlled, measured, hard-working, and cares about fitting in, literally and metaphorically. Following these Puritan values, the U.S. has imagined itself as “civilized”—socially, culturally, and morally superior to other

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<sup>17</sup> Stearns offers a nuanced look at how, on one hand, during the 1800s medical, fashion, and dieting trends did appear that showed preference for slender bodies. However, he asserts that until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century roundness was the preferred figure for women.

<sup>18</sup> In countries like Uganda and Mauritania some ethnic groups consider fat the ideal beauty for women. However, this is not to say that this can be also seen as problematic as girls getting ready for marriage can be force fed to roundness. In other words, that a bigger body is the ideal, whether in Western or non-western countries might still mean subjecting women to a beauty standard still dictated by heterosexist norms.

countries and cultures. As Europe is considered the epitome of civilization, it follows that the U.S. would adhere to Eurocentric ideals of beauty: light, flawless skin, narrow and thin nose, proportionate lips, straight hair, and light-colored eyes. In the U.S. context, the slender body achieves two sets of values. It is not only a marker of beauty due to its proportionality and adherence to European aesthetics, but it is also seen as a symbol of discipline and hard work. Thinness, then, is associated with goodness, health, and cultural superiority.

In contrast, the fat body is perceived as out of control, lazy, unhealthy, and uncivilized. Ideas of fatness as undesirable are so ingrained in U.S. culture that they mostly go unquestioned and unchallenged. Fatness is understood as evidence of a character flaw: fat people do not have the power, will, discipline, mental health, or self-love necessary to reach an average or less than average body weight and size. A recurring trope in contemporary representations of fatness is that of a thin person, trapped or hiding inside a fat body. Fitness and dieting programs like *Insanity* or *Jenny Craig*,<sup>19</sup> as well as reality weight loss shows like *The Biggest Loser* use this trope as motivation, to create an emotional connection, and as evidence of their results. Through exercise, dieting, extreme surgical procedures, and consumption of services and products that help achieve weight loss, freedom from the perceived excess of tissue and fat can be achieved. Only then can the once fat person be in control, happy, and successful.

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<sup>19</sup> An example of a testimonial on the Jenny Craig webpage: “My weight gain started after having my 2 children, and fifteen years later the baby fat remained. It felt permanent and like I was trapped in my own body. I was always out of breath, my self-esteem had plummeted and I dreaded going out and having to find clothes to wear. I’d tried so many diets but always became discouraged and gave up... I joined Jenny Craig after seeing a commercial on the TV... I never would have believed that the miserable, sweat pant wearing mom would become the happy, fit, healthy mom that I am today. When I look in the mirror now I am proud to see the woman I have become. Damaris R.”



Figure 2: Gold's Gym ad campaign depicts the trope of a thin person inside every fat person. The ad's tagline is: "Put away your winter clothes."

The implications of the fat/thin dichotomy can be devastating for those who are fat. Not only are they exposed to the perceptions of others, but their own perception and valorization of themselves is at stake. According to communication scholar and fat activist Kathleen LeBesco, the identity of fatness as unhealthy and unattractive "is so powerful that even fat people roundly abhor their own bodies" (63). While this might be a generalization, the emotional and social toll that devaluation, body shaming, and scare tactics can have on fat individuals should not be underestimated.

In the last fifteen years, public and private institutions, including insurance companies, the health industry, and governmental agencies have been strongly invested in the "war" against obesity. Those classified as overweight and obese are considered to be at risk for a number of life-threatening ailments. They are considered a time bomb that

will, sooner or later, affect not only the individual, but the well-being of the nation. An article on Harvard University's School of Public Health webpage cites a study by Meyerhoefer and Cawley that estimates that health care related to obesity cost the U.S. economy \$190 billion in 2005. The same study calculated the health cost per capita the following year was "\$2,741 higher for obese individuals than for individuals who were not obese" ("Economic Costs: Paying the Price for Those Extra Pounds"). In 2006, the Surgeon General Richard Carmona made headlines when he called obesity "the terror from within" and claimed that Americans' rising weight was a bigger threat to the U.S. than terrorism (Pace). In the U.S., obesity is feared not only for its impact on an individual's health, but as a threat to the economy, and to the security and stability of the nation-state.

The implications of understanding fatness as disease and a threat can be devastating both individually and socially. Fatness is a risk factor, not a disease; there are studies that establish that obesity can be a risk factor, just like being underweight, but is not an illness. More importantly, as cardiologist Carl Lavie explains in *The Obesity Paradox*, cardiovascular and metabolic fitness are more accurate predictors of health than the body mass index (192). The rhetoric that defines fatness as an illness allows for stigmatization and oppression based on physical characteristics; unlike other stigmatizations based on appearance (race, gender, age, etc.) fat-phobia is widely condoned. For example, the term obesity epidemic is often used within the medical and media establishments. Epidemic is a disease that affects a disproportionately large number of a certain population; it also suggests the possibility of contagion and infection. It refers to that which spreads out of the limits of the body. Thus, the phrase "obesity epidemic" serves a two-fold stigmatization. It pathologizes fatness, depicting it as something that puts the general public at risk. It also refers to excess and "un-

boundedness,” suggesting that the fat body occupies too much space, consumes too many resources, and indulges in too much pleasure.

Fat Studies scholars argue that the view of obesity as an epidemic creates and reifies existing prejudices in U.S. society (Campos, Solovay and Rothblum, Wann, Braziel and LeBesco). Furthermore, in her article “Fattening Queer History,” Fat Studies scholar Elena Levy-Navarro argues that “the construction of ‘obesity’ has helped define what it was and is to be ‘white’ or ‘American,’ just as it has helped define what is to be nonwhite or ethnic” (16). In other words, fat is un-American. Like the war on drugs or the war on poverty, the war on obesity serves to further stabilize U.S. racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

Approaching obesity as a “war” that needs to be won or a dangerous enemy, may reflect anxieties about people of color and immigrants. Studies show that Latina/o adults have one of the highest rates of obesity in the U.S. after African Americans. For example, according to the Center for Disease Control’s “Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 2011-2012,” 32.6% of white, 42.5% of Hispanic, and 47.8% of African American adults of all genders are obese, whereas 32.8% of white, 44.4% of Hispanic, and 56.6% of African American women are obese. In other words, Latina/os are not only growing in numbers, but in weight and size. As a result, this animates already existing anxieties and prejudices about immigration from south of the border and non-assimilated Latina/os living in the U.S. consuming an excess of public resources: jobs, food, and space. This is reminiscent of performance scholar Jon D. Rossini’s assertion that “the Latina/o body becomes a synecdoche for an emerging political resistance and the potential transformation of public space and everyday life, something that must be contained and controlled” (3). In other words, the body marked as excessive and “other” represents the increasing presence and influence that can and is changing the national landscape. Thus,

the growing Latino population becomes a dangerous threat to the country's social order, economy, power structure, racial, cultural, and linguistic make up, as well as its body shape.

This perspective fails to point out why it is that these populations of color have a higher rate of obesity, and how this phenomenon relates to social inequalities. For example, the State of Obesity's 2014 annual special report titled "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Obesity" states that, "lower-incomes and poverty correlate strongly with an increase in obesity, since less nutritious, calorie-dense foods are often less expensive than healthier foods." It also states that one in four Latina/o and African American families suffer from food insecurity or limited access to food. According to the report both racial groups experience higher exposure to marketing of low-nutrition foods and limited access to well kept sidewalks and safe spaces for physical activities. The cost of after school physical activities can also keep low-income youth from participating in them. Lastly, this report contends that because of language, cultural context, and immigrant status Latina/os may not take advantage of programs available to improve health and nutrition.<sup>20</sup>

### **THEORIZING FATNESS**

Fat Studies, like Ethnic Studies and Women and Gender Studies, seeks not only to make marginal subjects visible but also to reveal how stigmatization and marginalization allows the dominant discourses to establish privilege and supremacy. Studying race, ethnicity, and female bodies as an expanded understanding of the American body offers

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<sup>20</sup> This information was retrieved from The State of Obesity web page. The State of Obesity is a project of the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For the report go to [www.stateofobesity.org](http://www.stateofobesity.org).

critical insights on how fatness is both a gendered and racialized political identity. Given this, I attempt to extend a racialized and gendered analysis to Fat Studies and focus on the intersection of fatness, race, racism, racialization, and performance.

Fat Studies scholarship, a field that writes history explicitly critiquing invisibility and exclusion, to date contains limited in-depth analysis of the racial and ethnic implication of fatness. Both *Bodies Out of Bounds* (2001) and *The Fat Studies Reader* (2009)<sup>21</sup> are two canonical works in the formation of Fat Studies. Examining how race is discussed in these anthologies, published almost a decade apart, offers an understanding of the importance of engaging in a critical race analysis within this field. These texts represent the initial efforts to address the topic of race within the field of Fat Studies. While the first work offers only tangential insights to race and cultural representations of women specifically, the second begins to give greater attention to the topic.<sup>22</sup> In each text, the fat body is constructed predominately as white, and race, including whiteness, is not deeply discussed.

Furthermore, through the process of inclusion and exclusion, anthologies become authorities that situate and establish authors whose writings and ideas influence and shape our understandings of a field. As editor Jeffrey R. Di Leo argues in the introduction to *On Anthologies: Pedagogies and Politics*, “anthologies take a key role in canon formation and are always and already implicated in various political and cultural agendas” (2).

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<sup>21</sup> The anthology *Fat Studies in the U.K.*, edited by Corina Tomrley and Ana Kaloiski Nailor was published in 2009, and *Historicizing Fat in Anglo-American Culture* edited by Elena Levy-Navarro in 2010. I have not read the former; the latter contains a few articles that mention race or refer to immigrant groups as non-white, but there is no in-depth discussion of these formations.

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Stone Thornberry’s dissertation *Fat Chance: Images of Women of Size in the American Theatre* is dedicated specifically to the analysis of “the varied ways in which playwrights and theatrical performers have employed the large body size of women onstage.” While all the historical figures she analyses are white, one of her chapters on contemporary performances is titled “Intersections: Race, Class, and Size in *The Panza Monologues* and *Yellowman*.” While it offers a discussion on those intersections, most of the chapter focuses on documenting in detail the performances and their creation process and goals. There is no at-length performance analysis of the monologues or the intersectionality issues its title identifies.

Thus, *Bodies out of Bounds* and *The Fat Studies Reader* are linked to ways of writing history and shaping Fat Studies scholarship, committed to interdisciplinarity, fat-affirmation and acceptance, feminist thought, inclusiveness, diversity, and the critical study of fat stigmatization.

In the *Bodies out of Bounds* introduction, editors Kathleen Lebesco and Jana Evans Braziel underscore the necessity for further study on the “intersections of race, class, gender and sexuality” and its relationships to the social constructions of corpulence (12). However, of the fifteen articles included, only one does an in-depth analysis about race, and only two have women of color as their subject of analysis.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in “Resisting Venus: Negotiating Corpulence in Exercise Videos” Antonia Losano and Brenda A. Risch analyze exercise videos to show how the fat female body is both present and absent in representations of the female body in our cultural imaginary. Losano and Risch describe how instructors and students in the video have perfectly toned bodies, which their tight, low-cut, bright outfits emphasize. The authors also assert, “in the majority of videos ... the truly ‘grotesque’ body—uncontained, running liquid, wild, lawless—is simply unacceptable, the evil and troublesome Other” (118). In other words, while the intended viewer may be fat or see herself as fat (unfit, not toned), the fat body remains absent or invisible. Nevertheless, fatness is a latent presence. Fatness is that which needs to be avoided and feared as a threat.

Within fitness discourse, thinness is not enough. Accomplishing a fit, toned, firm, lean body, like that of the instructors’, is the only way to conquer the undesired fatness.

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<sup>23</sup>The last article of *Part I: Revaluing Corpulence, Redefining Fat Subjectivities*, written by LeBesco, advocates for inclusion and intersectionality. She specifically discusses sexuality and nationality (race, ethnicity). Then *Part II: Representational Matrices of Power: Nationality, Gender Sexuality, and Fatness*, opens with Marcia Chamberlein’s “Oscar Zeta Acosta’s *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo: A Fat Man’s Recipe for Chicano Revolution*,” an article about a Chicano man. The editors’ effort of strategically positioning the article here, as if in immediate response to the cry for inclusion and intersectionality, is diminished by the fact that it is the only article in the whole anthology devoted to a person of color.

However, some exercise video producers, most likely aware that their target market is *not* thin, include bodies to which this market can relate: less than “perfect” bodies, “normal” bodies, plump bodies, fat bodies. Losano and Risch call this video participant “the Woman in Gray.” She is “generally older, perfectly lovely, but, in contrast to the likes of Kathy Smith,<sup>24</sup> imperfect because of her size” (118). The Woman in Gray is usually dressed in neutral colors (often gray) and unrevealing, unflattering outfits. She stands in the back or the side and is rarely captured in a close up. There is only one instance when the instructor may bring attention to the Woman in Gray; after explaining and performing an high impact or complex exercise the instructor uses the Woman in Gray in order to demonstrate an easier variation, one that is lower impact or less strenuous. In other words, it is as if the Woman in Gray, because of her size, does not have the capacity to do the standard or higher impact version. In this moment, she becomes visible. However, according to Losano’s and Risch’s research, the camera spends only a few seconds on the Woman in Gray. It closes in on the specific part of her body that the exercise is meant to target, before rushing back to the instructor’s face. Looking straight at the camera, she continues to explain the exercise. Thus, the fat woman, while present, is dissected; only parts of her body are acceptable forms of representation.

The Woman in Gray inhabits a liminal space between visibility and invisibility. Her existence is barely recognized. She stands as a token, representing fat (not-thin, not-toned) women. She symbolizes Fat Women who, in fitness discourse, need to be transformed into smaller versions of themselves. Thus, the video’s effort at diversity inclusion fails, because fat women remain in the margins. By the same token, Losano and

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<sup>24</sup> Kathy Smith is a white, tall, blond fitness/wellness expert and entrepreneur popular during the 80s and 90s for her series of workout videos. She has dedicated the last 30 years to producing books, videos, and audios on aerobics, yoga, Pilates, nutrition, cardiovascular health, etc. At age 60, she appears as fit and more toned than in her thirties.

Risch's effort at diversity inclusion also falls short; while they call attention to the Woman in Gray who is fat, they fail to recognize that she is white. They do not address the fact that the video's instructors and participants are predominately white and fail to examine the fact that the beauty ideals discussed in their article and dominant in U.S. American culture are Eurocentric.

Petra Kuppers's "Fatties on Stage: Feminist Performances" analyzes the work of British performer Jo Brant and Mexican-American performer Nao Bustamante. While Kuppers dedicates four pages of performance analysis to Brant's work, she limits Bustamante's work to only two. And even though she gives a separate section to each artist, Bustamante's solo performance *America the Beautiful* is analyzed by contrasting its achievements (or lack thereof) to Brant's works. In other words, they don't get equal time. She further asserts Bustamante fails to "negotiate the content of the fat sign as Brant does" (288). Early in the article Kuppers argues, "fat, like sexual orientation, class, race, or disability, has clear connotations of value" (280). Later on she affirms that because fat is a physical identity, the fat woman's difference can't be hidden, thus "she is in the same position as a woman of color" (281). It's troubling that, while Kuppers attempts to ally fatness with other marginalized identities, she fails to mention that Bustamante is a queer Mexican American who identifies with the more political identities of Chicana and Latina. She is not only fat, but also queer and Brown. Furthermore, *America the Beautiful* as well as many other of Bustamante's works, is marked by race not only because of the fact Bustamante is not white, but even more because she explicitly addresses issues of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and nationality. Thus, not only is there no analysis of the implications and intersections of race and fatness in her work, but two very intrinsic parts of her identity, race and sexuality, have been erased and made invisible.

Angela Stukator's "'It's not over until the fat lady sings': Comedy, the Carnavalesque, and Body Politics," analyses films that use comedy to challenge fat oppression. In Stukator's analysis of the movie *Hairspray* and its protagonist, Tracy, she illustrates that fatness is equated not only with Otherness but also with racial Otherness. "Tracy's coming of age narrative is unique," Stukator argues, "because her grotesque body is coupled with racial unruliness" (208). As the plot progresses, Tracy—a working class white fat girl with an inappropriately high hairdo—befriends Seaweed, a Black boy, who teaches her to dance to "race music," securing her spot in a local T.V. dance show. Tracy also becomes a supporter of or even catalyst for a civil rights protest that results in the racial integration of the segregated dance show. In the end, Tracy wins the heart of the town's most popular teen, and she makes out with him in an alley while visiting the African American ghetto.

Stukator's discussion of race centers on how Tracy's character in *Hairspray* is associated with excess, Blackness, and corruption. This argument resonates with historian Sander Gilman's analysis of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century art. Gillman asserts that "Black females not only represented the sexualized females, they also represented the female as a source of corruption and disease" (101). If a Black woman is perceived as lowest on the social scale, a white woman who presented physical traits (wide nose or lips, big butt, voluptuousness, kinky hair) or behaviors (illicit sexual activity, sexual illnesses that were said to originate in Africa like syphilis) associated with "Blackness" was considered a potential source of immorality and illness as well. Similarly, as Stukator asserts, Tracy's association with Blackness through "race music," dance, and friendship with a Black boy and his community allows for her to break with standards of acceptable behavior for a white woman and claim her sexuality. Yet, she fails to note that since Tracy is white, she has a level of mobility in both white and African American spaces that Seaweed does not

have at the time. More precisely, Stukator fails to see Tracy's racial privilege. Thus, in this article the discussion of race remains in the realm of race as the other, more specifically the Black other.

Jana Evans Braziel, despite the fact that she is an African Diaspora scholar and one of the *Bodies Out of Bounds* editors who advocates for inclusion of non-white subjects and discussions about race, fails to act on these imperatives in her article. In her introduction to "Sex and Fat Chicks: Deterritorializing the Fat Female Body" the author states she will analyze "the sexual and social representations of the fat female body," (231) a body that she argues is represented in the media as either asexual or hyper-sexual. As part of her analysis she asserts she will later in the article discuss fat media icons Liz Taylor, Roseanne Barr, and Oprah Winfrey. However, as she develops her article she analyses the public personas of the first two, barely mentioning Winfrey. When she does address Winfrey, she only describes an image of her in a magazine. Thus, while Taylor and Barr were analyzed as three-dimensional, living, moving people, Winfrey remains a two-dimensional object. Like the Woman in Gray in the exercise videos, Winfrey appears to be a token—a stand-in for weight and (in this case) race diversity, giving the false impression of inclusion. She may be present, but her presence in this article only serves as an example of those who are not part of the majority.

There is an important change from *Bodies out of Bounds* to *The Fat Studies Reader*. While most articles from *Bodies out of Bounds* can be classified as cultural critiques, the *Fat Studies Reader* is a more comprehensive collection that includes articles on health and medicine and social inequality. In the earlier anthology, race is barely mentioned, and bodies of color are absent or invisible; in the latter, there are articles that offer in-depth analysis about race and women of color. Editors Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay address this important shift in Fat Studies scholarship, arguing that

“today we do not stop our analysis after noting that people are treated differently based on race, nor do we stop after asking what race is. The field is well established and the deeper question of the construction of race come reasonably naturally” (3). Among the *Fat Studies Reader*’s nine articles dedicated to performance analysis, three address race and/or ethnicity and have women of color as their subjects. There are also two articles that offer in-depth discussion about how the fat female body is racialized. This facet alone is a very important change from the previous collection. However, some of these articles still offer tokenistic or under-developed discussions of the intersectionality of race and fatness.

Amy Farrell’s essay, “‘The White Man’s Burden’: Female Sexuality, Tourist Postcards, and the Place of the Fat Woman in Early 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S. Culture,” offers the most comprehensive and complex discussion about race. Farrell analyses tourist postcards to see how fatness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was associated with prosperity and affluence, whereas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it became associated with non-whiteness, primitiveness, and the working class. Most of the postcards present big voluptuous women with a huge derriere. Farrell argues that “their huge buttocks are reminiscent of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century representations of African ‘Hottentot Venus’...to look or act like a ‘Hottentot’ meant, in Anglo-American terms that one was primitive, ‘Black,’ and overly sexual” (258). The essay further explains how these ideas of racial, ethnic, and phenotypical hierarchies were established at the time in pseudo-scientific and anthropological studies as a reaction to the emancipation of African Americans in the U.S., and a large influx of immigrants to the country. While most of the women Farrell describes are not Black, they are non-white (e.g. Jewish and Irish immigrants who, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were considered non-white). “Within the context of the increased waves of immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and migration from the South,

nativist critics and health professionals argued that everything from health to fortitude to intelligence and character were inherited traits, in low supply among the immigrants and migrants, and in high supply among native-born Americans of Northern European stock (259). In other words, immigrants are categorized within frameworks of “ethnic” due to their foreign status, religion, fatness, and working class status that racializes them as such. Farrell’s article effectively furthers discussions of race within Fat Studies as it directly addresses the relationship between constructions of fatness and whiteness.

Julia Grace Jester’s “Placing Fat Women on Center Stage,” an examination of several plays that feature fat women as main characters, errs in tokenism. After discussing *Hairspray*, *The Most Massive Woman Wins*, and *Fat Pig*, whose playwrights and protagonists are presumably white (Jester never specifies) she devotes a separate section to African American playwright Suzan-Lori Park’s play *Venus*. Jester clarifies that “[t]his play gets its own section because it both performs fatness and because it points out the concepts of normalized beauty that make a large woman a spectacle” (253). But what are those beauty concepts? Were they not present in the other plays? It can reasonably be assumed that “the concepts of normalized beauty” Jester refers to are white and Eurocentric. By failing to specify and only analyzing these notions as they pertain to her only Black subject, Jester repeats the mistakes of earlier Fat Studies scholarship.

*Venus* is based on the appalling story of Saartjie Baartman (birth name unknown). A Khoikhoi South African woman, Baartman was enslaved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and taken to Europe where she was exhibited as the Hottentot Venus. Jester asserts Baartman was circulated as a sexualized novelty and commodity, objectified and dehumanized not only for her large breasts, buttocks, and labia, “but because of her status as an African woman” (253). In other words, she was objectified and abused because she was Black. However, in both instances, Jester fails to clearly mark Baartman’s race as Black and clearly

identify Blackness as the result of the racial hierarchies that doomed her to a life of abuse. While these facts remained implicit in her analysis, they were never explicitly addressed or analyzed. Furthermore, by devoting a separate section to the discussion of *Venus*, Jester separates both the play and the playwright from the normative corpus to again revalidate and inscribe the binary of racial invisibility and visibility. Inclusion means embracing and incorporating disparate parts in favor of larger benefits. This work takes liberties to further fragment and disjoint the fat female body of color, offering little redress or contribution to archival revision.

Fat Studies serves as an interrogative lens through which to understand women's body size in the United States. From *Bodies out of Bounds* to *The Fat Studies Reader* there is some progress in how race is addressed; nevertheless, scholarship on race within these anthologies almost exclusively centers on Blackness. A robust engagement with race must also include non-Black marginalized communities of color, whiteness, and white privilege. In the decade between anthologies, bodies of color gained some visibility in scholarship on fatness. However, as performance scholar Peggy Phelan argues in her book *Unmarked*, visibility does not necessarily equal political power. Visibility can actually result in what Phelan calls a trap that “summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession” (110). This is most clearly illustrated by the enslavement, voyeurism, and fetishism that circumscribed Saartjie Baartman's life. For the body of color, for the fat body and—most acutely—for the fat body of color, visibility is rarely a choice. Race and size difference cannot be concealed and passing as the norm is seldom an option. Nevertheless, in spite of the social hyper-visibility of fat women of color, their bodies remain culturally invisible and misrepresented, even in what should be inclusive and diverse spaces like the

field of Fat Studies.<sup>25</sup> It is not enough to recognize the lack of diversity in the scholarship and advocate for inclusiveness; inclusiveness might not be enough. It is necessary to actively include work by activists, artists, and scholars of color who are already engaging in this field and analyzing the intersectionality of identities and bodies marked by multiple marginalizations.

### **WHO IS LATINA? WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM GORDAS?**

What can we learn about fatness and Latinas if we study how gordas represent their bodies? And what can we learn about the dominant culture by studying a marginalized one? It is first relevant to examine, even if briefly, the construction of Latina/o as a community and an ethnicity within U.S. society, and what a Latina/o Studies perspective provides beyond the fact that the subject of this research can be classified as Latinas.

The term Latina/o was first coined in the 1980s as a political response to the homogenizing term Hispanic, adopted by the federal government that same decade to denote the multiple Latin American ethnicities living in the U.S. (Rossini 2). Hispanic implies both a cultural heritage from Spain and the use of the Spanish language. In her book *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage*, Latina performance scholar Alicia

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<sup>25</sup> In 2012, *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, edited by Esther Rothblum, one of the editors of the *Fat Studies Reader*, saw its first volume. The role of this journal has been important to the development of Fat Studies as an academic field, providing a space for multidisciplinary discussion around fatness. Its most recent edition, published online in May 2014, is a special issue titled *Reflective Intersections*. In its introduction Fat scholar Cat Pausé explains this issue responded to the *Fat Studies Reader* editors' assertion that intersectionality is "an integral part of fat studies scholarship, due to the fact that oppression based on weight is usually tied to oppression related to gender, race, class, and sexual orientation." Nevertheless, as her title "X-Static Process: Intersectionality Within the Field of Fat Studies" suggests, Pausé concludes after analyzing the content of the issue that the discussion of intersectionality is limited. For example, she explains that while it is important to have discussions on the intersection of fatness and gender it is not enough; if other identities and material realities are not addressed, the discussion is not really complete. Specifically, she is concerned with how racial and ethnic minorities still remain marginal in the issue and in the field.

Arrizón explains, “the word ‘Hispanic’ came to be associated with Establishment and with a politics of identification that accepts the notion of the ‘melting pot’ as a category of unity and equilibrium” (3). In contrast, the term Latina/o implied a geographical ancestry that is located in the (Latin) American continent and thus includes other races, ethnicities, cultures, and languages that coexist in this vast territory. It also creates distance from the association with a colonial past and the assumption that people of Latin American heritage necessarily are Spanish speakers.<sup>26</sup>

Latinidad also names a political solidarity since those who adopt this fluid identity do not necessarily share culture, race, nationality, class, language, or religion. In “Latinidad, AIDS, and Allegory in *Kiss of the Spider Woman, the Musical*” David Román and Alberto Sandoval explain:

Latinidad was introduced by Latino and Latina critics as a term identifying and codifying various practices within Latino popular culture and also as a tool for social organization ... it arrives on the scene as a nostalgic reinvocation of the markers of cultural heritage and homeland—wherever that may be—for the *gente* by the *gente* (“people”). It is always understood to imply a certain, although unidentified, Latino vernacular. (261)

In other words, Latinidad is a slippery term of self-definition that captures the sentiment of our cultural commonalities, as well as our differences as an imagined community. What Latina/os definitely share is geography. As Deborah Paredez explains “one becomes Latina/o within the geographical, political and economic borders of the United States” (23). In other words, it is through immigration, migration (recent or of past generations), or annexation that the process of becoming Latina/o takes place. It is also through similar experiences with marginalization that Latina/os form a community.

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<sup>26</sup> It is important to point out there are people of Latin American descent who do prefer the term Hispanic or use it interchangeably with Latino. Some even reject the term Latino for its political implications, or because as it has been adopted by the mainstream, it has become as homogenizing as Hispanic. However, I am using it in my dissertation in its original sense of heterogeneity and solidarity.

Despite the fact that Latina/o is not a racial term or even an ethnicity, in the national imaginary Latinidad is constructed as a racial identity. Latina/os are imagined as foreign, and often referred to as a homogeneous group. As with racial groups like Native Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders, Latina/o is a problematic category since it does not fit within the White/Black binary that dominates the construction of race in the U.S. Latina/o as a classification becomes more elusive due to the heterogeneous racial composition of those who identify as such, as well as to the 500-year history of miscegenation between European, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant people within Latin America, as well as the more recent history of Asian immigration.<sup>27</sup> Thus, we Latina/os enter in a non-white category that reifies white as the norm, and those who don't fit that category as Other.

In naming ourselves, people of Latin American descent use different ways to identify. For example, some identify themselves by their country or region of origin or ancestry (e.g. Colombiana/o, Dominicana/o, Argentina/o, Caribeña/o, Centroamericana/o) or they may attach the word American (Cuban American, Ecuadorian American) (Sandoval-Sánchez, “José Can you See?” 14). Others have coined different words that, in some cases, refer to the city where they live (e.g. Nuyorican, Dominicanoyork) or depend on national context as well as class alliances (e.g. Boricua,

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<sup>27</sup> According to an article titled “La realidad de los chinos en Latinoamérica” (“The Reality of Chinese in Latin America”) published by the Programa Asia Pacífico (“Asian Pacific Program”) of Chile’s Congress National Library (2008), the largest immigration of Chinese to the Americas was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as they came to work in sugar plantations in Cuba and on the canal in Panamá. The article also argues that today, the Chinese population in Latina America is bigger than the Chinese populations in Europe, Oceania, and Africa combined. For more, see <http://observatorio.bcn.cl/asiapacifico/noticias/chinos-en-latinoamerica/>. Daniel M. Masterson’s book *The Japanese in Latin America (Asian American Experience)* discusses the history of Japanese immigrants in Latina America. It asserts that today, 1.5 million people in Latin American are of Japanese descent. Japanese and Chinese are the two major Asian immigrant populations in the continent.

Pueltorra/o, Chicano, La Raza). Some people use Hispanic and Latino interchangeably, other reject one or the other.

Other Latina/os also identify with their racial heritage, and sometimes it is in the U.S. when they start identifying with their race instead of just their nationality. While *mestizaje* (“mixing of the races”) was first used to create a complex caste system by Spanish colonizers in Latin America, later it was used in order to create a conceptualization and sentiment of national identity (Taylor 94-95). While this conceptualization may partially reflect the racial makeup of Latin American countries whose populations are significantly comprised of mixed race individuals, it erases the presence of distinct ethnic and racial groups and the socio economic disparities between them, and creates a false impression of racial harmony and equality. For example, communications scholar Maritza Quiñonez Rivera explains how, while Puerto Rico’s constructions of nationality embraces the idea of *mestizaje*, there are mulatta/os and Black Puerto Ricans who, due to racial constructions on the Island-state that conceptualize Blackness as inferior, do not identify as Black or embrace their Blackness as positive (173). She further explains:

My racialization process of becoming and being Afro-Puerto Rican in the United States happened gradually. I had to let go of ambivalent and suppressed feelings and emotions inculcated by a culture of oppression in Puerto Rico. While negotiating a transnational identity as either Black Latina in the United States or as a Black Puerto Rican on the island. The politics of location intersect with and often reject the politics of identity ... In the United States, hybridity is negotiated across a clean-cut binaries of race: Black/White; language: English/Spanish; and social relations: segregation/integration. However, in Puerto Rico, my invisibly visibly, racialized, gendered, and sexed self remains silenced under the veil of cultural hybridity and the myth of a racial utopia. (176)

In other words, she lives navigating the racial politics of the island and the mainland. Quiñonez Rivera also contends that the assumption often made in the U.S.—that because she is Black she is African American—erases the geographical and historical context of her Blackness (173). As a result, for Black Latina/os, claiming their identity as Afro Latina/os affirms both their racial and their geopolitical identity. This becomes more important as the term Latina/o becomes mainstream and loses some of its original heterogeneous meaning.

In the past two decades, the market has re-signified and appropriated the term; as a result, its original political implications of solidarity and resistance have faded but not disappeared. In her book *Latinos Inc.*, Arlene Dávila asserts that within advertising, representations of Latinidad as an homogeneous ethnicity has helped “to partially consolidate a highly heterogeneous population around images of a world where everyone is good, no one is a minority, and ‘everyone is your friend’” (125). These images of a docile whitened Latina/o consumer circulate in the Hispanic media and capitalize on the consuming power of Latina/o populations, inviting them to participate in U.S. culture as consumers, yet maintaining them separate as foreigners.

Representations of Latinas mostly fall into one of two stereotypes: respectable, sacrificing mother or sex bomb. Dávila argues that “Whether a good or evil woman, Latina is foremost beautiful, white and alluringly dressed” (131). And definitely, unless they are old, representations in advertisement and media depict Latinas as voluptuous yet thin. Morning shows such as *Despierta América* and newscasts such as *Primer Impacto*<sup>28</sup> are led by Latinas clothed in tight, short dresses that accentuate their guitar-like figures:

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<sup>28</sup> María Celeste Arrarás, the second host of this Univisión News Show and the current hosts of Telemundo’s *Al Rojo Vivo*, has gained weight and has been criticized for it. While other younger and slimmer reporters have joined the show as supporting reporters, Arrarás continues to be the anchor and continues to showcase her curviness.

big breasts, small waists, wide hips, and round, big butts. When fat Latinas are represented they are mostly faceless victims of obesity: consumers of weight loss diets and pills or body shaping girdles.<sup>29</sup> Thus, they are also marginal to mainstream constructions of Latinidad.

Duany, Millán, and Grise challenge these assumptions and representations. While I situate these performers as part of the Latina/o community, in their performances they identify specifically as Cubana, Puertorriqueña, and Chicana, respectively. Nevertheless, when studied together *Cabaret Unkempt*, *La Mujer Invisible*, and *The Panza Monologues* illustrate a heterogeneous Latinidad. They further deconstruct the racial and ethnic constructions behind these identities as they relate to the performers' personal histories.

## A PERFORMANCE STUDIES SCOPE

Performance Studies offers the theories and methods for this dissertation. It allows for an interdisciplinary approach and, because it understands the body as subject, not object, it provides a useful lens for thinking about bodies. Performance Studies engages in questions of embodiment in order to understand how we live in the world through our bodies. Furthermore, it understands performance as an epistemology, a way to construct knowledge and share history and culture in a specific community. Performance scholar Diana Taylor explains that “[p]erformances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through

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<sup>29</sup> The stereotypes of fat Latinas in popular culture are similar to those of fat women in general: hyper-sexed or asexual, very nice or very bitter, overeater, over the top, the maternal figure, or the best friend. One such example is George López' mother (Benny López) in *The George López Show*, played by Belita Moreno. Exceptions to these stereotypes are America Ferrera's character in *Ugly Betty* and *Criminal Minds*' Penelope Gómez, played by white actress Kirsten Vangsness. Yet both character are eccentric, and while sexual tension and emotional ties exist between them and the hunk of both shows, we never see those relationships accomplished. *Grey's Anatomy*'s Dr. Callie Torres, played by Sara Ramírez, is probably the most interesting and complex fat (queer) Latina character on T.V.

reiterated [behavior]” (2). Thus, analyzing performances within the context of a specific community, in this case Latinas, sheds light on how that community understands itself and how it (re)articulates its identity in the world.

Each chapter in this dissertation is dedicated to one of the three gorda Latina performances, and the specific themes they distinctively bring forward. While the works are unique, they also share aspects that go beyond the body size of the performer. First, each performance uses autobiographical material in varying degrees. In *Cabaret Unkempt*, Duany uses autobiography as inspiration for spoken word poetry and a dramatic monologue; these scenes are part of an avant-guard multimedia performance which displays her body’s versatility onstage. In *La Mujer Invisible*, Millán alternates between singing her original, sometimes nostalgic but mostly assertive rock songs with anecdotes from different stages of her life. She further deconstructs implicit and explicit messages she received about her body’s value from people in her life as well as the media and larger society. Millán also underscores the relationship this had to her own understanding of self-worth. *The Panza Monologues* weaves together personal narratives of San Antonio Chicana and Mexican women interviewed by Mayorga and Grise with reflective monologues written by the former and autobiographical monologues by the latter, all performed by Grise. Through performing multiple women’s stories, including her own, Grise’s body becomes the site where the collective memory and autobiography of her Chicana community—women of different ages, education, sexualities, place of origin, and life experiences who share a cultural background and dedication to social justice—coalesce.

Autobiographical performance and personal narratives have been a favored medium for feminist and other marginalized groups, like people of color and queer communities. Reflecting the popular feminist adage “the personal is political,” people of

color and queers have situated themselves as individuals while giving voice to a community of which they are a part. As Performance Studies scholar Kristin M. Langellier explains, “Personal narrative situates us not only among marginalized and muted experiences but also among the mundane communication practices of ordinary people” (126). Thus, not only do these stories validate the experiences of their marginalized subjects, they also affirm that acts of everyday life are a vital part of our cultural repertoire and embodied memory (Taylor). By staging quotidian stories and acts, which are considered devoid of authority in dominant discourses, marginalized subjects make themselves visible and furthermore, they are empowered by being both the authors and narrators of their narratives.

Autobiographical performance also allows for an extraordinary relationship between the performer and her audience. The performer is performing a version of herself, or a persona. She shares real events and intimate ruminations, thus exposing herself, and closing the gap between character and actor. Sue Ellen Case’s description of Vanalyne Green’s autobiographical performance *Trick or Drink* is useful in understanding this:

In speaking the words of her diary, the performer performs herself, speaking in the most personal language of the self to the self. By thus performing her own life, she becomes the woman as subject, as her own space, in the public space of performance. The performer is woman as self, without the aesthetic distance of character. (59)

Just as in Green’s performance, Duany, Millán, and Grise speak directly to the audience, and though they may impersonate characters different from themselves, there are multiple moments where they take off that mask and embody their personas. These moments of vulnerability and honesty, when the performers look directly at the audience and share their secrets and desires—like how they actually love their socially abject bodies and

derive pleasure from them—create an intimate relationship. Audience is not just a witness but becomes an entrusted confidant and a potential ally who can see her as the three-dimensional human she is.

Another important aspect all three performances share is that they take place on and through the “explicit body.” This concept also serves as a theoretical frame of this dissertation. Rebecca Schneider defines the explicit body as the unfolding of the body, exposing and giving visibility to the different layers of “social margins, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, marking of delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege” (2). For example, in *The Panza Monologues* Grise calls attention to her belly roll, and uses it both as a metaphor and a literal representation of aspects of her culture and experiences. First, it is, according to the play, the place where life and history begins. Later it is referred to as the place where emotional pain as well as hunger are felt, and as the object and subject of queer desire and love. With movement, gestures, and descriptions she shows off this part of her body that is supposed to remain hidden by shame, instead re-signifying it and thereby demonstrating its beauty and value. Thus, the performers’ bodies, marked by different signifiers that affect their movement through society, are the site where the performance takes place.

The explicit body in performance is not only observed by the audience, but also looks back at them, and addresses them directly. Just as in autobiography, the explicit body in performance reveals aspects of her body and private life, shamelessly bringing them to the public, and allowing them to reverberate across her body (Schneider 72). In so doing, she challenges standards of propriety and respectability, and asserts herself as a complex woman. In the case of gordas, they create themselves in performance, becoming both the text and the stage. Duany, Millán, and Grise make their audiences look at the

body that they “should” be hiding; they directly name the stereotypes that society (and most likely some audience members) put on them as fat women of color and decry the social exclusion they face because of their size, race, gender, and sexuality. In the space of performance, they are the authority as they critique the social values that render them invisible and deviant. Gordas refuse to be powerless victims, and instead are assertive agents calling for solidarity.

### **GORDAS IN LATINA PERFORMANCE**

*Cabaret Unkempt*, *La Mujer Invisible*, and *The Panza Monologues*, are part of a genealogy of Contemporary Latina Performance. Since the 1990s Latina artists have produced the most prolific and cutting edge work in Latina/o performance. Moreover, as Maria Teresa Marrero asserts, “A reading of the development of Chicano/Latino theatre offers an oppositional dynamic, an impetus towards the interruption of the stereotype. The energy of this rethinking has been largely *women’s*. Indeed it is Latina women who now lead the Latino theatre to the new millennium.”<sup>30</sup> Among this body of work, there are performances and plays relevant to this dissertation, given their concern with Latina bodies and body image, in relationship with standards of beauty and womanhood in U.S. American culture.

Award winning playwright and performer Josefina López<sup>31</sup> is probably the best-known gorda. She became nationally known when her play *Real Women Have Curves* (1996) was adapted for the big screen. While López does not literally take the stage in this play,<sup>32</sup> the character Ana’s storyline—an undocumented, working class young

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<sup>30</sup> See also Arrizón, Svich, Ramírez and Casiano, Sandoval and Sternbach.

<sup>31</sup> For more about López who is also a poet, stand up comedian, painter, designer, cultural producer, and activist go to: [http://josefinalopez.co/?page\\_id=6](http://josefinalopez.co/?page_id=6).

woman who worked at a garment factory before going to college—is similar to her own life experience.<sup>33</sup> Also *Real Women*'s characters Ana, Estela, Carmen, Pancha, and Rosali are respectively described as: “plump and pretty,” “plump and plain-looking,” “short and large,” “huge,” and “only a bit plump in comparison to the other women” (López). Furthermore, I call this a gorda performance because among other issues related to the conditions of their lives, including their legal and economic status, the play discusses U.S. standards of beauty and size as they relate to gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. The women address how they literally could not fit into the women's clothes they sew to make a living, and how their bodies are bigger and curvier than the U.S. ideal. In her feminist play, López celebrates sisterhood and difference, while at the same time recognizing the tensions between accepting your body and living in a society that is obsessed with the policing of women's bodies.

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<sup>33</sup> In the play, Ana is one of the secondary characters, and Estela, Ana's older sister, is the protagonist. In the movie adaptation, Ana becomes the protagonist, and her mother, Carmen, the antagonist, urging her among other things to lose weight. For more on this read Deborah Paredez “All About my (Absent) Mother: Young Latina Aspirations in *Real Women Have Curves* and *Ugly Betty*” in *Beyond El Barrio: Everyday Life in Latino America*.



Figure 3: Screenshot of YouTube video of Josefina López' performance as stand up comedian: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWYyaRwjT8U>

Honduran American actress America Ferrara also gained national attention after playing Ana in the *Real Women Have Curves* film (2002). She later became a star when she played Betty Suárez in the popular television comedy-drama *Ugly Betty* (2006-2010). Betty is a young Mexican American woman from Queens who is very bright and talented, but due to her looks (she is short, fat, wears glasses, has braces and, despite all her efforts, she can't dress according to trendy fashion rules<sup>34</sup>) she is a misfit at the high-end fashion magazine where she works as assistant to the chief editor. Betty is bullied for

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<sup>34</sup> For example, in the pilot episode Betty sees a model using a Dolce & Gabbana fur poncho that she likes. On her first day of work at a fashion magazine publishing company, she wears a polyester poncho with the name Guadalajara written in big letter on the front that her father brought her from Mexico as a souvenir. However, as the series progress, she gets a better sense of fashion trends while keeping her own style.

her body and looks at work, but is able to both retain her confidence and gain a fashion sense that is still true to her colorful taste. Beyond her character, America herself became an icon and inspiration to Latinas and other women with her body positive attitude. Not only did she succeed regardless and because of her phenotype and body type, but she long ignored criticisms against her body. While she recently joined the ranks of celebrities who lost a significant amount of weight through diet and exercise, she has stayed away from diminishing her previous body type.



Figure 4: This picture of America Ferrara as an “improved” Betty, provided by ABC, appeared on Amy Chozick’s article “Making Ugly Betty Prettier” on The Wall Street Journal in 2009.

Tejana gorda Alicia Fernández was a playwright and performer who wrote *Big, Bad and Beautiful* (1997), a funny, assertive, fat-affirming play. Originally a solo performance, Fernandez further developed it as a five-woman play comprised of a series of sketches. Deborah Paredez describes the relevance of the play in the introduction to the *Jump Start*<sup>35</sup> *Play Works* anthology:

[T]he play reframes the view often cast on the *gorda* body. In the monologue, “This is my Body,” the speaker [a woman about 30] conducts an unabashed inventory of the flabs and rolls of her body that is the ‘map’ of her life. Throughout the performance, the women take re-possession of their bodies. When in a chorus of voices they proclaim, “No one ever says [to other people] ‘You are skinny!’ or ‘You’re a man!’ or ‘You are white,’” Fernandez’s characters expose how bodies get marked with public scrutiny. (xi)

In other words, Fernández unabashedly calls attention to the parts of her body considered socially undesirable, and claims them as part of gordas’ life experience and identity. Furthermore, she points out thin, male, and white privilege, and the ways it remains unnamed and normalized.

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<sup>35</sup> Jump Start Performance Company is a community-based San Antonio non-profit and space dedicated to arts education and the development and presentation of the arts. For more information go to: <http://jump-start.org>.



Figure 5: From left to right: Janie Saucedo, Alicia Fernández and Crystal Don, the first full cast of “Big, Bad, and Beautiful. Taken from the book *Jump Star Play Works*.

Feminist solo performance has been one of the preferred genres for Latina and queer performers such as Mónica Palacios, Alina Troyano, Adelina Anthony, Coco Fusco, Marga Gómez, and Karina Casiano. Through solo performance, these artists represent themselves as gendered<sup>36</sup> and racialized subjects and make powerful political interventions. In *Stages of their Lives: Transculturation and Identity in U.S. Latina Theatre*, Alberto Sandoval and Nancy Sternbach argue that solo performances are “a highly original, irreverent, and innovative theatrical art form Latinas are producing today” (95). Besides requiring fewer resources than traditional plays, solo performance allows for the performer to tell their stories without the mediation of other characters.

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<sup>36</sup> Many of these artists also identify as Lesbian or queer.

The authors further argue that contemporary Latina solo performance is bold, irreverent, transgressive, frank and personal, and assumes its Latinidad as implicit. Latina solo performers are more interested in offering a social critique and addressing other issues centered on their bodies and the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality.

A queer Chicana multimedia artist best known in the performance art scene, Nao Bustamante is a gorda who has put her big body explicitly on center stage in many of her performances. For example, in *America the Beautiful* she undresses on stage and proceeds to do a series of actions exaggerating and mocking beauty transformation routines. For example, she curls her eyelashes, puts on makeup, fake eyelashes, a blond wig and high heels. In the background, a male voice talks about the relationship of the spirit and the body. Bustamante also wraps herself in plastic paper in order to contour her body belly, hips, legs, and arms. Then she performs risky and funny balancing acts on stepladders of various heights, goes backstage to throw up a rose she previously ate, and plays the U.S. national anthem by blowing on glass beer bottles. At the end, she mimics Marilyn Monroe's famous "Happy Birthday Mister President" song, takes off her costume, blows a kiss to the audience, utters "I love you," and leaves the stage.<sup>37</sup> Her performance mocks the all-American beauty standards, and the lengths women are expected to go to adhere to them, especially those who have the wrong color, size, and shape.

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<sup>37</sup> My simplified description is based on her performance at the Hemispheric Institute of Politics and Performance in 2002, which I saw live. For the full viewing go to: <http://hidv1.nyu.edu/video/001018439.html>.



Figure 6: Nao Bustamante in America the Beautiful at the 2002 Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in Lima, Perú.

Virgie Tovar is another noteworthy gorda performer. Tovar, like other fat women, found a body affirming art in burlesque. Burlesque is a theatrical performance whose main goal is to celebrate and showcase the female body in all its forms. While it involves stripping and teasing it differentiates itself from striptease due to its campy humor, irony, eccentricity, elaborated costumes, and props. Also, burlesque caters to audiences of all genders and sexualities in the same venue. Besides performing as her burlesque alter ego Dulce de Leche, Tovar is a fat activist, author, storyteller, and holds an M.A. in sex education with a focus on fatness, gender, and race ([www.virgietovar.com](http://www.virgietovar.com)).



Figure 7: Virgie Tovar picture from web-based Interrupt Magazine 2003 issue with citation from her book *Hot & Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love and Fashion*. Retrieved from Tovar’s Facebook page.

Diane Rodríguez is an award winning director, playwright, and performer. She is also a former member of Teatro de La Esperanza and El Teatro Campesino (Ramírez and Casiano 93). Her solo performance *The Path to Divadom or How to Make Fat-free Tamales in G Minor* (1985) tells the story of how her cousin Rachel, concerned by her weight, prepares fat-free *tamales* for a family *tamalada* reunion, instead of traditional ones made with lard. Narrated by Diane’s persona, a big girl, the tamales become a metaphor for the tensions between Mexican tradition and American culture. Eventually, her aunt tries to compliment the fat-free tamales, and then urges Rachel to try the traditional one. The narrator describes that moment of letting go of the policing of her food as the moment when her cousin became a “sexy, bossy, *nalgona* (“big butt”), *mandona* (“bossy”), big ole hips and thunder thighs” diva (101). The play ends with a

culture and body-affirming poem that asks: “Why do we shrink ourselves, hide ourselves?” (101).



Figure 8: Diane Rodríguez. Picture retrieved from [www.broadwayworld.com](http://www.broadwayworld.com).

*Cabaret Unkempt*, *La Mujer Invisible*, and *The Panza Monologues* share characteristics of contemporary feminist Latina solo performance described by Sandoval-Sánchez and Sternbach as blunt, transgressive, rooted in the body as both text and subject, and as evidence of their hybrid racial and cultural identity. Although in the first two works<sup>38</sup> the performers are not alone on stage, they are still indebted to the solo performance genre. For example, *Cabaret Unkempt* is a two-woman show. However, the performance is focused on Duany’s experiences and Doud’s *Ballerina* character is in the service of *Jenny*’s storytelling. Doud never speaks, and her role changes from stagehand,

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<sup>38</sup> In the recorded DVD version of *The Panza Monologues*, an otherwise one-woman show, Grise is accompanied on stage by the Flacasos (“Thin Ones”), a *son jarocho* music ensemble. Most of the time they remain stage right, but at one point, Grise goes backstage and the musicians play center stage.

to observer, to oppressor, to Duany's alter ego. In *La Mujer Invisible*, Millán is also the author/performer, and the object and subject of the performance. She is on stage as the lead singer of a rock band, thus in the company of the musicians and back-up singer. On occasion, the singers react to the story or briefly impersonate different characters or voices in order to assist the storytelling.

In *The Panza Monologues*, Grise is alone on stage, however, her performance is not strictly her personal story. Instead, it is a collective autobiography that weaves experiences from Grise's life with personal stories from members of her community. As Sarah Myers explains, collective autobiography:

can denote a group with a common purpose for sharing personal narratives together at once (in a performance, anthology, etc.) and who, in effect, 'reconstitute' this group ... Second, collective autobiography can refer to the ways that an individual performs herself as an amalgamation or collection of many different people's influences, ideas, and identities challenging the notion of a singular self altogether. (19)

In *The Panza Monologues*, Grise's body lends itself to the voice and memories of members of her community, and at the same time represents the multilayered, multiracial, multicultural self. As a result, these three performances expand the genre of solo autobiographical Latina performance.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this dissertation I rely on close reading of performances in order to investigate how these gordas use their explicit bodies on stage to disrupt dominant narratives of both the fat and the Latina body. Performance analysis as a methodology focuses on actions,

gestures, sound, voice, movement, and words. Thus, my dissertation specifically focuses on the embodiment of gorda subjectivities as fat women of color and understands their performances as a means by which they reclaim their agency in representation.

Even though I saw *La Mujer Invisible* and a version of *The Panza Monologues* live, due to the ephemeral nature of performance, my analysis is based on video recordings of all three performances. I examine *Cabaret Unkempt*'s recording of the December 2007 performance at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts as part of the National Performance Network (NPN) Annual Conference, courtesy of Elizabeth Doud.<sup>39</sup> My analysis of *La Mujer Invisible* is based on a video recording I commissioned of its March 6, 2012 presentation at the patio of Sala Beckett, a performance venue in Puerto Rico. Lastly, I looked to *The Panza Monologues* DVD of its performance at the Casa de La Raza in Los Angeles in 2009 in order to examine this work, courtesy of Virginia Grise.

Even though I have copies of all three scripts, when specifically looking at the text uttered by the performers I utilize my own transcription from the recordings as a way to stay true to the live nature of performance. Only *The Panza Monologues* has been published; all the scripts were given to me courtesy of the artists. All translations of the text that was originally in Spanish are mine, unless otherwise noted. Also, in order to write the artist biographies and production histories presented in every chapter, I relied mostly on online research, press releases, and reviews. I interviewed Elizabeth Doud<sup>40</sup>,

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<sup>39</sup> As described in their mission statement, the non-profit National Performance Network “is a group of diverse cultural organizers, including artists, working to create meaningful partnerships and to provide leadership that enables the practice and public experience of the arts in the United States.” It commissions new work, offers residencies, and other cultural projects. Their headquarters are in New Orleans where every year they hold a national conference. Artists who received the Creative Fund Grant present the work they created at this conference. For more information go to: [www.npnweb.org](http://www.npnweb.org).

<sup>40</sup> Doud, a longtime friend and artistic partner of Duany accompanied her in the conceptualization of the piece, and later joined as performer and collaborator.

Virginia Grise<sup>41</sup> and Nancy Millán in person, and also corresponded with them via e-mail or Facebook.

## VI. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Each chapter of this dissertation is devoted to one gorda performance. As discussed in this introduction, these gorda performers represent works by three different Latina/o ethnic groups. They are all autobiographical performances, where the explicit body of the performer functions as subject, text, and stage. I begin each chapter with a detailed description of one moment of the performance, then move on to present my argument. Following this, I turn to a brief artistic biography of the artist and the performance's production history in order to explain the dramaturgical influences that helped in the conceptualization and development of each performance. In doing so, I also meet my goal of documenting these performances. Then I continue with each chapter's thematic topics wherein I offer in-depth close readings of moments from the play as evidence of my claims.

In Chapter Two, "The Power Inside of Us: Collective Memory and the Reshaping of the Boundaries of the National Body in *The Panza Monologues*" I investigate how language and translation are used as a symbol of biculturalism and belonging. I also analyze Grise's role as stand-in for community and an articulation of a Brown collective memory. Finally I move on to demonstrate how *The Panza Monologues* understands thinness as a disciplinary discourse and how the performance explores the intersectionality of fatness and citizenship as an indictment of structural political and economic problems, rather than an individual or cultural pathology.

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<sup>41</sup> I reached out to Irma Mayorga multiple times for an interview, but it was not possible.

In Chapter Three, “Such a Pretty Face: Performing Fatness, Blackness, and Latinidad in Jennylin Duany’s *Cabaret Unkempt*” I situate Duany’s gorda performance as part of a diasporic Black Feminist genealogy. Then, I demonstrate how, through embodying the diva, Duany reveals the humanity inherent in her Black fat body. Additionally, I discuss how she uses dance as the platform through which the gorda can claim her queer desire as well as her virtuosity. Last, I illustrate how, by celebrating the big arms that she once loathed, Duany invites the audience to appreciate them, and see her as she now can see herself, as a human—complete, lovable, and desirable.

I move on to Chapter Four “All High and Mighty: Performing Visibility in Nancy Millán’s *La Mujer Invisible*” where I explore how Millán embodies the diva in all her vocal virtuosity to create a space of exchange with her audience. Then, I look at how she re-appropriates the myth of Medusa reclaiming the destructive power of her gaze as a way to talk back and assertively respond to stigmatization, petrifying those who look at her with fear. I also investigate how she further uses Medusa and her snake-like hair as a metaphor for Blackness in order to illustrate the relationship between the stigmatization of fatness and Blackness, both markers of socially unacceptable unruly excess. Lastly, I analyze how, through her music, songs, and performance, Millán creates audiotopias or utopic moments of aural encounter between her and her audience. These moments have the potential to influence the audience, allowing them to more fully understand the gorda. Finally in Chapter Five, “The Queerness of Fat Positive Communities,” I explore the role of queer communities in creating spaces for Fat liberation and positive embodiment. As an example of this I describe my experience at the night of performances by queer Fat solo performers and the presentation *Fat: The Play* last February in Austin. I also consider in my conclusion how queer people—particularly gender queer people— might use fat as a marker of social resistance.



## Chapter 2: The Power Inside of Us: Collective Memory and the Reshaping of the Boundaries of the National Body in *The Panza Monologues*

A fat Brown woman is on stage, getting her groove on. She is dancing alone to the irresistible rhythm of funk music<sup>42</sup> played live by *Los Flacos* quartet.<sup>43</sup> She is dressed in black: a tight shirt that leaves her round arms naked and delineates the rolls of her belly. Her bell-bottom yoga pants caress her heavyweight thighs and round, plump butt as they sway to the music. *Vicki*, Virginia Grise's stage persona, is bouncing in sync with the twangy sound of the bass, her arms flexing upwards. Her whole body swings from side to side, marking the rhythm with a little shoulder and hip pop. The guitar and the clapping of hands and feet from *Los Flacos* complement the bass' repeatable phrase; the music is percussive, relaxed, and sexy.

*Vicki* has her back to the audience, most of them Latina/os,<sup>44</sup> and is facing the big Mexicana/Chicana traditional domestic altar that sits upstage center. The altar is full of

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<sup>42</sup> Funk is an African American music genre with other Afro-diasporic influences. One of its particularities is that it is syncopated and danceable, and that the string instruments, such as the guitar and bass, are used in a percussive style.

<sup>43</sup> *Los Flacos* (The Really Thin Ones) quartet was not part of the original *The Panza Monologues* performances that instead used recorded music (Mayorga, "From Cuentos to DVD" 31). Grise and Mayorga invited Alejandro Hernández Gutierrez to write original music for the show's final performance, which was recorded in front of a live audience. The performance took place at Plaza de La Raza's Margo Albert Theatre in East Los Angeles on August 2, 2008.

<sup>44</sup> In *The Panza Monologues*' second edition, Mayorga explains that originally they were going to record the performance in San Antonio, but they had to find a new venue last minute since their original spaced was double-booked. Despite all their efforts, they could not find another suitable venue in San Antonio. However, Grise, who was living in Los Angeles at the time and working at Plaza de La Raza's Youth Theatre Project, was offered their support. They state that in East L.A. they could gather an audience "populated by *gente* ('people')," in other words, a Latina/Chicana audience (Mayorga, "From Cuentos to DVD" 33). In the DVD, we see the audience waiting in line before the show, and in their seats. From their appearance and their fast reactions to comments and jokes in Spanish, as well as cultural references in the performance, one can assume that they are the Latina/Chicana audience Grise and Mayorga were seeking.

objects like an image of the Virgen de Guadalupe,<sup>45</sup> an assortment of crepé, silk and fresh flowers, a spiritual bath in a plastic bottle, handmade clay cookware, black and white pictures of loved ones, a Texas flag, books by feminist writers of color like Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, a cardboard moon, amulets, colorful cut-paper decorations, and all sorts of mementos (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 39). Still dancing, *Vicki* swiftly spins around to face front, and the audience gives her an encouraging cheer.

This is the opening to the last scene of *The Panza Monologues*;<sup>46</sup> and moving from the previous participatory scene to this groovy music has made for an enthusiastic audience. In white letters over a blue background, the scene's title is projected on the screen behind the altar. The music lowers, and *Vicki* shouts the title: “Panza Girl Manifesto!” Then, in a firm tone she proclaims, gesturing with her right arm extended upwards: “*Uno: ¡Sin frijol ni tortilla, no hay revolución!*” (“One: Without tortillas and beans there is no revolution!”)<sup>47</sup> The audience claps and shouts in approval, the music grows louder.

A fat Brown woman is on stage, getting her groove on. She is dancing alone to the irresistible rhythm of funk music<sup>48</sup> played live by *Los Flacos* quartet.<sup>49</sup> She is dressed

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<sup>45</sup> La Virgen de Guadalupe or Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Brown virgin, patron saint of Mexico, has been reinterpreted as a Chicana feminist icon.

<sup>46</sup> Panza will be defined in more detail later; in general terms, it is Spanish for belly.

<sup>47</sup> All translations are mine unless embedded in a citation with parentheses, or noted otherwise. I only italicize Spanish words when they appear for the first time in the chapter.

<sup>48</sup> Funk is an African American music genre with other Afro-diasporic influences. One of its particularities is that it is syncopated and danceable, and that the string instruments, such as the guitar and bass, are used in a percussive style.

<sup>49</sup> Los Flacos (The Really Thin Ones) quartet was not part of the original *The Panza Monologues* performances that instead used recorded music (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 31). Grise and Mayorga invited Alejandro Hernández Gutierrez to write original music for the show’s final performance,

in black: a tight shirt that leaves her round arms naked and delineates the rolls of her belly. Her bell-bottom yoga pants caress her heavyweight thighs and round, plump butt as they sway to the music. *Vicki*, Virginia Grise's stage persona, is bouncing in sync with the twangy sound of the bass, her arms flexing upwards. Her whole body swings from side to side, marking the rhythm with a little shoulder and hip pop. The guitar and the clapping of hands and feet from Los Flacos complement the bass' repeatable phrase; the music is percussive, relaxed, and sexy.

*Vicki* has her back to the audience, most of them Latina/os,<sup>50</sup> and is facing the big Mexicana/Chicana traditional domestic altar that sits upstage center. The altar is full of objects like an image of the Virgen de Guadalupe,<sup>51</sup> an assortment of crepé, silk and fresh flowers, a spiritual bath in a plastic bottle, handmade clay cookware, black and white pictures of loved ones, a Texas flag, books by feminist writers of color like Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, a cardboard moon, amulets, colorful cut-paper decorations, and all sorts of mementos (Mayorga, "From Cuentos to DVD" 39). Still dancing, *Vicki* swiftly spins around to face front, and the audience gives her an encouraging cheer.

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which was recorded in front of a live audience. The performance took place at Plaza de La Raza's Margo Albert Theatre in East Los Angeles on August 2, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> In *The Panza Monologues*' second edition, Mayorga explains that originally they were going to record the performance in San Antonio, but they had to find a new venue last minute since their original space was double-booked. Despite all their efforts, they could not find another suitable venue in San Antonio. However, Grise, who was living in Los Angeles at the time and working at Plaza de La Raza's Youth Theatre Project, was offered their support. They state that in East L.A. they could gather an audience "populated by *gente* ('people')," in other words, a Latina/Chicana audience (Mayorga, "From Cuentos to DVD" 33). In the DVD, we see the audience waiting in line before the show, and in their seats. From their appearance and their fast reactions to comments and jokes in Spanish, as well as cultural references in the performance, one can assume that they are the Latina/Chicana audience Grise and Mayorga were seeking.

<sup>51</sup> La Virgen de Guadalupe or Our Lady of Guadalupe or the Brown virgin, patron saint of Mexico, has been reinterpreted as a Chicana feminist icon.

This is the opening to the last scene of *The Panza Monologues*;<sup>52</sup> and moving from the previous participatory scene to this groovy music has made for an enthusiastic audience. In white letters over a blue background, the scene's title is projected on the screen behind the altar. The music lowers, and *Vicki* shouts the title: “Panza Girl Manifesto!” Then, in a firm tone she proclaims, gesturing with her right arm extended upwards: “*Uno: ¡Sin frijol ni tortilla, no hay revolución!*” (“One: Without tortillas and beans there is no revolution!”)<sup>53</sup> The audience claps and shouts in approval, the music grows louder.



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<sup>52</sup> Panza will be defined in more detail later; in general terms, it is Spanish for belly.

<sup>53</sup> All translations are mine unless embedded in a citation with parentheses, or noted otherwise. I only italicize Spanish words when they appear for the first time in the chapter.

Figure 9: Virginia Grise performing the last scene or monologue of *The Panza Monologues*. Photo retrieved from [www.msmagazine.com](http://www.msmagazine.com).

Without pausing, *Vicki* continues dancing around the stage while enumerating the ten principles of her manifesto. She complements her dance with funky street style moves, losing herself in the enjoyment of the movement. Every few beats, she slows down, the music lowers, and she shares one of the principles: “*Cuatro* (‘Four’): Don’t let your *panocha* (‘vagina’) rule your life, it don’t know shit! Let your panza be your guide!”—and then goes back to her dance— “Seven: We may be in Los Angeles, but San Antonio still is the panza capital of the world! Home of Chicana heavyweights!” After declaring each principle, she does a bicep curl with both arms, and the audience cheers. At one point, *Vicki* grabs her belly with both hands and adds in a zesty voice, “*Ocho* (‘Eight’): You gots to loooooove the panza.”

*Vicki* goes to the altar, climbs the step towards it, and a spotlight closes in on her as she turns around, still dancing. In a lower and heartfelt voice she says, “Nine: You gots to love yourself.” Now she steps on the altar’s first level, bending over the second level and performing a “booty dance” for the audience, who claps. She turns around once more and sits, leaning forward to deliver the last principle in a reassuring manner: “*Diez* (‘Ten’): When everything else fails, and you are feeling really low, just remember...” *Vicki* pauses for a second, pulls up her shirt and lowers her pants’ waistband to expose her big belly. She slaps it with her hand, before raising her fist clenched as she proudly declares: “Power to the panza!”

In Spanish, panza refers to the abdomen and could be translated as belly, gut, or stomach. In colloquial language it is also used to imply one's fat roll or a woman's womb. This last use highlights the gendered nature of fat stigmatization, as the term relates to excess weight and body fat as well as the female reproductive system. In Virginia Grise's and Irma Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues* the panza is conceptualized as the core of the physical, emotional and spiritual well-being of their San Antonio community of Chicana women.<sup>54</sup>

In this chapter, I illustrate how through storytelling based on personal experiences and memories, *The Panza Monologues* gives voice and visibility to Tejana/Chicana subjectivities that are rarely heard outside of spaces of intimacy. I argue that, by presenting *Vicki*, Grise's persona, as narrator and translator between cultures, *The Panza Monologues* articulates collective memory in order to reveal the political dimensions behind the constructions of fatness and its relationship to race, gender, and class—particularly as it relates to Chicanas. Furthermore, by celebrating and re-appropriating the panza as valuable, this performance resists essentialist ideas of fatness as inherently undesirable. I also contend that, by highlighting particularities of Chicana culture, Grise and Mayorga use performance as a platform for cultural citizenship.

Some of the questions I explore in this chapter are: how does *The Panza Monologues* engage in dialogue with Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*? How does it

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<sup>54</sup> In the *The Panza Monologues*' second edition the authors explicitly identify themselves as Chicana feminists (xix), and Tejana/Chicana artists (xvi). They also use Chicana and Tejana interchangeably to refer to themselves, and describe their contributors and colleagues as Texas Mexican, *mexicanas*, Texas American (4) and Mexican American. Grise and Mayorga also situate themselves as part of the Latina/o communities (xix), and their work as part of the history of Latina/o theatre (xxx).

depart from it? What are other dramaturgical influences? How does it redefine and articulate collective memory? What stereotypes related to fat bodies of color does it challenge and how does it challenge them? How does it illustrate the political implications of the construction of fatness as non-white, and un-American? How does it engage with theories and practices of feminists of color?<sup>55</sup>

In the section titled “Two Chicana Feminist Artists/Activists and Their Collaboration *Herstory*,” I offer a brief background of the production, as well as Grise and Mayorga’s artistic collaborations, in order to illustrate how *The Panza Monologues* is part of a larger history of social justice activism in San Antonio’s Chicana/o communities and the larger communities of color in Texas. Following this section, I offer a brief synopsis of the play. In the next section, “From Chocha to Panza: Feminisms of Color, Visibility and Embodiment,” I present an overview of the play’s different dramaturgical influences and its methodology. Also, in this section I show how Grise and Mayorga are not outsiders documenting the experience of a community, but members of that same community of Chicana women. Their project is an effort to bring visibility to an otherwise invisibilized community, and the conversations, concerns, and knowledge this group shares. In the first and third section of this chapter I mostly rely on the author’s

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<sup>55</sup> This term acknowledges the distinctive feminist approaches of Black, Latina/Chicana, Asian, and Indigenous women; I am not collapsing these distinctions into one concept, but instead I’m referring to women of color who identify and work as feminists. For further explanation go to the section titled, “Who is Latina? What can We Learn from Gordas?” in Chapter One.

own accounts, documented in the introduction of the play's published first edition and in the first chapter of the play's second edition.

In the following two sections, I undertake an analysis of the DVD recording of the performance at Plaza de La Raza's Margo Albert Theatre in East Los Angeles. In these sections, all quoted text is from my own transcription of this recording, unless otherwise noted. The section "*Chicanidad, The Wild Tongue, and Collective Memory*" explains how *The Panza Monologues* uses language and cultural symbols to establish a dialogue between the play and *The Vagina Monologues*, while at the same time distancing itself from Ensler's work. In this way, it presents itself not as an adaptation or derivative of the latter, but part of a Chicana/feminist intervention that interrogates how race, class, and gender intersect with the politics and oppressions played out on the female body in the U.S. Lastly, it shows how Grise stands in as a representative for the community, functioning as repository as well as an articulator of collective memory. The section "Performing Cultural Citizenship and Activism" describes how *The Panza Monologues* resists and subverts stereotypes of fatness that devalue bodies of color and mark them as always foreign and un-American. By articulating a sense of belonging through connections with Chicana cultural heritage, *The Panza Monologues* presents a counter-discourse, raising consciousness about the implications of these stereotypes and advocating for collective action.

## TWO CHICANA FEMINIST ARTISTS/ACTIVISTS AND THEIR COLLABORATION HERSTORY

*The Panza Monologues* was written by multidisciplinary artists Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga, and is based on personal stories of a group of Mexican and Chicana activists from San Antonio, Texas. Grise and Mayorga met in 2002 when both were working as community organizers at the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center (a.k.a. the Esperanza).<sup>56</sup> Located in the heart of San Antonio and serving the Mexican, Chicana/o, Latina/o and LGBTQ communities, the Esperanza was founded on Chicana and Queer feminist principles which acknowledge and embrace differences both within and between communities in order to form alliances, and take collective action to achieve social change.

In many ways, the Esperanza shaped the creation and reception of *The Panza Monologues* as a space where social justice and the arts go hand in hand. In her extensive study of the Esperanza's twenty-five year history, communications scholar Sara De Turks argues that this progressive activist organization's approach to social justice is unique because of its wide scope and unconventional tactics. "Its multi-issue approach to social justice and cultural transformation is accomplished through *mestiza* consciousness, the celebration of cultural expression through arts programming, and the forging of alliances through interpersonal, group and public communication"(9). In other words, the

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<sup>56</sup> The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is a non-profit organization that "promotes networking of social, economic, environmental justice and community-based arts organizations... by providing places for grassroots activists to meet and work together — [in addition to] the physical space, network meetings, and collective projects [it also] provides individualized assistance and group workshops on grant writing, board and membership development, fundraising, facilitation and leadership, and alliance building. The Esperanza also acts as fiscal sponsor for groups who have not yet attained non-profit status." To learn more, visit <http://esperanzacenter.org/>.

Esperanza is not focused on one or two issues that affect its community, but it is dedicated to the struggle against multiple oppressions, and it values the arts as a tool for education, critical thinking, and social change. Furthermore, it provides a physical space for gathering and convergence of activists, artists, and other allies. As a result, through their work with the organization, Mayorga and Grise were part of a large network of cultural workers and leaders dedicated to social justice.

Esperanza is a women-led and women-centered organization with an emphasis on gender equality. Grise, Mayorga, and the other community organizers employed there at the time were overworked, and this took a toll on their health. Mayorga explained that “Unfortunately, [while] we were working hard for others, we were very unhealthy for ourselves—the long hours prohibited us from things like going to the gym, and on top of that we worked in a neighborhood that was infested with fast food because it wasn’t part of what we called the richer north part of our city” (qtd. in [www.msmagazine.com](http://www.msmagazine.com)). What Mayorga describes is actually a common experience for women who work as community organizers. Chicana/o Studies scholar Mary S. Pardo explains in her book *Mexican American Women Activists* that women often report community organizing to be labor-intensive work, especially when resources are limited (3). An organizer’s role is to look out for the political and social well-being of the community or communities they serve, and usually there is no clear division between their activist work and their personal and family life (Pardo 4). Furthermore, I would add that because they work and often live in communities that suffer the consequences of marginalization, the organizers also suffer

from limited access to affordable and nutritious food as well as affordable and safe spaces for physical activity.

As a survival and stress management strategy, the Esperanza women shared their life stories, histories, and concerns in *pláticas* or informal conversations (Grise and Mayorga, “Power to the Panza” 45). This group of women came from different backgrounds, age groups, sexual identities, and levels of education; they shared a commitment to consciousness-raising, alliance building, and cultural and political transformation for their hometown of San Antonio. During a talk at the University of Texas in Austin, Grise explained: “We really believed this was our city, our *tierra* (“land”), our home, and that we were going to take responsibility for how this city was going to function ... and while we were doing that work together our panzas got bigger” (“Fridays@2”).

Eventually, the women noticed how their stories, in one way or another, were related to their bodies. Most of them had gained weight during their tenure at the Esperanza. They were aware it was important to cultivate a positive attitude towards their bodies, but also were engaged in discussions of how capitalism affects women’s bodies (Grise “Fridays@2”). As Mayorga elaborates:

Drawing attention to our weight quite naturally led to a focus on our mid-sections—the thickest part of many of us. Our *panzas*. The word *panza* soon came to the fore in our analysis and jibes and began to take on a life of its own in these conversations. (11)

Mayorga started keeping a record of the “panza anecdotes,” stories and words of wisdom from her co-workers about their panzas and bodies. Grise’s witty stories and comments

and jokes stood out in particular, due to her sense of humor and her abilities as a storyteller (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 13).

*The Panza Monologues*’ title was the result of Grise’s humor and wit. When Eve Ensler’s renowned play *The Vagina Monologues*<sup>57</sup> was touring San Antonio, a co-worker asked Grise if she was going to see the show. Grise, who had gained a significant amount of weight since she moved back to San Antonio, responded: “I don’t have to pay \$40 to see *The Vagina Monologues* ‘cause I have my own panza monologues right here!” (qtd in [www.msmagazine.com](http://www.msmagazine.com)). Grise then lifted her shirt and patted her belly in a tongue-and-cheek gesture that she often did when discussing body related issues (Grise “Interview”).

Friends and colleagues who considered Grise and Mayorga talented artists had suggested they should do a project together (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 12). Grise.<sup>58</sup> Before working at the Esperanza, Grise had completed her B.A. in History and Spanish with a Language Education Certificate, and had worked as a middle school teacher.<sup>59</sup> She had theatre experience, and while living in Austin she studied poetry with

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<sup>57</sup>Originally a solo-show, *The Vagina Monologues* is based on hundreds of interviews Ensler conducted with women of different ages, races, ethnicities, social classes, and national origins, and their experiences with their vaginas. After its off-Broadway beginnings, the play became a cultural and international phenomenon, won an Obie Award, was translated into 48 languages, recorded by HBO, performed – mostly in diverse ensembles – by celebrities like Whoopi Goldberg, Melissa Lou Etheridge, Rosie Pérez, and Jane Fonda. It has been presented and performed by women actors and non-actors all around the world. Most importantly, it has generated V-Day, both a campaign and “a non-profit corporation [that] distributes funds to grassroots, national and international organizations and programs that work to stop violence against women and girls.” (<http://www.vday.org/about>).

<sup>58</sup> In the scene titled “International Panza,” Grise explains she is the daughter of a Chinese-Mexican mother and a white American father. She was born in Georgia, but moved to San Antonio when she was a toddler.

<sup>59</sup> Grise currently has an M.F.A. in Writing for Performance from the California Institute of the Arts, and she lives in New York where she continues working as a playwright. She also travels the country facilitating writing and performance workshops, as well as presenting talks. For more information go to: [www.virginiagrise.com](http://www.virginiagrise.com).

Raúl Salinas and writing with Sharon Bridgforth, and was a member of the Austin Project.<sup>60</sup> Mayorga,<sup>61</sup> an artist/scholar, had a B.A. in theatre, an M.F.A. in design, and was completing her Ph.D. in Drama and the Humanities.<sup>62</sup> She also had training and experience as a playwright, dramaturge, and director. Mayorga showed Grise the “panza anecdotes” she had been collecting, and urged the performer to keep a journal of her own panza anecdotes (Grise “Interview”).

Inspired by the traditions of performance ethnography and documentary theatre, the artists invited other women to collaborate and share their panza stories. They sent emails and letters to other Tejana/Chicana activists, requesting contributions (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 15). Some of the questions they asked to start the conversation were:

How do you feel about your panza? How does your panza feel about you? How does your *familia* (“family”), your partner, your *cultura* (“culture”) feel about your panza? When do you control your panza? And why? When does your panza control you? Why? From your words, and other sources of inspiration, we will be developing our performance piece. We will treat your story with respect and honor if you give it to us, we offer you many thanks in advance.” (Grise and Mayorga, “Power to the Panza”)

Many women responded by email, others who did not feel so confident about their writing were interviewed in person (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 15). Mayorga

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<sup>60</sup> The Austin Project (tAP), created in 2002 by Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, “provides a space for women of color and their allies to write and perform in a jazz aesthetic as a strategy for social change (Jones et al viii). For more, read *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia, and the Austin Project*. Eds: Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Lisa L. Moore, and Sharon Bridgforth.

<sup>61</sup> Mayorga describes herself on the back cover of *The Panza Monologues* second edition as “Tejana, San Antonio-native and Army brat.”

<sup>62</sup> Irma Mayorga is currently Assistant Professor of Theatre at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire.

would also give Grise prompts to work on a specific story (Grise “Interview”). Based on all this material, and on work that surfaced during rehearsals, the two artists began devising a performance.<sup>63</sup>

As Mayorga explains at length in “*The Panza Monologues: From Cuentos to DVD*,” she did the dramaturgical work of editing, choosing, and weaving the stories together (3). Even though all the stories their collaborators shared were performed at some point during the development of the performance, only a few remained in the final version. “Hunger for Justice” was shaped after an interview Grise conducted with activist Petra A. Mata (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 16). Lawyer and former Esperanza staff member María R. Salazar wrote “Inside the Panza,” “Sucking It In,” “Panza to Panza” and “Praying” (16). Journalist and former Esperanza staff member Bárbara Renaud-González submitted “Political Panza.”<sup>64</sup> Grise’s own stories “From Chacha to Panza” and “International Panza” were also part of the final play.<sup>65</sup> Mayorga, who also directed the play and designed the set, would combine two or more stories to create composite monologues, and also wrote new scenes (i.e. “Prologue” and “Historia”) after working with Grise during rehearsal (Grise).

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<sup>63</sup> For a detailed description of the project, its background and production history read “*The Panza Monologues: From Cuentos to DVD*” in *The Panza Monologues*’ Second Edition.

<sup>64</sup> While it is not clearly stated in the introduction that “Political Panza” is Renaud-González’s story, the authors do mention that one of the stories that remained in the book from the originals is hers. Also, Mayorga refers to her as “*flaca*” (“thin”) (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 12), which is the same way the narrator of this story describes herself.

<sup>65</sup> In “From Chacha to Panza” Grise refers to herself as “Virginia” and “La Vicki,” and in “International Panza,” she says her real name is Virginia May. Thus, this suggests that these are Grise’s stories.

In August 2003, Grise and Mayorga presented the first staged reading at the Esperanza to the Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social-MALCS (“Women Active in Letters and Social Change”) Summer Research Institute.<sup>66</sup> They presented other staged readings and abbreviated versions the following year at Northwest Vista College, the University of Texas in San Antonio, and at Theatre in My Basement/SW Annex’s *¡Teatro Caliente!* (“Hot Theatre!”) Festival in Phoenix (Grise and Mayorga, *The Panza Monologues* 104-105). *The Panza Monologues* was presented as a full production for the first time at the Tillery Street Theatre in Austin in November 2004. The Texas state-wide queer people of color activist organization *allgo*, through its Multi-Tiered Cultural Arts Program, produced it.<sup>67</sup>

*The Panza Monologues* has been performed in many different iterations. Grise and Mayorga have presented full productions, selected readings and *Panza Pláticas*, or performative talks, numerous times in Texas, and in other U.S. cities like Santa Ana, CA.; San Juan, PR; and Chicago, IL. These presentations have taken place in all kinds of venues: college classrooms, conference rooms, hotels, cultural centers, and small theaters. In 2008 it was performed at the Plaza de La Raza in Los Angeles, CA where it was recorded live, in order to produce a DVD.<sup>68</sup> Their efforts are reminiscent of the

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<sup>66</sup> MALCS is a non-profit organization that supports the work of “Chicana, Latina, Afro-Latina, Native American and Indigenous activists and scholars in higher education and community leadership.” For more information, visit [www.malcs.org](http://www.malcs.org).

<sup>67</sup> Based in Austin and founded in 1985, *allgo* (originally Austin Latino/Latina Lesbian, Gay Organization) is a Texas-wide queer people of color organization dedicated to social justice through educational, wellness, arts, and civic action programs. For more information go to: [www.allgo.org](http://www.allgo.org).

<sup>68</sup> For more information about the artists, the play and the DVD, which is available for sale, go to [www.thepanzamonologues.com](http://www.thepanzamonologues.com).

words of El Teatro Campesino’s director Luis Valdez, “If the Raza<sup>69</sup> won’t come to the theatre, then the theatre must go to the Raza” (10).

Other artists have produced and performed *The Panza Monologues* with a multiple actress cast. For example, the feminist Chicana college student organization *Conciencia Feminil* at California State University performed it this way in 2011. More recently, in 2015, Austin’s Latino theatre group Teatro Vivo<sup>70</sup> presented it with three performers. There have also been multiple independently organized *Panza Parties* — from intimate cocktail parties, to dinner-extravaganzas, to fundraisers — where an individual or an organization invites friends for a viewing of the DVD, followed by an informal discussion of the performance and the issues it raises, and a celebration of the “power of the panza.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> *Raza* (“race”) refers to the Chicana/o people, and comes from the Chicana/o civil rights movement..

<sup>70</sup> Teatro Vivo was founded in 2000 in Austin TX, and it is dedicated to the production of bilingual plays that address social issues. For more information go to: [www.teatrovivoatx.wordpress.com](http://www.teatrovivoatx.wordpress.com).

<sup>71</sup> For more about the different formats go to [www.panzamonologues.com](http://www.panzamonologues.com) or read the fourth chapter of *The Panza Monologues* second edition, titled “A DIY Production Manual.”

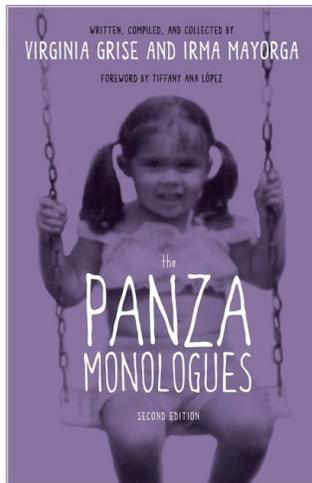


Figure 10: Cover of *The Panza Monologues* Second Edition. Retrieved from [www.panzamonologues.com](http://www.panzamonologues.com).

It is remarkable how well documented *The Panza Monologues* is, and that it continues to have a life as it is, read and viewed in college classes, living rooms and cultural centers.<sup>72</sup> This is in big part due to Mayorga's efforts as the producer (Mayorga,

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<sup>72</sup> When I started this research, the only scholarly work that documented and analyzed Grise's and Mayorga's play was Rebecca Stone Thornberry's "Intersections: Race, Class, and Size in *The Panza Monologues* and *Yellowman*," the fourth chapter in her dissertation *Fat Chance: Images Of Women Of Size In The American Theatre* (2008). Since then, to the best of my knowledge, the only other scholarly works are T. Jackie Cuevas' article "'Power to the Panza': Stomaching Oppression in Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues*" cited here (see bibliography), and Patricia Herrera's "Power to the Panza!: Feminist Body Politics in *The Panza Monologues* (Video Performance Review)" published in *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas* 10:2 (2011). There are also a number of non-scholarly play reviews and press releases available online.

“From Cuentos to DVD” 3). In this role, she produced the play in different locations including academic conferences, adapted it as a plática, recorded a live performance and made it available for sale as a DVD, maintained a vibrant web page, and promoted the idea of the *Panza Parties*. In terms of the printed text—given the fact that the publication of contemporary plays in general is uncommon, and that plays by women of color, if published, are usually part of an anthology—it is extraordinary that *The Panza Monologues* is already in its second edition. The script, with an introduction by the artists, was first published in 2004 under the queer feminist independent publisher Evelyn Street Press in conjunction with *aligo*. In 2014, the University of Texas Press published a second extended edition. Besides a foreword by Tiffany Ana López, a new introduction, and the script, this extended edition consists of a detailed production history, pedagogical guide with creative exercises and discussion questions, and dramaturgical material. Most notably, it also includes a practical DIY production manual of sorts for those who want to produce it in any of its possible formats. Thus, it is an invitation to action, analysis, and discussion.

#### ***THE PANZA MONOLOGUES: A SYNOPSIS***

The *Panza Monologues* is a 60-minute solo performance consisting of fifteen scenes, which the authors refer to as *cuentos* or stories. The scenery consists of a domestic altar set center stage and a projection screen behind it. At the beginning of each scene, its title appears on the screen. Music also marks transitions and serves as background or soundtrack for the scenes. In the recorded DVD version analyzed for this

chapter, the music was played live and the musicians were positioned stage left. Lights may dim between scenes but there is no blackout until the end, so the audience can always see the performer as she transitions from scene to scene. Costumes and props are located next to or in the altar, and the performer retrieves them from there as needed. The performer (Grise) is barefoot and dressed in a tight-fitting black top and yoga pants. In some scenes she uses simple costume pieces (glasses, hat, shoes) to distinguish some of the characters she performs from each other. In other scenes Grise uses simple props to help tell her story (stool, ironing board, pillow, a U.S. flag, an egg, a chair, etc.).

*Vicki*, Grise's persona, is the narrator and in most instances she directly addresses the audience and in some, asks for their participation. Except for one, all stories are narrated in the first person. In most scenes it is very clear that the story is telling is Grise's, since she refers to herself as Vicki. In others, as I will point out, it is obviously not her, because of the changes she makes to her costume, voice, and body language. Nevertheless, there are a few stories where it is not clear if *Vicki* is recounting her own experience or is serving as a medium for someone else's.

The first scene is titled "Prologue" and in it *Vicki* establishes the relationship and differences between *The Panza Monologues* and *The Vagina Monologues*. As upbeat Latin jazz music plays in the background, she explains why panza stories are relevant to the women in her community, as they relate to their own well-being and that of the community. Lastly, she establishes her position as repository and storyteller of her homegirls' memories. In the second cuento, "*Historia*" or Histories, *Vicki* tells a fictitious Chicana origin myth. In it the goddesses created panzas "large and round," "to keep me

warm,” “[as] my body’s own drum,” and determined that the moon would rule over women. This myth also defines panza as an important part of the body since it holds the ovaries, the uterus, and the stomach. At the end, *Vicki* proclaims long life to the *lonjas* or love handles, the *chichis* or boobs, and the panza. Then she calls: “¡Qué vivan las panzas!” (“Long live the panzas!”), and the audience responds, “¡Qué vivan!” (“Long live!”)

The next tender cuento, “Inside the Panza,” relates a childhood memory. A sweet, soft guitar melody plays in the background. *Vicki* sits stage left on a folding chair, with her feet turned inward and her eyes wide open. She gives the audience a naïve look while swinging her torso forwards and backwards. This physicality and her sweet toned voice suggest that *Vicki* is not only impersonating a child, but also telling someone else’s story (María Salazar’s). The character relates with amazement how, when she was a girl and she would lay her head on her parents’ panzas and listen to the sound of their insides, she thought there was a world inside them. The “girl” then picks up the tin can telephone Grise had previously placed on the floor. She places one can on her ear and the other on her belly, as if trying to hear her gut. She recounts how she imagined little people lived in that world inside her, and decided that meant panzas were special. At the end of the story she hears her own stomach making a sound and concludes, “from that day on, I knew the panza was the most important part of the body, because people lived inside the panza, including me!”



Figure 11: In “Inside the Panza,” the narrator invites the audience to listen to the “little people” and the world that exists inside her panza. Retrieved from [www.panzamonologues.com](http://www.panzamonologues.com).

In the humorous and campy “From Chacha<sup>73</sup> to Panza,” *Vicki* tells the audience that when she was younger and thin she used to wear *tacones* or high-heels. She states that these made her feel powerful. In this scene she does refer to herself as *Vicki*, so it seems this is Grise’s story. *Vicki* takes a pair of sexy red *tacones* out of a shopping bag she retrieved from the altar, puts them on and dramatizes how she would go out dancing and control who she danced with (unless she chose to dance alone). The music here is a simple background rhythm until she illustrates how she danced, when it turns into an

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<sup>73</sup> Chacha comes from *muchacha*, or young woman, it has different connotations and social meanings depending on context (girl, maid, vagina, queer dance club, slut). Here it refers to young Latina women who typically dress up in sexy clothing and use flashy jewelry and heavy make up for most occasions. They also frequent clubs and hang out with the cool, “bad” crowd, and are very self-confident about their sexual appeal. In other words, it does have the connotation of “slutty,” but from the point of view of the chacha, who sees this as her sexual agency and an asset.

upbeat *norteño* polka. *Vicki* continues, saying that now that she has gained a lot of weight, so have her feet, and wearing heels is not as easy. As a result, she feels she has lost her chacha power, and now her breasts have become the focus of others' attention. Frustrated, she says: "chichis just aren't as powerful as chocha. I don't know why? Who makes these rules?"

*Vicki* sits on the altar for the next cuento, "Hunger for Justice," as a voice-over of Grise as an older woman recalls her childhood growing up in a small town on the Mexican side of the border with Texas. The lights are dimmed and the band plays a nostalgic, soft melody. A series of black-and-white photographs from the first half of the 1900s depicting Mexican American families who lived in South Texas appear on the screen. The woman explains how even though at the time her family was very poor, they had a happy, harmonious life, and even though food was scarce, women were usually plump. She also compares those times with the pressures of life today.

After the narration ends the lights go up and *Vicki*, using the same older voice she used for the narration, impersonates the older woman. She has a scarf on her head, wears reading glasses, and hunches her back slightly, making her appear older. She retrieves an ironing board and iron from the altar and sets them stage right. Simultaneously, she begins to iron a blouse and address the audience. She tells a story of working at the Levi's factory in San Antonio until it closed suddenly, and how this affected her and her colleagues. After sharing this story, the woman stresses the importance of the panza as a vital part of the body, especially for women.

The next scene, “Sucking It In,” is a ludic scene that employs exaggeration, comedy, and the absurd physicality of slapstick. In it *Vicki* mimics the colossal challenge of putting on and buttoning skinny jeans. While she performs this sequence, moving through the entire stage and even jumping down into the audience, a voice-over narrates the stages of this process. The voice informs the audience that the final task of pulling up the jeans’ zipper was achieved with the help of “panza pliers”

In contrast, the next scene, “My Sister’s Panza,” is a melancholic story. The band plays a sad melody and a sweet voice sings an unintelligible song. First, *Vicki* stands in front of the altar holding a red book, as if she was reading the story from it. From the book, she pulls long strings of cutout paper in different shapes and color (e.g. a string of red hearts) that illustrate elements of the story. She then sits on a folding chair turned backwards, and shares how her sister was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes as a child. Then she recounts her sister’s love story; and how despite all her efforts she was always fat until she became thin as a result of heartbreak and depression.

In “Noticias” or News, a series of slides are projected onto the back screen which contain quotes from local news articles.<sup>74</sup> These quotes specifically present facts about the health conditions of Mexican Americans in the nation, Texas, and San Antonio. In this scene, *Vicki* sits on the altar as the lights dim. Only a soft spotlight shines on the small wooden *tarima* or platform in front of the altar. One of the female musicians,

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<sup>74</sup> If the play was performed outside of San Antonio or Texas it would also include “panza facts” from local newspapers about the place where it was performed.

dressed in a black dress and *zapateado*<sup>75</sup> shoes, steps on the small tarima as the projections start behind her. She begins dancing, striking her heels in a staccato, fast, syncopated rhythm typical of the zapateado of the *son jarocho*. As the audience reads the news headlines, the cadence of the dancer's zapateado evokes the clicking sound of a typewriter or a teleprompter working to deliver urgent news.

“Praying” is a gut-wrenching poem, narrated in the first person by a child, who witnesses her father beating her pregnant mother during a family car ride. *Vicki* is standing on the tarima during this scene. She reaches for a red pillow on the altar that she will use during the narration to simulate the blows to the mother's belly. Later she kneels on the pillow, as the child prays to God to make the father stop, terrified that if she talks to her father “we will all be dead.” The child continues praying, hoping both her mother and unborn brother will survive.

With the help of the music, which transitions into a Mexican waltz, the painful atmosphere of the previous cuento smoothly transforms into the romantic mood of “Panza to Panza.” *Vicki* puts on a black fedora and walks towards a chair previously set stage left. She moves and speaks with a masculine swagger, her voice deep and demeanor sticky-sweet. Evidently, *Vicki* is performing a woman different from herself, thus reminding us this is not just Grise's autobiographical performance, but the performance of the collective memory of the community of Tejana/Chicana women she represents. In

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<sup>75</sup> The *zapateado jarocho* is similar to jazz tap dancing, and Spanish flamenco, where the footwork serves as a percussion instrument of the music ensemble. Thus is not intended just as a dance or skill demonstration.

this sexy cuento, she describes with delight the feelings and sensations of embracing and being embraced by her girlfriend, and her panza, in bed.

“International Panza” narrates *Vicki*’s visit to Havana, Cuba, when she was identified as Mexican based on her phenotype. She shares the details of a conversation with a Cuban man who was confused by her peculiar Spanish accent, as it did not correspond to the Mexican accents with which he was familiar. With the help of two friends from Mexico, *Vicki* tries to explain to the man “what” she is. This leads the man to comment on her weight, stating that her size is evidence that she is Mexican American since obesity, according to him, is a consequence of capitalism. The cuento then shifts directions with the aid of the band playing an inviting Cuban *son montuno*,<sup>76</sup> as *Vicki* describes, then performs with the utmost admiration, a Cuban woman *Vicki* witnessed who was larger than her and was proudly showing off her big panza in public.

The following scene, “*El Vientre*” (“The Womb”) is another poem-cuento. Even though it starts with the same waltz as “Panza to Panza,” the song is sung a cappella making it somehow somber. *Vicki* sits on a chair center stage with her back to the audience. She opens her legs wide, and bends back, as if she was at an appointment with her OB/GYN and had just put her legs in the stirrups. *Vicki* enacts a woman reflecting, through poetry, on how she tried, without success, to provoke a natural abortion and had to resort to a medical one. Melancholic, she speaks to her unborn child and laments the decision she had to make.

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<sup>76</sup> Son Montuno is one of the sub-genres of *son cubano*, a fusion of Spanish and African musical roots. It is considered one of the most influential music styles of what would later become *salsa* music.

The music changes again to a fast upbeat rhythm in order to transition into “Political Panza,” where the main character is a thin woman. *Vicki* gets a black feather boa from the altar, and starts prancing around the stage, embodying this sassy middle-aged woman. The woman claims she is harassed by the other women for being too flaca or thin, and declares her right to talk about her panza too, even if she has no belly rolls. She stresses the importance of solidarity, and asserts that the state of the people’s panza is the indicator of the well-being of a city or country.

In “*Panza Brujería*” or Panza Witchcraft, *Vicki* invites the audience to help her cast a protective spell against “evil” politicians. She recounts when she lived in Austin and witnessed with despair George W. Bush winning his second term as president. Then, she explains how her mother taught her about the *ojo*, or evil eye, and how to cast protective spells. She performs a collective *limpia* or cleansing to protect against *ojo*, and then with the help and cheers of the audience she curses the wicked politicians. The play ends with the “Panza Girl Manifesto,” described in the opening of this chapter.

#### **FROM CHOCHA TO PANZA: FEMINISMS OF COLOR, VISIBILITY AND EMBODIMENT**

*The Panza Monologues* is dramaturgically influenced by the artistic and intellectual work of women of color. For example, Mayorga was inspired by the work of performer/playwright Anna Deavere Smith whose plays are verbatim performances of interviews with different members of a specific community regarding a particular problem or event (Mayorga, “From Cuentos to DVD” 15). Smith portrays each interviewee by studying and imitating their speech patterns and gestures as faithfully as

possible. This documentary theatre model<sup>77</sup> was the initial starting point for *The Panza Monologues*. However, *The Panza Monologues*' goal was not to imitate the interviewees in such detail, but to craft and shape their interviews and submissions for the purpose of effective storytelling.

*The Panza Monologues* is also indebted to the teachings and principles of woman of color and queer feminists. Grise and Mayorga declare that as artists and activists they were influenced by the “driving ideas that generated foundational, searing, women of color works such as *This Bridge Called My Back*,<sup>78</sup> *the bull-jean stories*<sup>79</sup> and other ‘genre-bending-mind-blowing-soul ravaging woman of color texts’ that are deafening in their gritos (“shouts”) to the world” (Grise and Mayorga, *The Panza Monologues* 3-4). In my analysis I will discuss in detail how Anzaldúa’s concepts of new mestiza, dual or wild tongue, and *Nos/otras* (finding commonalities in difference) are reflected in the play. Certain scenes in *The Panza Monologues*, like “Panza to Panza” and “El Vientre,” blend poetic writing and performance, bringing a distinctive melody to the storytelling. Like Sharon Bridgforth’s *the bull-jean stories*, Grise’s and Mayorga’s work pays homage to

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<sup>77</sup> Despite its mainstream notoriety in the U.S. during the 1990s with plays like *Fires in the Mirror* (Anna Deavere Smith) and *The Laramie Project* (Moises Kaufman and Tectonic Theatre Project), documentary theatre is an old theatre genre with no traceable origin. Another genre that relies on performing interviews in order to represent the experience of a specific community is performance ethnography.

<sup>78</sup> *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Chicana feminists Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, is a groundbreaking anthology of fiction, poetry, storytelling, testimonies, and critique by women of color from different backgrounds, first published in 1981. By linking feminism with race, sexuality, ethnicity, and class this collection challenged the white middle/upper class feminist idea of sisterhood.

<sup>79</sup> *bull jean stories* is authored by writer Sharon Bridgforth based on storytelling, non-traditional verse, and the principles of theatrical jazz aesthetics. Bridgforth refers to this work as “an anthology of linked stories.” It takes place in the rural South from the 1920s to the 1940’s and follows the story of bull-dog-jean, an African American “Woman-loving-woman.”

the wisdom of women who work for their community and, in the midst of their work, find intimate moments to share stories, laugh, dance, eat, and revere the dead together.

*The Panza Monologues* is situated among this genealogy of feminists of color, many of them queer and their allies, in which womanhood and commonality is not defined by gender but by the intersections of the different conditions of women's lives. As Black feminist cultural critic and social activist bell hooks argues in her book *Feminism is for Everyone*, the idea of sisterhood can still be powerful, but political solidarity is only possible if the intersectionality of race, class, and other privileges are recognized and addressed (16). Furthermore, *The Panza Monologues* pays homage to the conversations about the female body, weight, and its relationship to capitalism, as well as the specific conditions, beliefs, and practices that are embedded in a specific community of Latina women fighting for social justice.

Mayorga and Grise were committed to using *The Panza Monologues* to give voice to the Tejana/Chicana women of San Antonio. As the authors explain in their introduction to the first edition of the *The Panza Monologues*: “From the get go, *The Panza Monologues* worked off two basic ideas: uno— cuentos about our panzas were important: literally, culturally, and metaphorically. Second, everyone, almost without provocation, has a panza story” (3). In other words, the panza reflects and represents the material and cultural realities of Tejanas/Chicanas. Furthermore, Grise and Mayorga used it as a prompt to document their community's oral history.

The artists recognized that sharing these panza stories as a performance instead of written text was essential in order to give the underrepresented stories not only a voice,

but visibility. As performance scholar Deborah Paredez explains in her book *Selenidad*, “In many southwestern urban areas the maintenance of the tourist industry relies on the labor of working-class Mexican Americans and their simultaneous absence from civic representations” (61). It is through the celebration of exoticized cultural elements of *Mexicanidad* that cities like San Antonio articulate a “public memory” that excludes socially and economically marginalized populations except as evidence of cultural diversity, and as support for the tourist industry. Thus, regardless of the fact that the Esperanza organizers and other Mexicana/Chicana<sup>80</sup> women interviewed are part of the majority of San Antonio’s population and actively engaged in civic work, their stories remained not only unheard, but invisible in the larger panorama of the city and the nation. Furthermore, when their bodies are subject to these erasures not only because of class and race, but also because of gender, sexuality, and body size, representation and visibility becomes critical.

Grise’s explicit gorda body on stage makes the Chicana body both visible and tangible. Theatre scholar Alicia Arrizón writes, “In the larger context of the Chicano Theatre movement, Chicana performativity *must* be located in the realm of negotiations which transforms silence into, sound, invisibility into presence, and objecthood into subjecthood” (74). Grise’s Brown body moves the margin to the center, since her body is not only a Brown, working class-woman’s body, but a fat, queer body as well. Thus, she embodies multiple layers of difference and marginality.

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<sup>80</sup> Mexicana refers to women born in Mexico that identify themselves as such.

### **CHICANIDAD, THE WILD TONGUE AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY**

*Vicki*, Grise's stage persona, is dressed in black, sitting center stage on a stool and addressing the audience directly. *Vicki* is in front of the domestic altar and to her right the quartet Los Flacos plays the popular son jarocho song "Cascabel" ("Sleigh Bell"). The singer's high-pitched, wail-like singing contrasts with the happy, upbeat music that energizes the space. Then, the music gets softer. *Vicki*, who up to this point has been quietly taking in the music and making eye contact with all audience members, begins her first story with big facial expressions and hand gestures: "There once was a play ... This, really, quite interesting play. It was this play about women. Well, not just anything about women, but about them in a specific way ... The play was about (beat) their vaginas." *Vicki*'s black costume, placement center stage sitting on a stool, and explicit reference to Ensler's work suggests that what she is about to present is an adaptation of *The Vagina Monologues*. However, the cultural markers present even before the first story starts imply a departure from it.

The altar and the music situate *The Panza Monologues* both as a culturally and politically Chicana feminist project. While domestic altars come from the syncretism of Catholicism and the indigenous celebration of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, as Latina/Chicana Studies scholar T. Jackie Cuevas explains, they also have a political meaning in the Diaspora. In her article "'Power to the Panza': Stomaching Oppression in Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues*," Cuevas asserts, "In Chicana/o activist communities, such altars may also be constructed and displayed publicly in honor of a political cause" (2). The juxtaposition of family and traditional

Mexican mementos, books by feminist activists of color, and the Virgen de Guadalupe — also a feminist Chicana symbol — brings together the domestic with the public or political lives of the authors. The altar also creates an intimate space, as the shrine shares *Vicki*'s personal and intellectual-activist history and legacy with the audience.



Figure 12: Vicki in front of the domestic altar. Retrieved from [www.panzamonologues.com](http://www.panzamonologues.com).

The *son jaracho* also functions as a sociopolitical signifier, as it is not just any style of Mexican music, but one that has a history of resistance. Ethnomusicologists Micaela Díaz-Sánchez and Alexander Hernández explain in their article “The *Son Jaracho* as Afro-Mexican Resistance Music,” that this music genre emerged in the 18th century from enslaved Black populations in coastal Mexico as an ingenious response to the prohibition of other Afrodiasporic music styles, drums, lyrics, and dance movements,

which were considered vulgar and subversive (192). Son jarocho is characterized by its use of stringed instruments and the zapateado's foot stomping on a tarima, which replaced the drums; the hip movement from Afrodiasporic dance was eliminated and the lyrics made to be inconspicuous. Black folk gathered to play the son jarocho in *fandangos* or jam sessions where everybody was welcomed to play and dance regardless of their level of skill. Then, it spread among other communities. In another article Hernández states that since the 1990s Chicanos have re-appropriated son jarocho fandango as a cultural and national symbol "in order to build a sense of community and belonging" ("Creative Renewal of Son Jarocho"). He further explains that in urban settings the son jarocho has become synonymous with Chicana/o activist movements. Thus, by holding the evidence of its living cultural legacy, this style of music challenges the ways in which Mexico's African heritage is often overlooked or dismissed. Furthermore, just like the altar, the music frames *The Panza Monologues*' specific cultural and political dimensions in relationship to Chicana/o collective struggles for social justice.

*The Panza Monologues* disassociates from the concept of a universalized female experience that holds up women's commonalities without exploring the distinctive sociopolitical dimensions of multiple understandings of womanhood. As the prologue continues, *Vicki* raises her chin sideways, slightly closes her eyes in a gesture of pride and declares, "But vagina is not what I call it." Now she looks back at the audience, smiling mischievously and raising her left arm upwards in a "tah-dah" like gesture as she says, "I call it my chocha!" A collective laugh follows, thus suggesting many audience

members are familiar with this word. Now looking serious again and pointing in opposite directions, she adds “Translation! Recoding!” Then, *Vicki* looks directly to the front and leans forward explaining with eyes wide open, “Sometimes translation makes all the difference in the world. Just listen ...” Frowning, extending her right arm and rotating her torso to the right she says in a deep voice, “Vagina.” Then, she turns in the opposite direction, gracefully raising her left arm upwards and elegantly rotating her wrist in a Vanna White style, as if presenting a wonderful prize. Changing her stern expression to a proud smile, in a mellifluous voice she declares, “Chocha.” To further underscore the difference, she repeats the spiel again, and ends by saying confidently, “One has music; the other sounds like sandpaper.” Thus, translation does not simply refer here to shifting from one language into another.



Figure 13: Vicki comparing the sounds of vagina and chocha. Screenshot from the DVD.

*Vicki*'s deployment of translation expands its definition from linguistic transfer to larger sociocultural understandings. For example, class identification is evidenced through word choice as *Vicki* chooses “chocha” instead of standard Spanish “*vagina*” (pronounced va-hee-na), as the translation for Standard English “vagina.” Chocha is slang (similar to pussy) common in the working class Spanish Caribbean and the U.S. Latina/o Diaspora. It is often considered vulgar, crude, and a “bad” word, evermore so in the mouth of a respectable woman. In this moment, *Vicki* unapologetically and candidly reveals an intimacy — how she refers to her own genitalia — thus in coherence with Ensler's feminist project. Moreover, with her elegant hand gesture and lyrical vocalization of the word, she elevates chocha from “low-class” to a higher status as melodic, beautiful, and appropriate. In doing so, she challenges norms of propriety while

also identifying with urban working class Latina/o slang. While there are still similarities between both plays, *The Panza Monologues* frames *The Vagina Monologues* as culturally specific rather than “universal,” as it is often touted,<sup>81</sup> thereby calling attention to the latter’s racial and class biases.

*Vicki* is also foregrounding, performing, and signaling her own linguistic and theatrical authority. Contrasting the sounds of the English and Spanish words, she establishes herself as a Latina who is familiar with the Spanish language, probably bilingual, and able to navigate both languages and cultures. This illustrates Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of “the wild or double tongue.” Anzaldúa argues that Chicano Spanish is a distinctive variation of the Spanish language, which she refers to as a “linguistic mestizaje” (*Borderlands* 80). This mestizaje or racial mixture is the product of the sociopolitical realities of Chicanos in the borderland: Spanish/Anglo colonization, interaction among different socioeconomic classes, ethnic and racial groups, and the everyday reality of living in the U.S. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 77-80). Furthermore, Anzaldúa contends that:

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<sup>81</sup> Even though Ensler interviewed a racially diverse group of women, most of the monologues do not reflect this diversity as they were read/performed originally by her. For example, in her HBO recorded solo performance, Ensler delivers most characters in the style of spoken word recitation, using Standard English. In a monologue-about a Bosnian woman who was a victim of a rape in a war camp, there is no characterization in Ensler’s speech to indicate the Bosnian woman’s ethnic origin. Like many mainstream feminists, Ensler originally concentrated on oppression based on gender, giving less attention to other oppressions based on race, class, sexuality, nation etc. There is, however, one exception in "The Little Coochi Snorcher That Could" monologue. Here, Ensler imitates what seems to be a U.S. Black vernacular southern accent. Other references indicate it is more specifically the accent of an African American working-class woman. Thus, the performance of whiteness is foregrounded at the expense of diversity, and at the same time Blackness is tokenized. In response to critics Ensler added other monologues. Also, others performing the monologue have made casting or characterization choices that give racial, sexual, age, and ethnic specificity to each monologue. Every year, in celebration of V-Day, new monologues are added from women around the world.

Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: [Indigenous], Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (*Borderlands* 81)

Anzaldúa draws a parallel between racial and cultural mestizaje and linguistic mestizaje. In order to embrace the former it is necessary to valorize the latter. Furthermore, she sees language as an expression of all the identities that intersect in her — race, gender, sexuality, and craft. Moving back and forth between languages and dialects allows Chicana/os to negotiate the social and cultural forces that shape their lives.

Throughout the play, *Vicki* performs her wild tongue by code switching, mistranslations or no translations, and use of non-standard Spanish and English. For example, in the “Panza Girl Manifesto” described at the beginning of this chapter, the first principle “Sin tortilla y sin frijol no hay revolución!” is not translated to English. Also, when listing the principles, she uses English and Spanish interchangeably, thus affirming her bilingual and transcultural background. Lastly, *Vicki* uses “gots to” for the standard “have to,” a phrasing distinctive of urban (predominantly Black) slang that has been adopted by Latina/o communities. This linguistic choice, as well as the performance of funk music and *Vicki*'s familiarity with its dance, allows the performance to resonate with a larger community of women and people of color, more specifically inner-city Black.

As *Vicki* continues with the prologue, she also establishes the identity of the community she is going to represent as Brown. She asserts:

And in the war of our bodies what became clear to me is that before we can get to the battle of the chocha, we have another score to settle, another place on our beautiful bodies to baptize, actualize, a place that has been demonized, sterilized, stuffed, starved, covered over. In fact, we've been encouraged or mandated or scared into actually getting rid of it.

As she referred to this other body part, *Vicki* gestures with her hands making an X over her belly, underscoring the words “demonized, sterilized, stuffed, starved.” Given the title of the play, and her gesture, the audience can presume the panza is the other part of the body she refers to. However, she continues by saying with a grave tone and a serious expression, “Before I can talk about chocha, I gotta tell the story of us.” The logical completion of this statement should be, “before we can talk about chocha, we need to talk about panzas.” In this way, *Vicki* underscores how the panza stands in for something bigger — cultural identity and sociopolitical reality.

*Vicki* takes this pause to clearly establish “us” as a community of bodies of color with a shared cultural history. As she continues, she smiles broadly and straightens up with pride and says, “And who’s us?” She raises her hands upward and slowly opens them sideways, like a fan. “We are the ones who carry the sun in our skin, brown like almonds or *café con leche*, *color de la tierra* (‘coffee and milk, the color of the earth’).” Putting her hands on her thighs and leaning forward, as if looking for signs of the audience’s understanding, she says: “Tú sabes (‘You know’), the ‘us’ that uses the word

chocha. ¡Panocha!”<sup>82</sup> She shouts, opening her arms, and the audience cheers. “But you see, the story of us is not just chocha, it’s panza. ¡Sí! ¡Panza! Now you know what I’m talking about, don’t you? Don’t you?” She looks again intensely at the audience urging them for a response, and the audience shouts, “Yeeees!” Vicki then asks the audience to join her shouting the word panza together, “Are you ready?” The audience cheers in approval. Using her fingers, Vicki counts “one, two, three” and everyone shouts together: “¡Panza!”



Figure 14: Panza shout. Screenshot from *The Panza Monologues* book, first edition.

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<sup>82</sup> *Panocha* is another slang word in Spanish for vagina, most common in Central America.

*Vicki* goes on to clarify whom she refers to when she says “us.” First, she refers to skin color, mostly using metaphors in English and Spanish to refer to the color brown. Here she is code-switching, using a metaphor common in the Spanish language to refer to mixed race mestizos and mulattos, “café con leche.” It should be noted that she is not invoking the hybridity of mestiza as defined in Latin American whitening discourses of race, where the Spanish culture and race prevails. This celebration of Brownness is reminiscent of the Chicana/o Civil Rights and Cultural Movement, which besides fighting for social equity reclaimed “mestizaje” and “Brown pride.”<sup>83</sup> *Vicki*’s other metaphor, “color de la tierra,” also refers to ancient indigenous heritage and Aztlán, or the ancestral lands of the Aztecs believed to be what is today the southwest U.S. Hence, through the invocation of Brownness, *Vicki* claims their rightful belonging to the land—they are not foreigners. In doing so, she challenges the general conception in the U.S. imaginary of Mexicanas/Chicanas as aliens, always suspect regardless of their legal status.

*Vicki* claims authority by challenging both Latin American and U.S. American national discourses on race, and claiming her new mestiza identity. Gloria Anzaldúa defines the new mestiza as a racial, ideological, cultural, and biological hybrid, someone who does not belong to only one category, but embodies an amalgamation of them, not necessarily harmoniously (*Borderlands* 99). The new mestiza is a border crosser living

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<sup>83</sup> This conceptualization of mestizaje has been criticized as problematic, for example Josefina Saldaña-Portiño argues in her article “Who’s the Indian in Aztlán” that it idealizes and stereotypes indigenous ancestry and its glorious past (413). It also fails to recognize the existence of contemporary indigenous communities and their social and political struggles. On the other hand Rafael Pérez Torres argues in “Alternative Geographies and the Melancholy of Mestizaje” that while Mexico uses mestizaje to construct its national identity, Chicana/os use it to challenge U.S. construction of nationality that erases racial differences (320).

between cultures and an intermediary or agent joining those cultures together, creating new epistemologies (*Borderlands* 99). Thus, if it is true that in defining an “us” *Vicki* inevitably defines a “them” — even if not named — she does not simply delete the notion of “otherness,” making those who are not part of her community the other. First, even though the culturally specific Chicanidad of the play is defined earlier through language, music, and other cultural markers, other Latina/os are included. Even though Latina/os are a heterogeneous multicultural group, given cultural similarities or familiarity due to cultural proximity to Chicana/o culture, as well as our own “minority” status, we are not outsiders, and feel included in the “us.” In other words, the performance of *The Panza Monologues* pulls many Latina/o cultures together. Other people of color might also identify due to a similar status of marginality and underrepresentation in mainstream society. Grise’s description of *The Vagina Monologues* as telling stories of different women “lovers who were both boys and girls,” and the centrality of queer desire in the sensual “Panza to Panza” — the only scene about reciprocated love — also makes space for an inclusive queer “us.” The “us” is expanded even further by the *flaca* or thin woman in “Political Panza” who remarks that everybody comes from a panza and everybody has a panza, and “if we asked how the panza is doing for all the citizens of a given society, we might not have hunger.”

*Vicki* also opens a space for allies, as she invites everybody in the audience to participate in the prologue, shouting “panza” with her. Afterward, she asks the audience for a show of hands answering the question, “How many of you have thought about your panza today?” Also, in the second to last scene, “Panza Brujería,” *Vicki* invites everyone

to join her in casting the evil eye against the evil politicians. Throughout the play, *Vicki* stresses the power that collective action can have to fight injustice. As Jackie Cuevas explains, the “them” in *The Panza Monologues* refers to “the few white men who hold political economic power over the [San Antonio’s] predominantly Mexican American population,” (7) and over the whole country. Thus, “them” refers to those who abuse their privilege and power. This is not to imply that “us” here is universal, as the stories *Vicki* shares are intentionally specific to her community of San Antonio Chicana activist women. While not universal, the “us” is inclusive of allies.

*Vicki*’s inclusive “us” resonates with Anzaldúa’s theorization of insider/outsider, which she names as Nos/Otras. According to Anzaldúa, the feminine Spanish word for “we,” this term contains both insider and outsider, as “nos” means “us” and “otras” means “other.” Anzaldúa explains, “the future belongs to those who cultivate cultural sensitivities to differences and who use these abilities to forge a hybrid consciousness” (qtd. in Keating 10). Anzaldúa argues for a consciousness that finds unity in the acceptance of difference and seeks similarities and points of encounter that bring us together as allies in solidarity and action. But before moving towards action, the new mestiza must know and share the community’s history of resistance and its insights and knowledge in order to reclaim our dignity (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 108-109).

In *The Panza Monologues*, *Vicki*’s body becomes a synecdoche, standing in for her community’s history. She continues, explaining that in conversation with her homegirls, they were not talking about their chochas but about their panzas. Homegirls refers to someone who is from your neighborhood, a close friend. In using the term, *Vicki*

is stating that this play is not born from interviews with strangers, but from casual conversations among women from the same *barrio* or neighborhood with whom she had a previous relationship. *The Panza Monologues* collects and documents San Antonio Chicana women's memories and *Vicki* is the repository and transmitter of these memories. Furthermore she asserts, "someone's panza story is a sacred story and to share it with someone else is to tell them about the condition of your life." In considering her homegirls' panza stories sacred, *Vicki* points to the value of women's personal narratives as evidence of their cultural and sociopolitical realities.

*Vicki's* mission as a storyteller is to give voice and visibility to the women of her community. She aims to share the specific situations of their lived oppressions, and specifically those that directly affect women's bodies and well-being. This resonates with Performance Studies scholar Diana Taylor's description of a character called "The Intermediary" in a play by Mexican playwright Emilio Carballido:<sup>84</sup> "her body functions as the site of convergence binding the individual with the collective, the private with the social, the diachronic with the synchronic, memory and knowledge" (80). In other words, *Vicki* communicates and embodies the intimate memories of the women of her community. Moreover, in some cuentos she conspicuously blurs her own experiences with theirs, articulating a mestiza version of collective memory, a collective memory where the individual story is part of a larger community's story and "a means of performing oneself while also evoking those who are not present, even those who are

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<sup>84</sup> Taylor analyzes the role of the *Intermediaria* in Carballido's play *Yo, también hablo de la rosa* (I, too Speak of the Rose), a mestiza character that holds the history and memories as well as visions of the future for Mexico City.

silenced because of lack of access to public platforms” (Myers 21). Hence, the mestiza collective memory is less interested in historic accuracy and more invested in the community’s ontology and the multiple epistemologies it creates. In Grise’s and Mayorga’s play, that *conocimiento* or knowledge comes from the collective Chicana panza.

By the end of the prologue, *Vicki* has achieved her purpose of explaining how the play came to be, and she prepares to move on and share those memories and knowledge. She stands up from her stool for the first time, saying she can’t stay still “because the panza is the heart of ritmo (‘rhythm’) ... and my panza gotta move.” In other words, the panza is the center that generates movement and action. She then continues walking around the stage as she declares, “And in honor of all those women who let me borrow their stories, I share them with you.” Moving from one side to the other, she points to different women in the audience saying, “cuz they’re not just her stories or her stories, or my stories anymore, they are us. They are our stories.” Finally, standing center stage, she spreads her arms sideways smiling proudly and says, “I present to you, *The Panza Monologues!*” With this prologue, *Vicki* has set up the space for a community, a sense of belonging, and collective memory. For those who have been marginalized and denied full citizenship, creating such spaces is imperative.

#### **PERFORMING CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP AND ACTIVISM**

The cuento “Hunger for Justice” comments on how the discourse linking thinness to discipline and good citizenship is related to the construction of whiteness in the U.S.

*The Panza Monologues* employs the same racial markers that were first used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to mark bodies of color and immigrants as inferior and non-white (such as phenotype), in order to subvert the stereotype of fatness as undesirable. Furthermore, it highlights the mistaken belief that thinness is the result of hard work and fatness is the result of laziness.

The cuento opens with a slow, melancholic melody playing in the background, transporting the audience to the past as a slide show of black and white photographs plays on the screen. *Vicki* sits on the altar as the audience views photo after photo depicting the harsh conditions Mexican Americans living in the rural Southwest experienced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The pictures show men, women and children living in shacks or simple wooden houses built on rough terrain. Some of the images depict women dressed in their Sunday best, indoors or outdoors, looking directly at the camera for a portrait. Others show them in their everyday, simple, worn-out skirts, blouses, and aprons as they do their daily domestic chores: making tortillas, stirring a pot on a coal stove, washing clothes in a big, outdoor steel tub, or fetching water from a barrel. Most of the women portrayed in the pictures are *panzonsitas* (“little fat”); some are *panzonas* (“very fat”) they have Brown skin, round faces, and almond eyes — features typical of the indigenous phenotype.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Currently, there are at least 65 different indigenous nations or ethnicities in Mexico including the Zapoteca, Maya, Otomí, Náhua, Yucateca, etc. Even though they have different phenotypes, common characteristics are different hues of Brown skin and almond shaped eyes. Although not common to all ethnicities, round faces and short, round physiques are typically considered indigenous phenotype.



Figure 15: Mexican American Family (Library of Congress). Retrieved from [www.panzamonologues.com](http://www.panzamonologues.com).

A voice-over recording of *Vicki* performing an older Mexicana plays — a character change that is signaled through a vocal shift as a soothing voice and a thick Spanish accent fills the room. The woman recounts how she and her family lived in harsh conditions yet they always had the basics and learned to appreciate the simple life and few resources they had. She starts her narration describing herself as *panzonsita* and how she comes “from fat people:”

Yo siempre fui gruesa desde chiquita (“I was always thickset since I was little”). Venimos de otros tejidos de herencia (“We come from other heritage tissue/weaving”). My maternal grandmother was a short lady, dark con facciones toscas (“with rough features”). My grandmother was a fighter, a worker, a strong woman because sometimes the world makes you that way.

By declaring she has always been fat, the woman establishes a racially specific context for her size. She has not become fat due to excess food or lack of control. In fact she has experienced a lack of food, but she has a round build because of her racial makeup. I would argue that it is not necessarily true that all Latina/os or people of indigenous heritage are chubby, just as being white is no guarantee of thinness. Nevertheless, this scene is calling attention to a difference in “tissue”: genetics, features, skin color, and the social and cultural realities of poor people who lived on the border. She also highlights how, despite the difficulties, that simple life was happier.



Figure 16: Grise performing the older woman in “Hunger for Justice.” Screenshot from

*The Panza Monologues* DVD.

The pictures, coupled with the older woman's narration of a past when food was scarce and hard work was plentiful, challenge the idea that the fat person overindulges in food and is lazy. After the slide show finishes, the lights go up and *Vicki*, now wearing a scarf and reading glasses — brings an ironing board stage left. She is performing the older woman and takes up the storytelling with the same intonation as the voice-over. Carefully, she irons a satin blouse, occasionally looking up over her reading glasses to make eye contact with the audience. She changes the focus of her story from her memory of a hard but happy childhood to her current San Antonio community's painful experience and collective memory.

The older woman recalls her experiences as a worker at the San Antonio Levi Strauss Factory.<sup>86</sup> When the factory was unexpectedly closed without prior notice, she and the other women working there lost their jobs overnight, and because of this, became activists and organizers. “During times like that, we work more with our minds than any other part of the body. We were seamstresses who overnight had to become organizers.” She explains that as result of their work and distress, they neglected their bodies: “what experienced the majority of the pain was the panza because there wasn't going to be nutrition, and we had a hunger for justice.” The panza suffered the consequences of their unjust situation in the physical sense as they lost their salaries, and with it their capacity to buy food. But their panzas also suffered in an emotional, spiritual and political sense.

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<sup>86</sup> Petra Mata worked at the Levi Strauss factory as a seamstress when it was closed without prior notice in 1990. She, alongside other seamstresses, founded the cooperative Fuerza Unida (“United Force”) in order to fight against the factory's closure. Even though they were not able to regain their jobs, they demanded and received severance and job retraining. Fuerza Unida continues to work for social justice in the U.S. and abroad with Mata as their co-director alongside Viola Cáceres. For more information go to: [www.lafuerzaunida.org](http://www.lafuerzaunida.org).

In this monologue, a lack of justice results in a lack of food. She ends by stressing how the panza is an extraordinary part of the body that can expand and contract, that can grow babies, and that suffers when one suffers. Thus, she warns, women need to pay attention to it, to their bodies, “and tie it to everything we do. If our body breaks down, then how are we going to do all this work.”

Immigrating to the U.S. helped this poor farm girl achieve the upward mobility the U.S. promises to those who work hard. In the capitalist discourse of the American Dream, determination and hard work are the keys to success. This discourse suggests that if you do not succeed, it is a fault of character: you did not work hard enough and you did not want it enough. Ironically, the older woman was a hard worker. She lost her job due to globalization and outsourcing when the Levi’s factory moved to Costa Rica, where manufacturing costs were lower. Because of this situation, she and her co-workers lost weight and their physical and emotional health was jeopardized.

In the discourse of the American Dream, thinness has become evidence of success; anyone can be thin if they make a concerted effort towards this goal. American Studies scholar Amy Erdman Farrell argues that, in actuality, stories of fat shame and celebrities who fail to control their bodies “suggest the level of danger for those seeking to shed other stigmatized identities of race, sex, and class. A fat body can threaten and unravel all the best efforts of upward mobility” (*Fat Shame* 131). In other words, for those who are marked by non-normative identities like non-white, immigrant, poor, or queer, a fat body makes their incorporation into mainstream society and consequent

success even harder. Pressure is put on the stigmatized person to exercise control over their weight in order to avoid or lessen discrimination.

“My Sister’s Panza” shares the story of an immigrant mother who is chastised for her failure to assimilate to American culture, as evidenced by her child’s ailing body. *Vicki* tells of how her sister, who was always fat, became thin as a result of heartbreak and depression. At the age of seven, her sister was diagnosed with juvenile or type 1 diabetes. The doctor who diagnosed the girl tells the mother that her child is too chubby, implying that this is the cause of her diabetes. The mother, who has never heard of the condition, is confused since for her, “that is the way kids are supposed to be.” For the immigrant mother, her children’s size and roundness was a symbol of their good health.



Figure 17: Vicki pulling white paper strings that symbolize sugar in the blood in “My Sister’s Panza.” Screenshot from *The Panza Monologues DVD*.

According to the doctor, traditional Mexican cuisine — which is high in fat as well as in fiber and legumes — is unhealthy and toxic. Given the fact that eating habits do not cause type 1 diabetes,<sup>87</sup> the doctor reveals a bias against this “ethnic” food and suggests that continuing to feed her Mexican American children her native cuisine is a failure to assimilate to American culture. He tells the mother her food was not only responsible for her daughter’s illness, but that her ignorance has put her family at risk:

But, to save us, we had to change—everything. All our *comidas* (“meals”) had to change, now today, this minute! No more *tortillas de harina* (“flour tortillas”) smeared with butter, no more *barbacoa* (“savory slow cooked shredded meat”) Sundays, or *arroz con pollo* (“rice with chicken”) Fridays. No more *capirotada* (“bread pudding”) piled five layers high. No more ice cream man bells. (Grise and Mayorga, *The Panza Monologues*)

Immigrants often bring with them the diet of their native country. Sociologist Claude Fischler explains that our sense of identity is linked to what we eat. “The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently” (275). In other words, our sense of belonging to a specific culture or group is constructed partly by how

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<sup>87</sup> Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune disease of unknown cause and is different from type 2 diabetes. It is believed that genetics may play a role, and that environmental causes, such as exposure to certain viruses can trigger it. Insulin therapy, meal planning, and exercise help control the disease. Type 2 diabetes is not caused by obesity, and anyone can get it, but obesity is considered one of the risk factors, along with age, lack of exercise, and high blood pressure, among others.

we prepare our food and the things we do and do not eat. Thus, food helps immigrants to maintain and nurture a connection to and memory of their home country and culture.

Through food, the mother in this cuento shows her love for her children and her home country. By doing so, she believed she was being a good mother and is devastated when told the opposite. The doctor's solution is that she learns to cook the "healthy" American way, in order to save her children. *Vicki*, still sitting in her chair, adds with a deeply sad expression:

But worst of all, they made Mami go to a nutritionist to learn how to cook out her love. They were teaching her how to lose the savings of our panza banks. Our panzas, they are what told her that her children were never 'over her dead body' gonna starve. (Grise and Mayorga, *The Panza Monologues*)

For the mother, their chubby bodies were evidence that she was providing for her children. The excess fat gave them protection against times when she could not make ends meet. According to her doctor, everything the mother knew about making her children healthy was wrong. She had failed at being a good mother, she had failed to adapt to American culture, and she had failed as a citizen, since fatness is a threat not only to her children, but also the well-being of the country.

Latina bodies are not necessarily always fat bodies, but they are constructed as excessive no matter what the reality of their size may be. This allows for them to be understood as a threat to U.S. national identity, especially if they are indeed fat. Cultural historian Cookie Woolner argues that after industrialization, "The fat body was increasingly seen as the non-American or even un-American body, and as such, it was

specially associated with the immigrant” (132). Given the criminalization of undocumented immigrants from south of the border, Latina/os are suspected of trying to usurp that which is not ours from rightful, tax-paying, law-abiding citizens. Our growing numbers and the fact that many maintain our connection with our cultural heritage, which is seen as a resistance to assimilate, threatens to change the makeup of white majority American society. Thus, the geographical border, as well as the cultural border, functions as a belt that prevents the panza from unruly action. Once the belt is loosened the ‘fatness’ or proliferation of colored bodies becomes a disease that sickens the body of the white nation.

“My Sister’s Panza” ends by questioning the conception that thinness equals health and fatness equals sickness. *Vicki* continues her sister’s story, and recounts how she met a man “who loved her even with the panza she tried to lose for twenty years.” They were happily married, but after two years he left with another woman. With a deeply sad expression, *Vicki* recounts how her sister then, “Stopped eating until every roll of her panza was gone. She measured her blood sugar to find sky-high readings of sugar, sugar, sugar.” Her sister was so depressed that she barely ate, which for a diabetic can lead to serious, even life-threatening health problems. Eventually, *Vicki* asks with a stern face, “I wonder if the doctor would think she’d done enough to help control the sugar sweetness of her diabetes now?” With sad iron this cuento criticizes the faulty notion that fatness is unquestionably a predictor of health. This resonates with recent studies that show that extra fat can actually increase the longevity of people with chronic conditions, if they have a healthy lifestyle that includes good nutrition and exercise (Lavie 153).

Thus *The Panza Monologues* indicts the discourse around fatness that pathologizes the overweight and obese individual, who, in the U.S., is primarily African American or Latina/o.

*The Panza Monologues* scene titled “Noticias” or news refers to studies about the health conditions of Mexican Americans in the nation, Texas, and San Antonio. In this scene *Vicki* returns to the altar as the lights dim, leaving only a soft spotlight on the small wooden platform in front of the altar. One of Los Flacosos’ musicians steps on the tarima, dressed in a black dress and high heel zapateado shoes, similar to those used for tap dancing or flamenco. A slide projection appears on the screen behind the altar with a series of headlines quoted from the San Antonio Express News. As the projections start behind her, the woman begins striking her heels in the zapateado jarocho style, a staccatoed, fast, syncopated rhythm. As the audience reads the news headlines, the cadence of the dancer’s zapateado resembles the rapid clicking of a typewriter delivering urgent news. When the other musicians stand on both sides of the dancer and join her soundscape with small percussion instruments, it is a reminder of the son jarocho fandango, a symbol of community building and resistance.

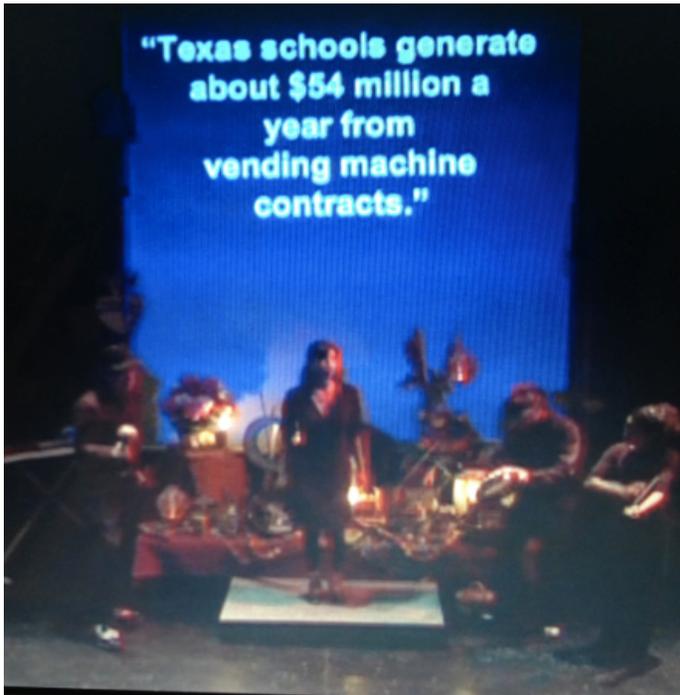


Figure 18: Los Flacosos playing during “Noticias.” Screenshot from *The Panza Monologues* DVD.

The headlines or “panza facts” intertwine health statistics with data that points to the economics and politics of nutrition (or non-nutrition). Some quotes establish how Hispanics and San Antonians rank nationally and racially when it comes to obesity: “S[an] A[ntonio] ranks as the nation’s fattest city . . . [a] study shows 31.1% of Alamo City residents are obese.” Another one reads: “More than 30% of Hispanic children across the country are overweight, compared with 25% of Anglo children.” Yet others refer to how the portions and calories produced by the food industry exceed our daily need, thus raising questions of the industry’s implication in the resulting health issues.

For example: “Texas schools generate about \$54 million a year from vending machine contracts.” In other words, children and teens are generating big profits for the junk food industry and, in turn, supporting the public education system. Another reads: “In 2000, more than half of Texas Hispanics had less than a high school education. Less than 9% had a college degree, and the income for Hispanics ... was two-thirds what it was for Anglos.” This quote speaks to the relationship between class, education, and health issues.

Mayorga and Grise highlight how the government, through public schools lunch programs, is responsible for providing unhealthy food to students and shamelessly profiting from this program. While the government places its program’s shortcomings and discourses about health and obesity on the private sector (specifically the fast food industry), the authors poignantly reveal the government’s compliance and the capitalist mechanism behind it. By selecting specific headlines from different newspaper sections and issues, and by showing them in sequence, Brechtian style, *The Panza Monologues* makes the government and private sector’s implication in the “obesity crisis” explicit and visible.

*The Panza Monologues* is invested in the performance of cultural citizenship and belonging. Cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo distinguishes between legal citizenship and cultural citizenship. He defines cultural citizenship as “the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense” (“Cultural Citizenship and Educational Democracy” 402). He further explains that even legal citizenship does not secure access to equal rights:

One must consider categories that are visibly inscribed on the body, such as gender and race, and their consequences for full democratic participation. The moment a woman or a person of color enters the public square both difference and inequality comes to the surface. It is difficult to conceal differences of gender and race, and given the prejudiced norms under which we still live, inequities will come to the surface". ("Cultural Citizenship, Inequality, and Multiculturalism" 29)

Rosaldo adds that regardless of legal status, those who do not enjoy full citizenship may respond to marginalization by participating in activities in the public sphere in order to claim space and claim their rights. In other words, it refers to those of us in Latina/o and other stigmatized communities who instead of claiming citizenship rights by assimilation or arguing sameness to the dominant society and its norms, affirm our particularities and use our cultural expressions as a platform for activism. Thus, we may bring to light how citizenship is not necessarily synonymous with U.S. ideals of freedom, justice, and human rights for everyone, especially for those who are not seen as fully American.

*The Panza Monologues* underscores the importance of solidarity and the role of allies in the struggle for social change. In the "Political Panza," Grise impersonates a thin Chicana who proclaims her solidarity with "her panza-sisters." She walks, swaying flirtatiously around the stage, then finally sits gracefully on a chair, and seriously and earnestly declares:

If we asked, how is the panza? Is it fed, is it warm? Is it nourished? Was this panza living next to an electrical plant? Perhaps if our government instituted Panza Positive Policies we might have world peace because we can see our humanity by the well-being of all our panzas. The panza is political. So don't be afraid of what we have to do because we are the panza, and to claim panza is to be free!

This final cuento clearly asserts the relationship between the well-being of a community and the state of their communal panza. Performance Studies scholar and activist Omi Osun Joni Jones argues that “being an ally means being able to relinquish some piece of privilege in order to create justice.” The thin Chicana understands that even though she is not fat she has the important role of the ally. She understands that oppression affects us all, regardless of our privileges. Thus, she calls for solidarity and advocates that the audience take political action and advocate for panza positive policies.



Figure 19: Vicki performing the collective *limpia* or cleansing. Screenshot from *The Panza Monologues* DVD.

In the last two scenes, *Vicki* proposes concrete collective actions and invites the audience to help her cast a spell. In “Panza Brujería” *Vicki* talks with the audience about contemporary political issues, such as the 2008 presidential election, which directly

affected the well-being of Latina/os. As she continues her monologue, she performs a *limpia* (“cleansing”) ritual, rubbing herself with an egg, and then symbolically rubbing the audience—a ritual to cure any emotional and physical ailments caused by the envy of others. Then she invites the audience to look at the teachings of our ancestors:

In times like these, my grandmother taught me that as a people we have enough power that we can curse someone just by the way we look at them, so what I want us to do today is to put our collective energies together, to give George W. Bush and all evil *politicos ojo*, can you imagine the power? That would be my *panza brujería*... Cause sometimes we got to give *ojo* to protect ourselves, the *ojo* of my *panza*.

With the performative act of collectively doing *ojo* in order to protect ourselves from policies and politicians who have the well-being of women in their hands, *Vicki* names and claims the political power that our policed, condemned, and devalued Brown bodies have. In light of the war conservative republicans have against women’s *panzas* and their reproductive rights, this collective cleansing and protective spell take on a new meaning and become ever more urgent and necessary. Today, more than a decade since the first performance of *The Panza Monologues*, low-income women, many of them women of color, are the most affected by the massive closures and reduced services of low-cost reproductive health clinics across the *panza* state of Texas.



Figure 20: Vicki performing the collective ojo or cursing of the evil políticos. Screenshot from *The Panza Monologues* DVD.

**CONCLUSION: POWER TO THE PANZA!**

In “International Panza” *Vicki* shares her own experience when she visited Cuba, and was identified as Mexican based on her appearance. She stands stage center-front shouting in the exaggerated style of paperboys and newsies, her hands around her mouth forming a loudspeaker projecting in different directions (with Spanish pronunciation), “México, México, México.” Then she faces forward, addresses the audience and narrates how when she was walking down the streets of Havana with two Mexican women people would yell at them “México” as they passed. “They recognized us by our nationality before we even spoke,” she says, bewildered. Eventually, a man hears *Vicki* speak in her

“broken” Spanish and stops them. Here, *Vicki* turns to her right, bends her knees, and performs as the Cuban man speaking to her.<sup>88</sup> She imitates his Cuban accent as he said, puzzled: “Oye, tú no eres de México!” (“Hey, you are not from México!”) The audience laughs at her impression, as if recognizing the distinctive Caribbean accent. They also might laugh in recognition of this particular situation: the Chicana, outside the U.S. and presumed Mexican, is identified as an impostor, an outsider of the culture she so proudly claims.

*Vicki* is taken aback, and tries to explain herself to the Cuban man with little success. She summarizes her explanation using phrases such as “Chicana” while raising her fist proudly, or “Mexican American War” making finger guns with her hands. Frustrated by the lack of understanding, she finally changes from her historical explanation to her personal story, “You see my mom is Mexicana, but her father was Chinese. My father is white.” To which the Cuban responds: “So that makes you what?” The Mexican women come to her aid and try to explain the concept of Tejana or a person of Mexican descent who is a native of Texas, and how after the U.S. invaded Texas, borders changed and Mexican Tejanos became Chicanos. After a beat, *Vicki* confides in the audience, first in a calm voice walking casually over to the tarima, “And I decide not to tell them that I was really born in Georgia ‘cause my father was in the military.” As she continues explaining, her tone gets higher, desperate and apologetic, “but we moved to Tejas when I was three!!! And I’ve never lived anywhere else! San Antonio IS my

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<sup>88</sup> During the whole scene, when citing the Cuban man directly, Grise changes her posture and voice, performing the man and imitating his accent. She turns her body sideways to the right when representing the man, as if he was looking at her and the Mexican women, who are facing him.

home!!!!” She sits down on the altar, resigned, and continues in a calmer voice, “And I decide not to tell them that my mother’s family is not *Chichimeca* (‘of indigenous Nahúas,’) that the border didn’t cross her, she crossed it. No, not in the revolution of 1910, but in the 1960s. She married a gringo so that she could go to the u.s. of a’s (‘USA’).”

*Vicki*’s choice to remain silent among Latin Americans suggests a problem of authenticity and belonging. *Vicki*’s multicultural and multiracial heritage puts into question the racial and cultural legitimacy of her identity. She is not an “authentic” Mexican as the Cubans thought based on her appearance, or an “authentic” Tejana or San Antonio native for that matter. She is not the victim of the geopolitics of colonization and war as the Mexican women believed, and not even the product of illegal immigration. If *Vicki* would have shared her full story in this street scene, she may have been seen as an impostor, not a true Latin American, not a real Chicana.

*Vicki* reclaims her identity as Chicana not based solely in racial, cultural, or geographical terms, but in self-definition, experience, and sense of belonging to a cultural community. And while she chose not to reveal her hybrid multi-racial and complex identity to the *cubano*, she does share her “true” identity with the audience. “My father is from a farming town, Goshen, Indiana. And my real name is Virginia, Virginia May. Not Victoria, Vicki, Kiki or Virginia (in Spanish Vir-hee-nya) even. And sometimes my ways are a little less *rasquache*<sup>89</sup> (‘Chicano ‘ghetto’’) and a lot more trailer trash.” In other

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<sup>89</sup> Rasquache, similar to ‘ghetto’ in the U.S., is used in Mexican Spanish dialect to refer negatively to the aesthetic sensibility or behaviors of impoverished communities. Here, Grise uses it to refer to her Mexican

words, in terms of her heritage and race, she could be considered white. However, there is no space for ambiguity in her identity as working class. The two adjectives she chooses to describe her “ways” are derogatory terms used to describe the poor and, among other things, imply low levels of education and unrefined aesthetics. While *rasquache* is interpreted as excessively flamboyant, white trash is seen as excessively casual or messy; both are seen as undesirable and tasteless, but from the outsiders’ perspective. However, *Vicki* is an insider and identifies with both, even if sometimes she leans towards one more than the other. For her, these are not inferior characteristics, but assets. This echoes Mexican-American scholar Tomás Ybarra-Fausto’s definition of *rasquachismo* as “a Chicano self-vision of wholeness and completion,” and “an underdog perspective—a view from los de abajo.”<sup>90</sup> An attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style” (5). In other words, *Vicki* articulates a subjectivity of the oppressed that critiques and resists Western conceptualization of bodies of color and other non-normative identities as excessive, deviant, and un-American. Thus, *Vicki* subverts those stigmatized racial and class markers and embraces them as part of her multilayered mestiza identity.

Regardless of her right to whiteness and its privileges, *Vicki* refuses to identify as a white American. She stands up from the platform pushing her chest and chin forward, while declaring in defiance: “[N]o, I am not an Americana. The u.s. of a’s did not want me güera (‘light-skinned’), alta (‘tall’) y gorda (‘and fat’) any more than it wanted my

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American inner-city low-income neighborhood. Depending on context it can mean, vulgar, ridiculous, wretched, stingy, bad taste, or cheap.

<sup>90</sup> Since “los de abajo” means underdogs I did not translate it in the text.

mother prieta ('dark-skinned'), baja ('short') y gorda." In other words, her fat body is a permanent marker of her difference, her non-whiteness. With this declaration *Vicki* asserts there is no space for the fat body in the imaginary of the good citizen, as there is no place for bodies of color. She underscores that she is an "other" in the U.S.; even with an Anglo name, light skin, legal citizenship, and perfect American accent, she does not fit into the ideal of the American. Furthermore, she identifies more closely with those in the margins than she does with the dominant culture. She does not want to pass or assimilate; instead, she chooses her mestiza identity despite the fact that, as *Vicki* says, there is more white blood in her than any other. In stating that the U.S. does not want her or her mother, she suggests that both of them have experienced similar racial, ethnic, and gender hostility and discrimination. As a result, *Vicki's* affective experience, understanding of race and ethnicity, and her alliances are with her Brownness. Through performance, this alliance is made tangible, as her body becomes a medium by which her community's collective memory is performed and their marginalization and public erasure are challenged and resisted.

The panza is a metaphor of the feared influence that threatens the national idea of the good citizen, yet it is reclaimed and renamed as positive and powerful. The *Panza Monologues* recognizes the experience of Chicanas/Latinas and the implications of hope in what is feared and is symbolized in the belly. Mayorga and Grise remind us of our collective power as a community of Chicanas/Latinas, but also of the mystical power that comes from within, from the gut, from womanhood, from anger and solidarity—an

affective power, from our origins and collective memory, a power we can access to advocate and work for social change and justice.

### Chapter 3: Such a Pretty Face: Performing Fatness, Blackness, and Latinidad in Jennylin Duany's *Cabaret Unkempt*

*“Jenny used to say: I want to be able to love myself exactly how I am right now. And I want to support and have respect for all people exactly how they are, because that is our only point of departure.”*

—Elizabeth Doud

With futuristic electronic chords descending down in the dark, a deep sensual female voice fills the theatre as she melodiously sings the song’s refrain: *“with such a pretty faaaaaace.”*<sup>91</sup> A mute, black and white pastiche of old movies projects on the white backdrop, depicting white women singing in sexy ball gowns or modeling swimsuits. The descending electronic chords stop and a slow techno beat follows, as an introduction to a catwalk parade. As the lights go up, Jennylin Duany’s diva persona, *Jenny*,<sup>92</sup> enters from the backstage and confidently walks to the front, casually carrying a microphone in her right hand. As she walks towards the audience her face is almost expressionless, except for her piercing eyes that look straight at the audience. *Jenny* is a big Black woman: tall, fat, and curvaceous. The wide, vertical, white stripe in the middle of her black sleeveless evening dress accentuates her hourglass figure. A long, straight, platinum blond wig frames her high cheekbones. Her big, expressive eyes are painted with heavy green and silver makeup and adorned with long, silver false eyelashes. *Jenny* stops, and after intensely looking around with her big brown eyes, she brings the microphone to her fleshy lips and performs spoken word as her voice dances to the beat.

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<sup>91</sup> In this chapter I do not strictly follow MLA format for citing song lyrics. In order to help the reader distinguish clearly between prose and lyrics, the latter are in italics.

<sup>92</sup> Duany never uses a name to refer to her stage persona. I use this distinction between the artist-author and her character in order to facilitate my performance description and analysis. Also, the name is in italics to help the reader clearly distinguish it as a character’s name.

*How could she be so... undisciplined,  
or just down right indecent.*<sup>93</sup>

She looks at different people in the audience as if addressing them. First, she performs with a serious expression and a severe tone. Then she turns to someone else and, coquettishly flicking her hair, smiling, and batting her shimmery false eyelashes, continues in an alluring tone:

*When you've got a face like that baby,  
you can't have unwholesome feelings.*

Jenny walks to center stage, serious again, and sternly continues:

*Morbid of relating to  
or caused by disease,  
pathological  
or  
diseaaaaaaaased!!!!*

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<sup>93</sup> All lyrics and performance text are transcribed from the video. I chose to highlight the lyrics in italics to underscore their musicality, and differentiate it from prose. I am not following MLA citation format here, since this text is not published.



Figure 21: Jennylin Duany performing *Cabaret Unkempt* at the National Black Theater Festival 2007. Season announcement on the Cultural Odyssey web page.

*Jenny* goes on, changing her demeanor, facial expressions, and hand gestures, impersonating different people giving unsolicited weight loss advice. Some advice is friendly and tries to be tactful, “*Come on sweetie! / Give in a little / lose a little weight,*” some is straightforward and disapproving, “*All you need is discipline /get off the couch,*” some is cruel and shows disgust, “*Let’s just face it, it’s gruesome.*” Abruptly, *Jenny* switches to Spanish with a distinctive Cuban accent revealing she is not an African American woman but a Black Cubana:

*¡Niña, estás gordísima!*

*Girl, you are very fat!*

*¡Tienes que hacer algo!*

*You have to do something!*

*¡Con esa cara tan Linda!*

*With such pretty face!*

The electronic music continues and *Jenny* walks through the stage to the rhythm of the music. Someone yells from the audience, “Work it!” and others follow their lead, cheering. Then, *Jenny* turns back to the audience and starts to dance sensually. She marks the rhythm moving her hips side to side and sensually raises one arm at a time. Next, *Jenny* extends her arms sideways, unfolding them and displaying their beauty and fullness. The tempo of the music accelerates and *Jenny*, now with her back to the audience, twists her torso to the left and swings her left arm behind her, as if grasping at something she can’t quite reach. As she repeats this movement from side to side for several beats, it gains its own momentum. *Jenny* stops and turns forward, rapidly walks closer to the edge of the stage, and begins the arm-unfolding dance again, now facing the audience. After this sequence, *Jenny* brings her hands to her breasts and sensually slides them down her hips as if seducing the audience.

This chapter examines how *Cabaret Unkempt* challenges assumptions of Blackness, Latinidad, and fatness. I argue that Duany’s autobiographical performance is a Black Feminist intervention and resistance against prevailing cultural definitions that render the female Black body as deviant and out of control. Furthermore, I assert that by elevating herself to diva status Duany accesses an alternative and subversive space where her fat Black body is centered and desired, yet unattainable. The diva is divine, larger than life, glamorous, and the talent housed in her body is peculiar. She is there on stage

for us, but yet is not like us—she is extraordinary, and she is adored for it. This unattainable quality of the diva persona is particularly significant for the gorda because of the ways the fat body has been vulnerable to public handling, shaming, and symbolic and literal dismembering. Thus, the diva offers Duany a representational space to stage the "excessive body" in a subversive and desire-affirming way where “she is in control of the gaze” (Lockridge). Once in that empowered position, Duany’s diva —literally and metaphorically— strips down and, through confessional spoken word and virtuosic expressive choreographed movement, engages the audience with her most intimate bodily struggles and desires in order to bring forward an alternative way to understand, value, and embrace the Afro Cubana gorda.

Some of the questions I address in this chapter are: What makes this a Black Feminist performance? How does Duany use the diva as an icon through which to claim center stage? How does dance become a platform through which the gorda can claim queer desire? What fat, Black, and Latino stereotypes is Duany challenging and what alternative subjectivity is she presenting? How does she apply synecdoche, a constant trope in the stigmatization of fat people, to instead represent wholeness?

This chapter begins with a section titled “A Cuban American Experimental Performer” in which I present a brief artistic biography of Duany and a production history of *Cabaret Unkempt*, in order to foreground my argument and highlight the work’s dramaturgical influences and experimental aesthetics. My assertions in this section are based on archival research of reviews of the performance, as well as of Duany’s previous artistic work. I also rely on a personal interview with performer

Elizabeth Doud, who collaborated with Duany in *Cabaret Unkempt*, performing the *Ballerina*.<sup>94</sup> This section is followed by a brief synopsis of the performance.

The following three sections are dedicated to the analysis of a recording of *Cabaret Unkempt* at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, which was performed as part of the National Performance Network's (NPN) Annual Conference on December 8, 2007. In the section "*Negra, Gorda, Mami: Troubling Latinidad, Performing Black Feminisms*," I identify the characteristics of *Cabaret Unkempt* that resonate with Black Feminist aesthetics and argue that Duany uses them to trouble ideas of Blackness and Latinidad as inherently exclusive. The next section, "Unkempt Diva: Fatness and Virtuosity," examines how Duany elevates *Jenny*, her character, to diva status in order to reclaim the value of the fat Black body, only to then strip it of its mysticism and claim its humanity. Then, in the section "Choreographing Violence, Dialogue, and Queer Desire," I focus on how Duany uses dance to debunk assumptions about the fat body's movement and physical agility and engage in conversations about the Black female body. Furthermore, in this performance dance becomes the space where the gorda claims her sexuality. In "Conclusion: Duany's Ode to Herself," I describe *Cabaret Unkempt*'s final scene where *Jenny* showcases, caresses, and reflects upon her relationship with her arms. She ends by embracing them in all their fatness, and challenging the audience to see her as she sees herself—as a complete human being.

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<sup>94</sup> Duany does not use a name to refer to Doud's character, but I use this name in order to facilitate my performance description and analysis. Also, it is written in italics to help the reader clearly distinguish that it as a character's name.

### **A CUBAN AMERICAN EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMER**

Jennylin Duany was an Afro Cuban American artist from South Florida who used experimental performance to engage in socially critical dialogues with her audience. Fat women and Latinas performers do not fit within the traditional theatre paradigm; they are usually kept on the sidelines, if present at all. Thus, it is necessary and urgent for gordas to create their own space, or to access alternative artistic niches where they are more likely to be embraced. Duany completed her B.A. at The New World School of the Arts College (NWSA) in Florida, an arts conservatory focused on the creative process, critical thinking, and collaboration. Attending NWSA allowed her to train and connect with national and international experimental performance artists. There she learned about collective creation and created a work ethic that valued process as much as the final product (Doud "Interview"). At NWSA she also met the artists with whom she would later found the experimental Akropolis Acting Company, a prolific Miami group that emerged in 1994. The group originally gained notoriety for staging plays by avant-garde playwrights such as Jean Genet's *The Balcony* and Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Theater critic Pamela Gordon praised their aesthetic sophistication, their seriousness as artists, and the significance of their endeavor, noting that they "provided theatergoers with the opportunity to see [international, political, and experimental plays] not often produced in South Florida" ("Homoneurotic").

Duany later became the artistic director of Akropolis, and under her tenure the group moved into creating experimental and original performances. In 1996, when interviewed by Gordon about her new role as director Duany said, "I'm really looking

forward to incorporating a lot of mixed media like film and movement and dance into newly developed works” (“Fashion Victims”). Thus, Duany was interested in pushing the aesthetic of Akropolis’ work towards the experimental and multidisciplinary. This change led to collaborations with other experimental South Florida artists such as video artist Dinorah de Jesús Rodríguez and experimental music composer Ricardo Lastre, who would later work in the production of *Cabaret Unkempt*. This is significant because as Africa/African Diaspora and Multi-Ethnic Theatre scholar Kathy A. Perkins asserts, “too many women of color continue to work in isolation and in near anonymity.” Perkins adds that even though women of color have developed an important body of theatrical work, very few enjoy significant funding that allows for full productions and visibility.

Besides her artistic work, Duany was also an artist educator and arts administrator. She taught at South Florida Art Center, Miami's Arts 4 Learning, and Akropolis' outreach programs, and facilitated workshops and master classes in voice, movement, objects, sound, and performance composition (Sanctuary Stage). She was also the coordinator of the education and residency programs for Miami Dade College's *Cultura del Lobo* (“Wolf Culture”) program.<sup>95</sup> It was through this program that she met Brazilian choreographer Giovanni Luquini and American dancer Elizabeth Doud, who would eventually become her artistic partners. In working with these artists, Duany began to experiment more deeply with the possibilities of her fat body on stage. Working at

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<sup>95</sup>This program produces a series of performance presentations by national and international artists, and Duany’s job was to coordinate and host artists’ residencies and workshops for the Miami Dade College community. This post allowed her to meet and befriend the most vibrant emerging and well-established artists. Most importantly, she also became acquainted with other organizations around the country that supported the work of emerging and mid-career artists providing a variety of resources, some of which supported her production of *Cabaret Unkempt*.

Miami Dade College also gave her access to organizations that would later support the production of *Cabaret Unkempt*.<sup>96</sup> This is relevant because funding is a challenge all independent artists face, but one women of color face most severely.

As a fat performer, Duany found that the possibilities for her were limited when it came to the roles in which she was cast. When working in theatre productions outside Akropolis, she was often offered roles that were static (Doud “Interview”). In an interview with dance critic Nancy Wozny, Duany said, “I didn't always want to be the big gospel singer. Why can't my character ever fall in love? Fat people fall in love, too” (“In *Cabaret Unkempt* Image is Everything”). Not only were the roles she was offered limited, it was assumed that because she was a heavy woman, her movement was impaired. This frustrated Duany, however, she had also internalized the idea that in order to dance on stage she needed a smaller body.

Duany further developed as a dancer and physical performer by working with Luquini and Doud. After collaborating with Duany in an Akropolis production of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra van Kant*, Luquini and Doud invited her to perform in a production by the Luquini Performance Troupe, a contemporary dance company. She was hesitant at first, but she eventually joined them. As she recalls in an interview for the *Santa Cruz Weekly* newspaper this was a turning point for her performance work:

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<sup>96</sup> One of the challenges artists experience is limited access to funding. While Duany had to apply and present a compelling proposal in order to find this financial support, having the knowledge of their existence — especially since one of the organizations, Diverseworks, is from a different state (Texas) and the NPN is a national organization— speaks to her resourcefulness.

We were in the middle of creating a new work, and I said to [Luquini], “I love the idea of what you're talking about.... Feel free to give me more stuff, because I'm going to drop another 30 pounds.” And he said to me, “What? I don't want you to drop weight to do the production, I want *you*.” The minute he said that to me, it was just so liberating. (qtd. in Messina)

This affirmation marked the beginning of a decade-long artistic collaboration and friendship with Luquini and Doud. The three would eventually end up being the trio behind Akropolis, as by 1998 other members moved on to other endeavors.

As Duany had envisioned, Akropolis' work further moved into new devised work, integrating experimental elements like dance, original soundscapes and music, film art, non-linear narrative, ritual, and elements of performance art. Miami photographer David Whitman, who collaborated as the trio's documentary photographer for a decade, wrote in an article for *Progreso Weekly*: “Their work radiates athleticism, grace, theatrical magic, and intelligent humor splashed with more serious social commentary. It challenges, taunts, flirts, provokes, propels, disturbs, dazzles.” Duany, Doud, and Luquini's work reflected their sociopolitical concerns without being didactic, as well as their artistic and personal affinity. After almost a decade working together in 2006, Luquini separated from the trio. Akropolis remained a non-profit production company, and Duany and Doud formed Las Negras Theatre Collective, a “creative entity to produce original works of theater and educational opportunities in the arts” (Doud “Projects”).

Originally conceived as a solo performance, *Cabaret Unkempt* was Las Negras Theatre Collective's first production. In a phone conversation Doud recalled, “At the time

the [National Performance Network]<sup>97</sup> was touring and supporting solo artists, this helped [Jennylin] realize that she could create her own work instead of trying to fit into roles assigned by directors and playwrights for her.” From the piece’s inception, Doud supported Duany’s creative process, helping her conceptualize the performance through dialogue and by offering ideas and feedback. Later, at Duany’s request, Doud became an integral contributor to *Cabaret Unkempt*, as a performer and co-creator. Both artists spent countless hours brainstorming, theorizing, improvising, devising, and rehearsing. Yet, Doud explained to me that she never considered herself an author, since she was at the service of Duany’s goals and vision.

*Cabaret Unkempt* is a semi-autobiographical multimedia performance based on Duany’s experience as a fat Black Cuban woman and performer. The piece first began to take shape when Duany wrote a monologue exploring the idea of plastic surgery and the memory of the flesh. In an interview with *Houston Press* she recalls:

Someone in my family was having a mastectomy, and at the same time another member was having breast enhancement surgery. It was really interesting for me to see that duality. For one person, it was a matter of life and death. For another person, it was also about life and death, but in a more psychological way. I live in Miami and there's a big plastic surgery industry that's going on. I realized that our bodies had become disposable. If you want surgery, you can have it. If you don't have the money, don't worry about it. You can mortgage your house and pay for it, no problem. But do you ever have a dialogue with yourself? How do you get to that decision? It was really important for me to explore that. (qtd. in Williams)

Duany made an appointment with a plastic surgeon, both as research for her piece and as a possibility for herself (Doud “Interview”). This experience and the conversations she

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<sup>97</sup> The National Performance Network (NPN) Creative Fund provides artists with funding for creation and touring of their work.

had during the appointment with the receptionist, nurse, doctor, and her inner thoughts inspired one of *Cabaret Unkempt*'s most powerful scenes titled "Doctor's Office Monologue," which will be described and analyzed later in this chapter. In this monologue she explores the aforementioned idea of the body as disposable, and the internal conflict of wanting to fit in, but fearing the consequences of taking such extreme measures.

As part of her research for the piece, Duany decided to visit her extended family in Cuba in order to uncover the cultural differences between Cuban and U.S. conceptions of body image (Doud "Interview"). Her parents and older sister immigrated to New York City in the 60s as part of the first migratory wave after the Cuban Revolution. Duany was born in New York; when she was six she moved with her family to Miami Beach, Florida where her grandparents lived.<sup>98</sup> Thus, she recognized that even though she grew up in the midst of exiled Cuban culture, she was also American and could not underestimate the effects media and consumerism had on the immigrant culture in which she grew up (Doud "Interview"). These concerns are reflected in *Cabaret Unkempt* as Duany discusses how she lives between two cultures and the anxieties each has with Blackness and fatness.

Consistent with her collective performance formation and multidisciplinary vision, Duany sought the collaboration of other local Miami artists when creating this piece. The elements of *Cabaret Unkempt*'s production design actively aid in the

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<sup>98</sup> The state of Florida, and specifically Miami-Dade County, is one of the four major enclaves in the U.S. where Cuban immigrants live.

storytelling. The performance's music, including soundscapes and silence, designed by Lastre, plays an important role in setting the mood and narrating the performance's story. Justin Townsend's lightning design not only signals changes in moods and scenes, but projects contrasting shadows of the performers that make them appear thinner, fatter, and at moments, omnipresent. Similarly, Estela Vrancovich's costume and prop design adds—and also literally peels—layers of meaning, as the Black/fat and white/skinny bodies are un/covered and interact with each other. Lastly, film and visual artist Dinorah de Jesús Rodríguez created the performance's video art. Working with hand manipulated 35mm slides, projections of re-appropriated graffiti, and 16mm film strewn with hidden messages, de Jesús Rodríguez's designs enhance and even become part of the storytelling throughout the piece.

*Cabaret Unkempt* was a project invested in dialogue and social justice through community-based workshops that further explored the ideas present in the performance. This focus positions the piece within a tradition of Latina feminists performers that value consciousness raising, solidarity, and exploration of embodiment based on the physical and social lives of marginal communities (Ramírez and Casiano 15). This approach is better epitomized by the idea of “theories in the flesh” embraced by Latina and Black feminists. Queer Chicana feminist scholars Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga describe this concept as such: “a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings— all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (*This Bridge Called my Back* 23). In other words, it refers to the exploration and understanding of the world around women of color based

on our everyday experiences and material realities. In *Cabaret Unkempt*, Duany embodies this concept, performing her subjectivities as a Black Latina and claiming agency through visibility and self-definition.

Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black women and Latina performers have found creative ways to produce their performance work, which otherwise received little to no mainstream support (Perkins 359-360). Some of the strategies these performers use include self-financing, seeking the support of arts and cultural non-profits, small formats such as solo performance or small casts, minimal costume and scenery, and making use of alternative venues such as community centers, bars, private houses, classrooms, and other non-traditional cost-effective performance spaces. *Cabaret Unkempt* is also minimalist, as it relies on multilayer costumes, and props, as well as projections and music, instead of scenery. It was performed in both main stages, like the Carnival Center in Miami, and in small, multipurpose spaces like Diverseworks' performance space in Houston, thus reaching a wide variety of audiences.

In April 2006, Duany presented a five-minute work-in-progress version of *Cabaret Unkempt* in Brooklyn, NY at 651 ARTS' Salon Series<sup>99</sup> of new work by African Diaspora artists. Later in November, Duany's Diverseworks<sup>100</sup> partnership offered her a week-long residency in Houston that provided rehearsal and performance space and an

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<sup>99</sup> 651 ARTS is a Brooklyn-based organization dedicated to the development, production, and presentation of contemporary work by performance artists of African descent. For more information go to: [www.651arts.org](http://www.651arts.org).

<sup>100</sup> Diverseworks is a Houston-based organization that sponsors and promotes the work of local and national contemporary experimental artists from different disciplines. Besides grants for the creation of new work, internships, and providing space to present the work, it also provides different resources, like free legal and accounting services to individual artists or non-profit art organizations, in order to support art making. For more information go to: [www.diverseworks.org](http://www.diverseworks.org).

audience. In both instances, Duany performed solo and presented a version of what would later be the last scene of the full-length version. *Cabaret Unkempt*'s full-length premier as a two-woman performance was on December 2006 at the Carnival Center (currently the Adrienne Arsht Performing Arts Center)<sup>101</sup> in Miami.

Over the next two years, *Cabaret Unkempt* toured nationally in places like the National Black Theatre Festival (NBTF)<sup>102</sup> in Salem, North Carolina, the Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA) ("Latin American Arts and Culture Movement")<sup>103</sup> in San José, California, and the NPN Annual Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana. Its Spanish version, *Cabaret del Descuido*, also toured through NPN's Performing Americas program to Mujeres en las Artes (MUA) ("Women in the Arts")<sup>104</sup> in Honduras and Arte Teatro ("Theatre Art") in El Salvador in 2008. In addition to presenting *Cabaret Unkempt*, Duany and Doud typically offered performance workshops or master classes related to body-image in the communities where they performed.

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<sup>101</sup> The second largest arts center in the U.S., the Arsht Performing Arts Center's mission is to serve the greater Miami-Dade County by sponsoring local artists, presenting a wide variety of work from different disciplines and national and international artists, and offering arts education programs for the local community. For more information go to [www.arshtcenter.org](http://www.arshtcenter.org).

<sup>102</sup> Based in Salem, North Carolina, the NBTF's mission is to sponsor, preserve, and bring together the work of Black artists from across the U.S. For more information go to: [www.nbtf.org](http://www.nbtf.org).

<sup>103</sup> MACLA is a San José, CA community-based organization that promotes the work of contemporary Latina/o artist of different disciplines whose work is committed to social justice and dialogue. For more information go to: <http://maclaarte.org>.

<sup>104</sup> MUA is a Honduran non-profit organization based in Tegucigalpa that, through sponsorship, diffusion and education, promotes contemporary artistic work of different disciplines. For more information go to: <http://muaartes.org>.



Figure 22: Doud and Duany during their *Sipping Fury from a Tea Cup* photoshoot. Taken from the Knight Arts webpage.

Unfortunately, in November 2009, Duany was hospitalized due to a chronic liver condition. While recovering, she caught pneumonia and died unexpectedly of liver failure on January 17, 2010. She was 39 years old. At the time she was scheduled to start an artistic residency at Florida State University and to premiere, along with Doud, *Sipping Fury from a Tea Cup* at FUNDarte's *Miami on Stage* in June 2010.<sup>105</sup> Doud adapted the two-woman performance she and Duany had been developing for two years into a solo performance. In the piece, Duany was present posthumously through a voice over recorded earlier during the piece's development. Thus, in true diva fashion, she was able

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<sup>105</sup> FUNDarte is a Miami based "multidisciplinary non-profit organization dedicated to producing, presenting, and promoting music, theater, dance, film, and visual arts that speak to Miami's diverse cultures with an emphasis on Hispanic arts and culture." For more information go to: <http://www.fundarte.us/>.

to transcend death, and perform beyond her physical body in the ultimate experimental performance of immortality.

### ***CABARET UNKEMPT: A SYNOPSIS***

*Cabaret Unkempt* is an experimental, multimedia, 55-minute, two-woman performance. It consists of ten scenes, or a series of ten performative actions that do not have a linear plot. The piece opens with Doud on stage topless, wearing a pink tutu and a pink pig mask. In the second scene, *Jenny* is dressed with a straight, blond wig and a long, black and white patchwork gown, with diva-like extravagance, sings a tongue-in-cheek spoken words song titled “With Such a Pretty Face.” In the third scene, which I will analyze in this chapter, *Jenny* performs a candid monologue in which she is consulting with a plastic surgeon and reflecting on the memory and value of her “excess” flesh. Subsequently, in the fourth scene, the *Ballerina* undresses *Jenny* to her slip, then sets up an operating room where she symbolically performs plastic surgery, making a nearly naked picture of *Jenny* thinner and making a picture of herself curvier. Simultaneous to this operation, *Jenny* moves through a dance sequence while a film is projected over her belly and her dancing shadow is projected on the cyclorama.

The fifth scene is a dance duet reminiscent of contact improvisation that I will discuss in greater detail later in the chapter. In it, the *Ballerina* and *Jenny* (who is blindfolded) first take turns playing with each other’s weight. Then, they separate and dance on the floor, mirroring each other’s movements. The *Ballerina* eventually exits,

and *Jenny* continues the dance solo while a voice-over in Spanish is heard in which a Cuban woman discusses her latest weight loss, thanks to a new diet pill from Brazil.

In the next scene, *Jenny*'s movement sequence slows down as she recites a poem of her authorship titled *Ms. San Lazarus Counsels Nurse R. on the Happy Good Luck Diet*. The poem is rather cryptic with allusions to self and others policing a person's dieting. After a blackout *Jenny* exits. The seventh scene starts with the *Ballerina* dragging a bundle to center stage, where she unwraps it. Using the variety of objects found in the bundle—including fresh flowers, a picture of the *Ballerina* in a black sexy outfit, a tiny plastic toy pig, scalpels, and *elekes* or necklaces dedicated to the different *Orishas* or deities of the Afro Cuban religion commonly known as *Santería*<sup>106</sup>—she performs a ritual, and then constructs what appears to be a fat suit. As the fattened *Ballerina*'s shadow is projected onto the backdrop, lights fade for a second and *Jenny*'s shadow appears overlapping the *Ballerina*'s.

The following scene is a beautiful and sensual solo dance by *Jenny*, who is wearing a long black slip. She opens the slip's invisible pockets, located over her breasts, to reveal Slinkies<sup>107</sup> that she stretches and wraps around her as she dances. I will further describe and analyze this dance in this chapter. In the ninth scene, Dinorah de Jesús Rodríguez's *Is It True That Blonds Have More Fun* is projected; the film artist describes

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<sup>106</sup> Santería (Way of the Saints) is a religion developed by enslaved West Africans brought forcibly to the Americas, also known as Yoruba, Lucumí, or Regla de Oshá. It is based on the Ifá Yoruba religion and while its origins are usually traced to Cuba and Brazil, today it is found all around the world. In order to avoid censorship during slavery, believers equated each of the Orishas with a Catholic saint, hence the name Santería (a name that some believers accept, and others reject). For more information read Mary Ann Clark's *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion*.

<sup>107</sup> A Slinky is a popular toy created in the U.S. in the 1940s, made of a pre-compressed spiral metal spring that can stretch and bounce back to its original shape.

this piece as “a graffiti remake of the classic Clairol hair dye ad of the 60s.” In the final scene, the *Ballerina* arranges a 16mm projector and then sits downstage, watching *Jenny*’s last movement sequence and monologue. In this intimate intervention, the performer shares with the audience her love-hate relationship with her big arms and concludes the piece by challenging them to look at her through a different lens, as a human.

***NEGRA, GORDA, MAMI: TROUBLING LATINIDAD, PERFORMING BLACK FEMINISMS***

*Cabaret Unkempt* is a semi-autobiographical performance that resists the devaluation and misrepresentation of Afro Latinas. In this performance Duany addresses how ideas of race, size, ethnicity, and womanhood relate to the Black female body, and define multiple layers of devaluation of the fat woman of color. Duany’s work shares characteristics of Black feminist performance. Foremost among these characteristics is, as Women and Gender Studies scholar Lisa M. Anderson articulates, that Black feminist dramatic aesthetics are invested in the “project of reinventing black identity—particularly black female identity” (119). Moreover, Black feminist performance recovers and reinvents stereotypes of Black women, transforming them from stand-ins for dominant racist and sexist images into multidimensional human beings. Duany’s performance challenges, rearticulates, and reveals Latina womanhood as Black, and Black womanhood as Latina.

Duany disrupts and unsettles the dominant configuration of race in the U.S. where Latina/os, as well as other racial groups and ethnicities that do not fit seamlessly into the

Black/white dichotomy, are categorized as “non-white” or “non-Black.” She also disrupts the notion of Blacks and Latina/os as monolithic and distinctly different communities that are (allegedly) locked in constant tension with one another.<sup>108</sup> In her first appearance, *Jenny* uses spoken a word song, “With such a Pretty Face,” mixing melody and rhythmic narration.<sup>109</sup> Spoken word is a performative poetry genre rooted in storytelling, which has been especially popular among and developed by urban African American and Latino artists in the U.S. since the 60s. This is one of many examples of cultural expressions born from artistic collaborations and overlap between these communities.

*Jenny*’s distinctive U.S. English accent suggests that she is a native speaker; her accent coupled with the dark brown color of skin color suggests that she is African American.<sup>110</sup> However, on the second stanza of the spoken song she switches from fluent English to fluent Spanish, thus revealing her bilingual Latinidad.

*Bueno, ya se dijo:*

*negra, gorda, mami,*

*comelona, lardo, gordinflona, rica,*

*ballena.*

*Well, it was already said:*

*Black, fat, Mamma,*

*glutton, lard, fatty,*

*tasty, whale.*

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<sup>108</sup> For an in-depth discussion on this subject, read Suzanne Oboler and Anani Ozidzienyo’s *Neither Enemies, nor Friend: Latinos, Blacks and Afro-Latinos*.

<sup>109</sup> Some examples of spoken word songs are James Brown’s “Heroin King,” Gil Scott-Heron’s “The Revolution will not be Televised,” and Madonna’s “Justify My Love.”

<sup>110</sup> Duany’s uncommon name does necessarily not hint at the possibility of a Latin American heritage.

Her use of language also reveals her cultural affiliation, as she is not speaking standardized Spanish, but has a distinctive Cuban subdialect and accent.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, this enumeration of euphemisms for fat women names the evident—the size and color of her body—and the not so evident—the stigmatization and harassment inflicted on fat bodies in general and Duany’s fat Afro Cuban American body in particular.

The list of insults starts with *negra* (“Black”), instead of an epithet for fat, thus, revealing the ways that race inextricably intersects with other notions of excess in the female body. Speaking in Spanish, Duany challenges the already destabilized Black and white paradigm that does not have space for those who do not fall in either category and complicates the notion of *Latina/o* as non-white, non-Black, and Mexican/South of the border. Furthermore, she defies notions of Cuban culture as comprised of whitened *mestizos* and light skinned *mulattos*, and the consequent racial integration and democracy presumed from such a falsehood.

In Cuba, as well as the rest of Latin America, the post-colonial nation was conceived as a unifying *mestizaje* or mixture of white, Black, and Indigenous races that gave the nation a sense of unity and strength. However, as Afro Caribbean Diaspora Studies scholar Jossianna Arroyo-Martínez explains, socio economic and political powers remained in the hands of white populations, while Black and Indigenous populations were perceived and defined as weak and “nunca lograban definirse como civilización, dado su [supuesto] atrazo físico, moral e intelectual” (“never having achieved definition

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<sup>111</sup> Only those familiar with Cuban accents will distinguish this. Central and South Americans may not necessarily recognize it as specifically Cuban, but at least as a Spanish Caribbean dialect, which to the uninitiated ear is undistinguishable. The Caribbean dialect is influenced by the dialects of the Canary Islands and Andalucía; it also has strong West African influences, as well as indigenous vocabulary.

as civilized given their [presumed] physical, moral, and intellectual backwardness”) (13). In other words, in the melting pot of races, *blanqueamiento* or whitening is the desirable and superior end result and everything else is “other.”<sup>112</sup> Thus *Jenny*, as an Afro Cubana, disturbs the discrete U.S. American racial binary of Black and white, where every Black person is presumed to be African American, and troubles the historic erasure of Black bodies in representations of *Latinidad*, where Latina/os are conceived of as non-white and non-Black.

Duany’s racial identity is unmistakably Black as she presents the phenotype often associated with Blackness (dark brown skin, kinky hair, wide nose, wide lips, and big butt). As the first U.S.-born child of first wave post-revolution Cuban immigrant<sup>113</sup> parents, she is part of a Black minority, as most of the exiles were upper class whites. In fact, Performance Studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz claims that:

By rarely operating outside of local ethnic groups, and not interacting with the national body, Cuban Americans are able to formulate a collective imaginary narrative that positions them as distanced from the palpable realities of U.S. racism, while at the same time eliding the very fact of their relational proximity to other subaltern groups in the U.S. (79)

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<sup>112</sup> In March 2015, Univisión fashion commentator Rodner Figueroa was fired after he said during a gossip show that First Lady Michelle Obama “looks like she is part of the cast of *Planet of the Apes*.” This and Figueroa’s open letter apology where he argues he can’t bear being called racist since he is the child of an Afro Latino father, and also the first openly gay Latino TV host, gave way to a discussion about the lack of racial diversity in Latino media, the prevalent discourses of *blanqueamiento* in Latin America, and its U.S. Diaspora, and how in both, blackface and other racist slurs are still condoned. For more read: [wlrn.org/post/latest-univision-race-gaffe-shows-culture-gap](http://wlrn.org/post/latest-univision-race-gaffe-shows-culture-gap).

<sup>113</sup> Cubans have settled in specific areas of the U.S. (South Florida, New York, and until the 80s, Puerto Rico) and have held claim to their cultural nationality. The third largest Latino migrant group in the U.S., Cubans are the group with the most upward class mobility. They have adapted well to the capitalist American way of life, establishing business, attaining higher education and political power, the latter mostly in Florida, creating a sense and an image of sanitized citizenship and inclusion in the U.S. American landscape.

Muñoz further argues that this isolation has created a fantasy that Cubans are shielded from the racism other Latino and immigrant groups face. However, this “fantasy” of shielded Cubanidad is not available to every Cuban.

For Black Cubans it is hard, if not impossible, to shield themselves from racism, even within their own culture. They are twice a “minority”— both Latinos and Black—and are marginalized within their own ethnic group. Thus, there is little room for them in this idealized perception of Cubanidad. Furthermore, like other Afro Latinos or Black people from other nationalities and ethnicities, once outside their own enclave they are assumed to be African American. Nevertheless, Black Latinos have historically identified themselves with their country of origin instead of their race. However, as Latino Studies scholars Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores explain “Afro-Latin@s increasingly identify as such in recent years, and their group [sic] past demonstrates a sense of tradition and shared social and cultural realities (4). In other words, many Afro Latina/os recognize —sometimes through the process of integration to the U.S. American culture<sup>114</sup>— that regardless of their national identification, they also have a similar experience as people of African ancestry. As Black men and women living in the U.S., Afro Latina/os history and experience may be similar to those of African Americans, but also distinctive.

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<sup>114</sup> Afro Dominicans and Afro Puerto Ricans have reported they did not identify as Black until living in the U.S. Their identificatory process was not only based on the national discourses of one mixed race where Blackness is still inferior and invisibilized, but also due to identification politics based on the different gradients of skin tone and class. In his article “The Tribulations of Blackness: Stages in Dominican Identity” Silvio Torres-Salliant argues that the experience of Black Dominicans in the Diaspora “can help to rid the country of white supremacist and negrophobic discourse” (143).

In “The Doctor’s Office Monologue,” Duany uses the butt as a synecdoche for Blackness in the context of the two cultures she inhabits. *Jenny* is standing in front of the audience, addressing them as if they were the plastic surgeon she is consulting for weight loss and body contouring. As *Jenny* discusses her reasons for the visit, the *Ballerina* has helped her strip off her evening dress, wig, and fake eyelashes and then leaves to set up props on the other side of the stage. *Jenny* continues her monologue, and at several occasions she is hesitant about trimming the “excessive” parts of her body. Here, she asserts her fondness for her big butt; turning her rear to the audience, she herself takes a look and caresses it with one hand:

Take my butt, for instance, and my hips –these cultural influences that I possess– [they] have grown to their mature nature as a reaction to the amount of sashaying they have had to do between two cultures: one society that speaks their offensive subtext openly, and another that encourages you to bury your racist, politically incorrect behavior where no one can find it; not even you. The result is two perfectly large rounded bottoms to my curvaceous top.

These two cultures are the Cuban culture and the U.S. American culture. As the opening spoken word poem establishes, Cubans have no qualms about calling out her weight, offering unsolicited advice, or showing amazement at her size. While American culture may be more aware of how these comments might be offensive or rude, politeness does not necessarily equal acceptance or lack of discrimination. In different ways, both cultures are guilty of chastising physical features such as wide hips —most common in Afro Latinas— as undesirable or even treacherous. *Jenny* addresses herself as a

transcultural subject;<sup>115</sup> she is a product of the exchange and tensions between these two cultures as well as the problematic values (or lack thereof) both cultures inscribe on women's rears.

The butt conjures a historical phobia and fascination with Black women's sexuality in Western culture. This history is best epitomized by Saartjie Baartman's life and afterlife. Baartman herself, and later her skeleton, brain, body cast, and dissected genitalia, were displayed in Europe from the 19<sup>th</sup> century through the 1970s and were not put to rest in her native South Africa until 2002. Her big buttocks were seen as related to her elongated genitalia, both assumed markers of a "primitive" and excessive sexuality and consequent amorality (Gilman 85-91). In "Jennifer's Butt: Valorizing the Puerto Rican Racialized Female Body" Latina/o Studies scholar Frances Negrón-Muntaner explains the logic of the still pervasive threat of the big butt in U.S. American culture:<sup>116</sup>

A big *culo* [ass] upsets hegemonic (white) notions of beauty and good taste because it is a sign of the dark, incomprehensible excess of 'Latino' and other African diaspora cultures. Excess of food (unrestrained), excess of shitting (dirty), and excess of sex (heathen), are its three vital signs. A big Latin butt is an open air invitation to pleasures constructed as illicit in WASP ideologues, heteronormativity, and the medical establishment through the three deadly vectors of miscegenation, sodomy, and high-fat diet. Unlike breast, which is functional,

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<sup>115</sup> Transculturation, a concept developed by Latin American scholars, involves the exchange between two (or more) cultures resulting in a new culture with shared characteristics from both, yet distinct from one another (Ortiz 537). However, transculturation is not a harmonious process; it often involves a violent culture clash wherein the transculturated subject finds herself in a constant power play and negotiation between these cultures in order to resist marginalization.

<sup>116</sup>It is true, as Negrón-Muntaner further explains in this article, that López opened a space for an alternative aesthetic as it relates to the rear, which allows for the proud mainstream display and celebration of her booty and those of Beyoncé, Sofía Vergara, Nikki Minaj, and Shakira. However, their rears are not devoid of their hypersexual meaning. On the contrary, these artists have cashed in on the sexual value of the big butt. They have made it desirable for white woman to have a firm round butt, and the refocus on this area within the fitness industry proves this. However, their big butts are still policed and ridiculed. Big booties are allowed in woman of color as long as they are large, but not too large, and the rest of the body is contained. The standards of beauty for the rest of the body still apply.

big bottoms have no morals, no symbolic family function, and no use in reproduction. (237)

In other words, the butt is a negative signifier in the female body based on its conceptualization as it relates to race, sexuality, gender, and weight. Negrón-Muntaner contends that in contrast to these “analphobic” WASP ideologies, in a Puerto Rican context the butt is “an epistemological resource [that] registers the ambivalent triumph of nonwhite aesthetics upon *boricua* cultural production, even among the educated elites” (239). Ambivalent, that is, because in colloquial language culo is used in different expressions with negative contexts, especially as it relates to homosexuality. While Negrón-Muntaner’s analysis is specific to Puerto Rico, it resonates with Caribbean and African American cultural attitudes, where a big butt is a desirable trait in a woman.

*Jenny*’s hesitation to trim the “excess” out of her butt challenges the hegemonic negative implications of the butt in the U.S. imaginary. Moreover, it affirms Afrocentric aesthetic values. Thus, it resonates with one of the characteristics Women and Gender scholar Lisa M. Anderson lists in “Black Feminist Aesthetics” since it “Directly confronts the racist, sexist images of Black women that have been projected by dominant culture” (116). Most importantly, in describing her butt as perfect, *Jenny* celebrates Blackness and fatness.

*Cabaret Unkempt* is invested in complicating the notion that, within the U.S., Blackness and Latinidad are inherently locked in conflict. This idea became popular as a result of the 2000 Census, which announced the rapid growth of Latina/o populations in the U.S, and has been used to bolster the false assumption that a growing Latina/o

population would jeopardize African Americans' access to already limited resources. This conceptualization ignores the history of cohabitation, cultural, social, and sexual exchange as well as collaboration and solidarity of people from both communities (Johnson and Rivera-Servera 4). Moreover, it erases the reality of people who share both identities, whether they are the child of a non-Latina/o Black and a Latina/o parent or because they have Afro Latin American ancestry. To perform her Afro Latinidad, Duany employs another characteristic of Black Feminist drama, conjuring "incidents in the history of blacks in the United States, the diaspora, and Africa to tell a history that is generally unknown to most people in the United States, black and white" (Anderson 115). In other words, through performance of her explicit body in *Cabaret Unkempt* Duany gives visibility to the transcultural and inter-racial subjectivity of Black Latina/os.

Lastly, *Cabaret Unkempt* is also invested in performing a dialogue that explores the existing tensions between Black/curvaceous and white/skinny bodies. Scholar Patricia Hill Collins defines the willingness to engage in dialogue in order to create new epistemologies as one of the principles of Black feminist thought (766-7). This dialogue is embodied in the presence and relationship between Duany's persona *Jenny* and Elizabeth Doud's skinny *Ballerina* character. Doud performs different roles during the play: a stage aid or observer, a metaphor of Western standards of beauty, *Jenny's* alter ego or double. Through dance, Duany and Doud also embody not only the tensions but the possibility of alliances between these two bodies.

This dialogue between a Black woman and her white female friend is reminiscent of Robbie McCauley's performance *Sally's Rape*. Black feminist scholar Sydné Mahone describes McCauley's performance as:

Two women hard at work, attempting to connect on some level. Dialogue across difference, with all its baggage and misunderstandings, is both the subject of this work and the work that we must do, in the interest of survival. McCauley insists that dialogue is the key, that the continuing struggle to find the right language is an activist strategy, a possibility for transformation, an ongoing work-in-progress itself. Instead of positing a false resolution, she explores the tension of interracial conflict as a productive force to continually reinvigorate our dialogue about race and gender. (584)

Like McCauley, Duany is invested in a conversation depicting the reality of her friendship with a white woman, illustrating the connections and the challenges, allowing for moments of risk between such dissimilar bodies, and the social meaning they hold. Duany does not present herself as a victim of society, but she poignantly delineates how ideas of race, size, ethnicity, and womanhood relate to the Black female body and defines the multiple layers of devaluation of the fat woman of color.

#### **AN UNKEMPT DIVA: FATNESS AND VIRTUOSITY**

Historically, there are few roles that have placed the fat woman performer center stage. The freak show fat lady and the opera diva are two of those roles. In *Cabaret Unkempt*, Jenny impersonates the diva, an icon that originally referred to gifted female opera singers. The diva is a figure of excess, an extraordinary voice in an extraordinary body capable of producing virtuosity. She is also glamorous, fabulous, enigmatic, dramatic, unattainable, and seductive (Koestenbaum, Leonardi and Pope, Gamson, Doty). Fatness

was, and partly still is, associated with singing virtuosity, from Maria Callas<sup>117</sup> to Aretha Franklin, and most recently Adele. Wayne Koestenbaum writes, “Singers are supposed to be fat. The body must be huge. The body must spill over, embarrass itself, declare immensity” (101). While I agree with Koestenbaum’s affirmation of the fat singing body, I disagree with his assertion that the diva’s fat body brings shame. On the contrary, because her extraordinary talent —and not her body— is her most important commodity, her body is allowed to be extraordinary too.

*Jenny*, like a true diva, unapologetically showcases her big body, wearing a form-fitting gown not intended to hide her surplus, but to highlight it. Her dress, her deep turquoise eye shadow, her fake eyelashes, and her blond wig make *Jenny* bigger than life. Her wig and costume evokes many other divas that came before her, most notably Afro Cuban transnational diva Celia Cruz, a.k.a. the Queen of Salsa. Celia’s signature look included a collection of wigs in elaborate, sometimes gravity-defying styles. While she wore a variety of colors, she was most commonly seen wearing different shades of blond. Latina/o Studies scholar Frances Aparicio argues that despite its association with white aesthetics, “the blond wigs do not necessary whiten Celia’s repertoire, but are, on the contrary, transculturated by her dark skin, her Spanish vocals, and the song repertoires that reaffirm afrocubanismo, a Cuban exile perspective and an hemispheric *latinidad*” (234). As was discussed in the previous section, Duany —similar to Cruz— is invested in claiming her Black Latina identity using Spanish language, music, and her body.

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<sup>117</sup> Even though Maria Callas is remembered as slim, she was fat at the peak of her career. Whether true or an unfortunate coincidence, the premature declining of her voice was perceived as related to her weight loss.



Figure 23: Photo of Celia Cruz from <http://www.rhapsody.com/artist/celia-cruz>

Departing from traditional understandings of divaness, *Jenny*'s virtuosity is located in her body, not her voice. Throughout the performance she shows great skill as a physical performer and dancer. *Cabaret Unkempt* uses the role of the diva as a means by which the gorda can claim center stage, occupying that space as a desired body in control of her audience's gaze. Moreover, this performance rearticulates divadom, placing emphasis on the fat Black body. *Jenny* is not a diva whose body is accepted because of her extraordinary singing, but it is through her dancing body, which I will analyze later, that she achieves virtuosity.

Extraordinary talent, physical, and aesthetic excess are not enough to be a diva; one must also possess confidence and stage presence (Koestenbaum 91). When *Jenny* enters the stage she takes her time. She slowly moves downstage with dignity, carelessly holding the microphone, remaining expressionless while intensely gazing at the audience. Instead of referring to this quality of performance as presence, sociologist Joshua

Gamson calls it being fabulous, a state of mind and “a personal attitude that involves extravagance (which others might interpret as showiness), and extreme, committed self-possession (which others often mistake for haughtiness)” (38). In other words, it is not only about what the diva can do, but how she does it; divas are known for their assertive personalities.



Figure 24: La Lupe’s *Definitivamente La Yiyi Yiyi* LP Cover (1970). Retrieved from [www.rhapsody.com](http://www.rhapsody.com)

If *Jenny*’s looks evoke Celia Cruz, her demeanor channels another Afro Cuban diva, and Cruz’s nemesis: La Lupe. Also known as the Queen of Latin Soul, La Lupe (Guadalupe Victoria Yolí) was a composer and singer of multiple tropical styles. Her stage persona was defiant, blunt, and passionate. While Celia represented respectability, La Lupe was

unladylike; she was known to moan and touch her breast during performances, dancing alone, self-absorbed in pleasure. La Lupe would also strip while singing — taking off her shoes, fake eyelashes, hats, head wraps or hair extensions, and pieces of clothing. She was both adored and criticized as vulgar, considered to be both crazy and a genius. She was an unkempt diva.<sup>118</sup>



Figure 25: Screenshot collage of La Lupe removing her costume pieces from a YouTube video titled *La Lupe: “The Queen of Latin Soul” en el Dick Cavett Show*.

La Lupe was also known for her use of the sarcastic spoken word comments she would integrate into her songs in between stanzas or during the instrumental interludes.<sup>119</sup> *Jenny*

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<sup>118</sup> Eventually her “unruly” persona would cost her throne, as the masculinist music world of salsa only had place for one queen: Celia.

<sup>119</sup> As I explain in my unpublished paper “La Lupe: A Black Latina Bad Girl:” “La Lupe editorialized and added meanings to other composers’ songs, reshaping them to her own sensibility. For example, in the *guaracha* ‘El Carbonero,’ a song about a man who sells overpriced carbon in a *barrio*, La Lupe finishes the song saying in Spanish: ‘Hey, carbon man they are saying that that happened to you because you were following me?’ Although it is not clear what happened to the carbon man, it is clear rumor has it that she, the woman, is responsible. The gesture that follows and her haul denote doubt, and question the veracity in the carbon man’s accusation. In the bilingual *bolero* ‘Se acabó,’ where she sings in English about the happy past, but firmly rejects in Spanish her ex-lover who wants to come back, she eventually says in English: ‘If you did not understand, *Se acabó* in English means: It’s over baby, over!’ Besides being a cry of

also uses sarcasm in her spoken word song between the chorus and title line, “*with such a pretty face,*” which is sung by a pre-recorded voice. As the end of the song approaches she looks serious, as if making a calculation, and speaks to the audience as if they were she and she was the voice of those who criticize her body: “You could stand to lose about 200 pounds or so.” Then *Jenny* smiles broadly and continues cheerfully and in a rising pitch, “so you could be a size six!” while raising her arm upwards in a “tah-dah!” gesture. She goes on, now flirty, “Honey, with a face like that, do you know how many men you would have at your feet? And then [pause] when you lose aaaaall the weight...” *Jenny* waits in silence for five seconds as the music slows and quiets, a conspiratorial look on her face before adding, “you can get yourself a boob job, tummy tuck, liposuction, thigh lift and...[beat] a makeover.”

In this song, *Jenny* uses witty sarcasm as a way to “come out as fat” or name her fatness, denounce the negative stereotypes associated with it, and reject dehumanization in order to renegotiate the “representational contract between one's body and one's world” (Sedgwick and Moon 230). In theorizing coming out as fat, Gender and Sexuality Studies scholars Eve K. Sedgwick and Michael Moon compare the idea of the sexuality closet with the size closet:

The closet, that is, seems to function as a closet to the degree that is a glass closet, the secret to the degree that it's an open one. Nonsensically, fat people now live under the same divisive dispensation; incredibly, in this society, everyone that sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn't herself know. (229)

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empowerment, this translation underscores La Lupe's awareness that the intended audience for her song is non-Hispanic, and that meaning is lost to those who are not bilingual. With the translation, she reifies her Latina transcultural identity as someone who transits back and forth between two languages and cultures.”

Similar to coming out as queer, it is not necessarily that the person is in the closet because of fear and shame, it is that others assume that the queer and/or fat person does not know what is evident to others (that they are queer, or fat, or both). Thus, by declaring the obvious —that she is fat— and mocking the unsolicited advice and fat-shaming fat women constantly receive from acquaintances, strangers, and mass media, *Jenny* accesses her agency. Her coming-out-as-fat moment is reminiscent of the Fat Acceptance Movement and of fat activist and performers who resist size discrimination and fat-hatred by embracing fat identity as positive, rejecting shame and dehumanization, and naming the negative stereotypes associated with fatness.

In the following scene, “The Doctor’s Office Monologue,” Duany allows the audience to peek into her diva’s private life. Once “With Such a Pretty Face” concludes, there is a blackout. When the lights come back up, *Jenny* is standing on stage and her demeanor has changed from fierce, fabulous, and flirty to sassy but casual. The *Ballerina* comes on stage, gives her a handkerchief to wipe her sweat and then begins to set up two medical privacy screens on either side of *Jenny*. She seems oblivious to the set change and a bit irritated by the *Ballerina*’s presence, which she mostly ignores. *Jenny* speaks directly to the audience as if they were the doctor she is addressing, pacing nervously as she does so. In this moment, the audience becomes the observer of this otherwise private exchange. *Jenny* takes a breath and continues the conversation, as she seems anxious and reflective at the same time. In the meantime, the *Ballerina* keeps herself busy setting up what will become an operating room behind the stage right privacy screen. A spotlight shines over the screen casting a bright yellow circle on the floor, allowing the audience to

see a bit of what lies behind the screen. A little to the right of the screen the *Ballerina* sets a desk chair and small medical table with an overhead projector. She sits on the chair and starts setting up small objects on the projector while *Jenny* continues her monologue.

*Jenny* explains that she is at this free consultation because concerned loved ones have suggested she seek help. She does not say what she needs help with. However, the previous scene, the “With Such a Pretty Face” song, and her body which was carefully undressed by the *Ballerina*, become the explicit explanation of what remains unnamed in this consultation. With one hand on her hip and a “bad-ass” attitude *Jenny* says: “I’m not blind, you know, I’m a sensible person, and I’m not so headstrong that I can’t see the obvious. They say it’s time that I get rid of some of the excess.” The “they” in question are her loved ones who advised her to go to see a plastic surgeon. But “they” can also refer to socialized beauty standards and cultural attitudes about women’s size. This scene reflects psychologist Sylvia K. Blood’s argument that, “A woman's body is viewed as a biological object separate from the individual who perceives her body” (Blood 2). Because society views women’s bodies through this lens, women are expected to treat their bodies as such, an object that can be contoured, molded, and handled for aesthetic reasons.

A long pause follows this declaration, after which *Jenny* raises her arms and in a softer tone asks candidly: “But, is it really that excessive?” She holds this position for a few silent seconds, forcing the audience to look at the fat that hangs from her arms. This moment, this question, this silent pause reveals *Cabaret Unkempt*’s primary exploration. If excess is that which is not necessary, that which can be discarded—what are the

implications when this term is applied to the body? *Jenny* describes at length how her huge thighs are a source of personal pleasure, how she loves the sensation of them rubbing against each other as she walks, and how her lover finds pleasure in them too. After considering that others might be right and she should get surgery, she grabs her thighs exclaiming, “THIS!” Walking closer to the audience and without a beat she continues, “has been here with me all of my life, and discarding it so abruptly is gut wrenching to me.” With this scene, *Jenny* brings attention to how the body, the flesh, and fat are conceptualized as disposable. In the weight loss narrative, the “extra” flesh and fat is not part of the real person; it is even thought of as the enemy that needs to be eliminated and defeated. However, *Jenny* sees her flesh as inherent to who she is, it is part of her, and she is hesitant about cutting off or vacuuming up parts of her body.

*Jenny* underscores that the body society deems as undesirable and excessive is one she highly values—it is a part of her personhood, character, and memory. Thus, she is concerned about what parts of herself would be lost if her body was trimmed. *Jenny* shares one of her most intimate secrets when she confesses to liking the way her thighs rub against one another. As she shares it, she mimics the action by scrubbing her handkerchief between her hands, smiling and sighing as if remembering the sensual and sexual sensation. Here Duany challenges the ideas of the fat body and the Afro Latina body as asexual or hyper-sexual and ready for male consumption. Instead, she claims the value of the fat Black female body, specifically her thighs, as a vessel for self-pleasure. In “The Uses of the Erotic,” radical feminist and writer Audre Lorde contends that the erotic encompasses much more than just the sexual sphere but refers to “the life force of

women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (55). In other words, it is through the celebration of their passions —sexual and otherwise— that women are empowered.

In this scene, *Jenny* literally and metaphorically strips; revealing her secrets and sharing her vulnerability, she makes the private public. With the help of the *Ballerina*, *Jenny* takes off her diva wig and gown. She is now in her undergarments, a long white corset and black tights that outline her thighs. Through embracing and voicing her appreciation of her thighs they become much more than the site of sexual pleasure, but a synecdoche for her body and lived experiences. Undressing on stage is a radical action for any woman, but especially for a fat woman, as she is not supposed to exist. For the diva, undressing on stage disrupts her performance of magnificence. In taking off her gown, Duany has given the audience a peek into the backstage, the dressing room, a space where they are normally not allowed. As Performance Studies scholar Shane Vogel explains, “While the musical diva may be difficult to reach offstage, on stage she offers everything in her performances” (12). In other words, the diva must constantly negotiate the public and the private in order to maintain the illusion of her larger than life persona. The diva gives herself to the audience onstage, where she should carefully control what aspects of her private life she will allow the audience to see.<sup>120</sup> For an Afro Latina

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<sup>120</sup> A great example of this is Beyoncé, who has rather successfully maintained her private life outside of the public eye, sharing bits and pieces of it when she chooses. For a detailed analysis read Priscila Peña Ovalle’s blog post on *Sounding Out!* titled “Resounding Silence and Soundless Surveillance, From TMZ Elevator to Beyoncé and Back Again.” <http://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/09/15/resounding-silence-and-surveillance-from-tmz-elevator-to-beyonce-and-back-again/>.

woman whose body and womanhood has historically been devalued and treated as an object, taking off her clothes makes her vulnerable to the predatory gaze (hooks 59). For a fat woman, who is supposed to be ashamed of her body and keep it out of sight, this action is transgressive. Duany uncovers the uncomfortable truth of how fat bodies are, through micro and overt aggressions, treated with cruelty and told they do not have a right to exist. By claiming her body and challenging the audience to look at it, Duany is making a space where a fat Afro Latina woman can be present. Sharing *Jenny*'s most intimate secrets and declaring her admiration and love for her body despite what others say, Duany rejects the idea of the fat body as inadequate.



Figure 26: The *ballerina* helping *Jenny* undress, reminiscent of La Lupe's undressing on stage. Screenshot collage made by me from the NPN recording courtesy of Las Negras Collective.

As the monologue continues *Jenny* further declares the value of her body. "In fact, these thighs are the physical manifestation of all of my emotions." She makes a fist with her hands, proudly and seriously she continues: "my pleasures, my experiences, my fears, my

personal armor that has accompanied me since childhood.” Then she extends her arms in opposite directions diagonally, and relaxing her body and facial gesture with a smile of joy *Jenny* declares. “They are memory vessels to my unfinished voyage.”

Duany explores memory and its relationship to the body in this monologue in two senses. On the one hand, people who have lost, removed, or were born without some parts of their bodies—a tooth, an organ, a limb—sometimes report experiencing phantom sensations or a feeling of movement, as if that body part was still present. What does it mean then, on a molecular and neurological level, to dispose of a body part because it is considered unnecessary? On the other hand, what parts of our histories and selves are stored in our bodies? This resonates with theatre director Jerzey Grotowski’s theory of body-memory. He argued, “memories are always physical reactions. It is our skin, which has not forgotten, our eyes which have not forgotten. What we have heard can still resound within us. It is to perform a concrete act ... It is not that the body remembers. The body itself is memory” (qtd.in Laster 212-3). In other words, memories are not simply thoughts that are stored in our brains, but they are experiences stored in the flesh, bones, and viscera. Thus, *Jenny*’s concern about losing her flesh is about losing her memories, her history, and herself.

*Jenny* refuses to go through with the operation if it involves any pain. As plastic surgery is known to be painful, this declaration suggests she will not proceed. However, the symbolic plastic surgery the *Ballerina* performs behind the privacy screen accompanied by *Jenny*’s simultaneous dance, which I will analyze in the next section,

implies otherwise.<sup>121</sup> Women Studies scholar Deborah Caslav Covino's scholarship can help to explain this paradox:

The unmodified, unimproved body is always a potential violator of the aesthetic stasis upon which happiness depends. As the industry story goes, in order for the body not to impinge upon psychological and spiritual well-being, its ailing or unacceptable parts must be cut, lasered, or refined away. (1)

In other words, in order to achieve wholeness and happiness, we must submit to extreme diets, fitness programs and makeovers, as well as public and self-policing, criticism, and loathing of our bodies. As a result, the contemporary diva's resistance to these standards is increasingly more difficult. The diva's body is also under strong surveillance and is getting smaller.

#### **CHOREOGRAPHING VIOLENCE, DIALOGUE AND QUEER DESIRE**

In *Cabaret Unkempt* dance serves as a medium for dialogue and challenges the normative binaries of white/Black, thin/fat women. The opening scene purposefully starts with a white, thin body on stage. Cutting through the darkened space, a spotlight shines on a pale, skinny woman wearing only a tiny, bright pink tutu. The *Ballerina* is standing in the middle of the bare stage, her naked back and legs facing the audience. Slowly and in complete silence, thus creating a moment of tension, she turns her head to her right. As the rest of her body continues rotating, she exposes her long, naked torso and breasts, barely covered with her hands. Once her head is completely turned to the front, the

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<sup>121</sup> In an informal conversation with Elizabeth Doud she told me that when Duany started this project two family members were undergoing surgery: one was having a mastectomy, the other breast augmentation. Doud also explained how at some point Duany did consider the possibility of reshaping her body, and how as part of her research Duany went to consultations where she was offered a free tummy tuck if she underwent bariatric surgery. Even as she considered the possibility, Duany wondered what would happen with all the disposed flesh, and what were the risks and implications of such surgeries.

*Ballerina* shows her face, a pig face. Thus, the slender body bears a head that symbolizes fatness. This image calls attention to the paradox of the *Ballerina*; she is, at once, a sensual object of sexual desire and a delicate, innocent, ethereal being, but because she is a woman, her body is especially vulnerable to become fat with hormonal changes, as she ages, or through pregnancy. Thus, it underscores the fatness in all women—even if latent in the bodies of those who are thin—which can be perceived as a threat. This is especially true for ballerinas, since in ballet physique is more important than skill (Foster 10).

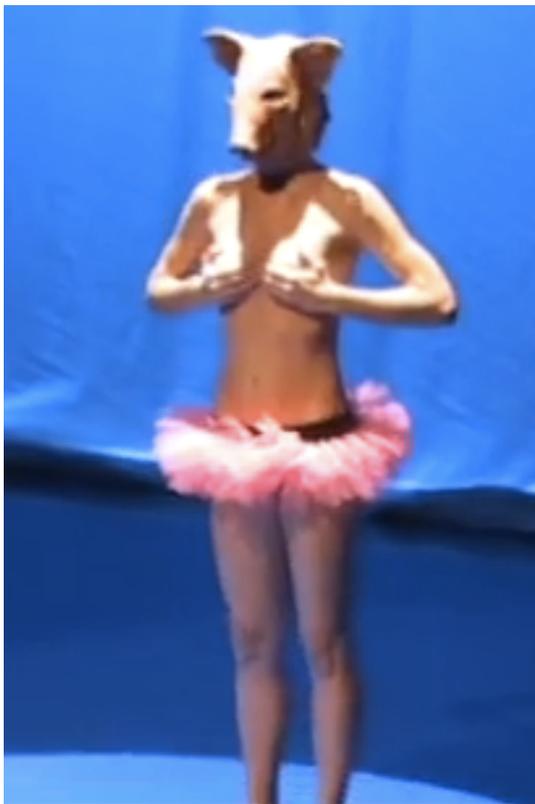


Figure 27: The skinny *ballerina* with a pig mask. Screenshot from *Cabaret Unkempt*'s YouTube trailer from Las Negras Collective's channel.

Duany opens *Cabaret Unkempt* with a body very different from her own in size, shape, and color — a body that epitomizes Western ideals of beauty and exemplifies the typical body of a dancer. The image of the thin *Ballerina* wearing a pig head reverses the recurring trope used in fitness and dieting rhetoric of the thin, authentic body trapped inside the fat body. It is reminiscent of women's struggles with body image and eating disorders, which, as psychologist Sylvia K. Blood argues, is “the product of social discourse, and experienced from ‘within’ or embodied” (37). In other words, these struggles are not a pathology of the brain, an emotional issue, or a woman's opinion or misperception of her external body, but the result of a socio-historic construction of womanhood. Thus, the pig-faced *Ballerina* points out how even for the thin white woman, the pressures of social standards and the fear of fatness and body image dissatisfaction are a reality.

One of the assumptions routinely made about fat people is that they are fat because they are lazy and do not exercise. Cultural historian Cookie Woolner explains, “Fat people are desexualized, or simply mocked for having sexual desires at all; they are viewed as gluttonous, slovenly, and lazy” (130). Also, it is unusual to see a fat dancer. As burlesque dancer and fat activist Heather McAllister argues, “Fat Dance is rare enough; fat exotic/erotic dance is pretty much unheard of outside of ‘fetish’ acts that alienate rather than normalize fat bodies” (305). In other words, fat women remain invisible on

the dance floor, and exist beyond the bounds of what is considered sensual or acceptable sexuality. This is especially true for fat Black women, who are most often represented in U.S. American media as nurturing motherly figures reminiscent of the asexual Mammy or as the angry emasculating Sapphire (Yarbrough and Bennet 636-40). However, Duany presents a fat Black dancing woman that is strong, sensual, tender, and dignified.

The first dance sequence in *Cabaret Unkempt* begins right after the blackout that marks the end of the doctor's office monologue. *Jenny* stands down stage left. The image of a headless, white, thin and flat-bellied model (Doud) in a black bikini is projected onto *Jenny's* white bustier. As the slides change, *Jenny* reproduces the different poses the model is performing: putting her hands on her hips, pushing up her breasts with her hands, showing her back while grabbing her butt. In addition to replicating the projected images, *Jenny* adds a suggestive, sexy gesture by slightly opening her mouth. Her dark brown skin and bright white bodysuit contrast with the model's pale white body and black bikini. This contrast emphasizes the size and racial values placed on women's objectified bodies.



Figure 28: *Jenny* posing with a projection of a white slim woman. Screenshot from NPN recording courtesy of Las Negras Collective.

Models epitomize what is considered to be the ideal of beauty at any given time in modern western cultures. In this scene, Duany overtly challenges these ideals. In regard to size, the two women's bodies represent the extremes of the spectrum. Doud's body projection occupies half of Duany's body. Doud's body is closer to a typical fashion model size 2; approximately a size 24, Duany is not even close to the average plus-size model size 12. The images of a thin woman projected onto *Jenny's* bigger body imply that Duany is well aware that she does not have an ideal, model-sized body. Furthermore, Duany does not choose a thin Black model to project onto her racially similar body. She uses a white model, which underscores the fact that the ideal body is not only about size, but about race and skin tone. Duany's body does not conform to other mainstream beauty

standards with her dark skin tone, her broad nose, and plump lips (which despite the popularity of Botox, seem to be most valued when paired with light skin). Once more, Duany is explicitly and unapologetically telling us she knows she is fat, and mocking the standard of beauty and expectations placed on all women.

As these images are projected onto *Jenny*'s body, techno music mixed with Afro-Cuban and drum dominated music—all Afro diasporic genres—plays in the background. The voice and iconic moan of La Lupe interject the music. The techno music suggests a futuristic character and an African American referent, while the Afro Cuban rhythm roots this scene in a racially marked cultural, musical, and spiritual tradition. Combining these sounds identifies Duany as an inhabitant of both cultures. Furthermore, La Lupe's aural presence in the recording evokes the Afro Cuban diva's unkempt personality, which was considered eccentric by many as she challenged gender, class, and race conventions with her dramatic performances.

As the music takes over the space, *Jenny* moves her hand from her hip to her thigh, leans further to the side, and then, in a swift movement, returns her hand to her hip as she makes a 180-degree turn and looks back over both her shoulders. Following the rhythm of the music, she moves from one pose to the other. The lights dim and in conjunction with the vocal melody sung in Yoruba, the atmosphere becomes hypnotic. *Jenny* seems to be caught in a trance; her movements become faster, and she fluidly changes from posing to dancing.

*Jenny* spins with her arms aloft forming a "V." Next, she walks in a small circle, as if walking on a catwalk while blowing kisses, and smiling like a beauty pageant queen.

The bikini projection disappears, the bright lights dim, and turquoise and purple light washes over the stages. A light casts *Jenny*'s shadow, now magnified to a gigantic size, diagonally across the cyclorama. She extends her arms sideways and arches her back backwards. She repeats some of the model and beauty pageant poses but now they are exaggerated, and part of the dance. *Jenny* imitates one of the projected model poses in particular, cupping her hands under her breasts and pulling them up towards her chin as she leans forward.

During this sequence, the *Ballerina* sits behind the privacy screen, performing a symbolic plastic surgery on a naked picture of *Jenny*. The *Ballerina* is wearing a tie-on surgical mask. She turns the projector on, and places a transparency sheet on it, with a picture of *Jenny* wearing a white hospital gown. The picture is projected on to the privacy screen. While *Jenny* has been posing center stage, the *Ballerina* is manipulating this two-dimensional image of her. First, she removes the transparency with the hospital gown picture, revealing an almost identical picture of *Jenny* semi-naked, wearing only black briefs similar to the *Ballerina*'s. Then, the *Ballerina* uses a black marker to trace lines around the body, as plastic surgeons do with wax pens over their patients' bodies. Finally she carefully traces those lines with a scalpel, trimming flesh away from *Jenny*'s arms, belly, and thighs.

While the symbolic plastic surgery is taking place, *Jenny* continues her movement sequence as a model turned beauty queen. After blowing a few pageant-like kisses to the audience, *Jenny*'s hand gestures change, and now it seems as if she is pulling a string or rope out of her mouth, as her body contorts back and forth. She then throws her arms in

the air and frantically shakes them. The pulling of her insides is an analogy to bulimia, as if she was purging the contents of her stomach, as many models and dancers do in order to maintain or obtain a thin, desirable body. This motion is also a metaphor for the shedding of excess, the fat that is extracted from the body because it is undesirable.



Figure 29: *Jenny* dances while the *ballerina* trims her image. Screenshot from *Cabaret Unkempt*'s YouTube trailer from Las Negras Collective's channel.

After this movement is complete, *Jenny* raises her arms and waves them frantically as if she was drowning and desperately pleading for help. Suddenly she stops. Slowly one arm descends, dragging the weight of her torso. She gradually rotates and the other arm falls too, resting for a second on the opposite shoulder, then tenderly caressing the side of her

face from cheekbone to chin to opposite cheekbone with the back of her hand. Swirling slowly while opening her arms wide and bending her torso sideways, she moves towards her right, ending in front of the second privacy screen where there is a small chair. *Jenny* lies down, resting her head on the chair, looking as if she's been beaten, and is in a catatonic state. Her eyes are wide open, and her breathing is fast.

The lights dim, leaving only the image of the overhead projector where the *Ballerina* continues the symbolic surgery. She finishes carefully cutting *Jenny's* image and pulls the trimmed-away pieces of the transparency off, leaving a version of *Jenny's* altered, proportionally ideal body on the projector. Then, the *Ballerina* removes the image and places another one on the projector—a semi-naked photograph of herself, posed just as *Jenny* was in the previous transparency. Using the marker, she makes the boobs bigger. Taking some of the flesh she clipped from *Jenny's* picture, she enhances her thighs, making them curvier. Adjusting her own body in this way, the *Ballerina* suggests that the ideal body is unattainable—even the thin white woman can and should transform her more body, in the pursuit of perfection.



Figure 30: The *Ballerina* trimming *Jenny*'s picture, and enhancing her own. Screenshot collage by me from NPN recording courtesy of Las Negras Collective.

Throughout this scene, the fat female body performs virtuosity with graceful and precise movements that make her dance seem effortless. Hence, it challenges the stereotype of the fat woman as clumsy, lazy, and unhealthy (Asbill 300). Duany does not try to replicate movements that best showcase a slender body; instead she explores the particular forms and qualities of roundness and vastness that her fat body allows and a slender body cannot achieve. In the first movement of choreography, there is a constant play between mimetic portrayal and mockery. On the one hand there is a non-traditional body—Black and fat—occupying center stage, faithfully and gracefully imitating the movements of a model. *Jenny* is beautiful; she is sensual and sexy. She first claims a space of female objectification and sexualization that had been denied her. Then, she begins to mock it, exaggerating her movements and performing a caricature of a beauty pageant queen. As the choreography progresses the poses become more distorted.

Eventually, as *Jenny* bends forward, she seems to be throwing up, purging or pulling her guts out as if the fat is being removed from her body, echoing the surgery being performed on her picture by the *Ballerina*. The scene is beautiful and simultaneously gut-wrenching; it portrays the loathing, physical mutilation, and emotional and physical tumult that a person in that body goes through.

The following dance duet between *Jenny* and the *Ballerina* exemplifies the points of tension possible in a dialogue between differently-bodied women. The *Ballerina* is wearing a sheer leotard that matches her flesh tone, suggesting a naked torso, and a black dancewear brief. *Jenny* is wearing her white bustier. In total silence, *Jenny* is lying on the floor facedown and motionless after a solo movement sequence. The *Ballerina* walks towards her, removes *Jenny*'s high heels, and wipes her face with a handkerchief. After putting those objects away the *Ballerina* carefully rearranges *Jenny*'s arms, holds her by the hip and rolls her over. Then, after rearranging the position of her legs and holding her arms by the wrists, the *Ballerina* pulls her upward and in a swift movement, *Jenny* stands. They are now standing facing one another, only a few inches apart, their bodies almost touching. The *Ballerina* holds *Jenny* by the shoulders and makes her turn towards the audience, while she stands behind her. She removes *Jenny*'s hair tie, runs her fingers through her natural hair, and proceeds to scrunch it.



Figure 31: The *Ballerina* scrunching *Jenny*'s hair. Screenshot from *Cabaret Unkempt*

NPN's performance recording, courtesy of Las Negras Collective.

The *Ballerina* performs a series of transgressions as she manipulates *Jenny*'s body at will, but the bold gesture of touching her hair is probably the biggest infringement. There are historical meanings imbedded in this scenario: a white woman touching a Black woman's hair and body without asking for permission, while the Black woman shows no reaction. It summons up memories of both the auction block where Black people were inspected as livestock, and the freak show, museum, fair, and zoo exhibitions that, until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>122</sup> showcased them as exotic rarities, monstrosities, and sexual deviants.<sup>123</sup> It

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<sup>122</sup> According to Zoo Biologist scholar Paul A. Rees in his book *An Introduction to Zoo Biology and Management* the last human exhibit at a zoo was held in 1925 at the Belle Vue Zoo in England, as part of their themed annual fireworks. That year the theme was "Cannibals" and they paraded a group of Black men dressed in straw skirts, carrying wooden shields and spears on the platform of a truck with a banner that read "cannibals" (Rees). In her article "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," artist scholar

also evokes the still prevalent fascination over Black women's hair texture. This curiosity may result in strangers touching or asking for permission to touch natural Black hair, which besides being plainly rude, is infuriating given the history of treating Black women as property, fetishizing Black bodies, and highlighting racial differences. Adding insult to injury, after touching her hair the *Ballerina* blindfolds *Jenny* and with a quick jump, climbs onto her back and stands over her making a chest and arm flexion like a body builder or wrestler, as if she has conquered the Black body. While this series of actions conjures a painful history of Black women's oppression in the U.S., it is important to remember that Duany is the author and director of this scene, and she has choreographed this scene with Doud's collaboration. Thus, she controls the narrative.



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Coco Fusco offers a chronological list of human beings who were exhibited from 1493 (Spain) to 1990 (U.S). She also asserts, "The contemporary tourist industries and cultural ministries of several countries around the world still perpetrate the illusion of authenticity to cater to the Western fascination with otherness. So do many artists" (147).

<sup>123</sup> For more about these types of spectacles read Daphne A. Brooks *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*.

Figure 32: The *Ballerina* climbing on *Jenny*'s back. Screenshot from NPN recording, courtesy of Las Negras Collective.

This moment is where the “hard work” (Mahone) of Black feminist dialogue takes place. *Cabaret Unkempt* makes explicit the ways Black and white bodies have shared history and memories. “Such memories do not exist in the past, but rather are part and parcel of the present, and they repeat across our social nervous system until we find a way to acknowledge their bones, and re-member” (Schneider 174). Thus, the *Ballerina* and her aggressive actions first address and embody the history of racial difference, privilege, and oppression in order to open up the possibility of an alternative dialogue of solidarity between the women.

In the very next sequence, the performers embody this possibility—including the trust and intimacy it requires to have such an encounter—through contact improvisation.<sup>124</sup> After losing her balance, the *Ballerina* falls from *Jenny*'s back and her demeanor changes from harsh to gentle. She carefully removes *Jenny*'s white bustier leaving her wearing a black leotard, which she takes a moment to observe. This costume and attitude change signals a shift from monologue to dialogue. The *Ballerina* looks at *Jenny*, and sweetly stands next to her, holding her hand. Together they take a step forward and, in a sensuous gesture, the *Ballerina* traces *Jenny*'s arms with her index

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<sup>124</sup> Contact improvisation is a contemporary dance practice where the dancers share each other's weight, do counterbalance, fall, lift, and roll while maintaining a point of body contact. Even though it can be done with multiple partners, when dancers learn contact improvisation they usually start with one partner. Some of the basic exercises are taking turns to roll each other's relaxed body on the floor or just being side by side, with a point of contact, remaining still. Another exercise is to stand in front of each other and taking turns carrying each other's weight in all possible position variations. For more read Nancy Stark Smith's “A Subjective History of Contact Improvisation” in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*.

finger, as she moves behind her and to the other side. Then she playfully pokes *Jenny* on her shoulder, and she faces the *Ballerina*. Both dancers hold a neutral facial expression as they play with each other's weight, adding to the tension. First, they both fall forwards, catching each other's opposite shoulders as their point of contact and balance. Next, they rearrange their bodies while keeping their mutual support and end up cheek to cheek, their lips almost touching, and then forehead-to-forehead. After a few seconds in this position, they arch their backs upwards, shifting their point of contact from their chests to their pelvis.



Figure 33: *Jenny* and the *ballerina* engage in a contact improvisation duet. Taken from MACLA's *Cabaret Unkempt* promotional flyer.

The role of the *Ballerina* and the relationship between the two dancers changes from one of oppression to one of communication. This communication is through contact

improvisation: touch, balance, and weight. Given that *Jenny* is still blindfolded the risk already inherent in this type of dance is heightened. The dancers depend on each other; they need to be alert and ready to hold their partner's weight as well as their own, as they are continuously off-balance. Thus, the *Ballerina* surrenders control, and she and *Jenny* collaborate through mutual support. Furthermore, in this dance the gorda exhibits dexterity and technique, and challenges the stereotype of the fat clumsy woman. Besides the technical virtuosity of the dancers' abilities, and how they function as a metaphor for dialogue, there is also an emotional quality and sexual connotation to the interaction.

In this duet, dance becomes the platform through which the gorda can affirm and claim queer desire. In her book *Sharing the Dance*, Dance scholar Cynthia J. Novak asserts that in contact improvisation "parts of the body normally considered taboo to touch in public, are to some degree desexualized by the use in dance" (163). She further suggests that even though the audience could interpret some of the ways dancers touch as sexual or erotic, because contact improvisation constructs bodies as non-gendered these encounters are desexualized (163). While I agree that contact improv allows for dancers to touch in intimate ways that are not necessarily considered acceptable in other styles of dance, I contend that there is no such thing as a non-gendered or neutral body. Histories and social constructions of race, gender, age, sexuality, and size are written on the dancing bodies, and are at play, not only for the audience's interpretation, but for the dancers themselves. Thus, I contend that, as Novak asserts, *Jenny's* and the *Ballerina's* touch can be read as sexual and erotic.

The bodies of *Jenny* and the *Ballerina* are marked by their shared gender and age, and their difference in race and size. It is in this moment, as they communicate by mutual touch and shared weight where, if only for a brief moment, they become equals, yet not the same. This doubling is a recurrent trope in other instances in *Cabaret Unkempt*. It is also a moment of sensuality and sexuality between these two cis female bodies, as their chests, lips, bellies, and crotches are in close proximity, brushing, touching, and pressing against each other. This presents a different possible sexuality of the fat Black body, resisting the imposed asexuality or hyper-sexuality, Duany presents herself as sensually queer. In this dance, her body is both desired and desiring.

The queering of the performers' bodies continues as the dance progresses and the relationship and the weight between both shifts. The *Ballerina* breaks out of their posture by pushing off *Jenny*'s hips, turns around, places her bottom carefully in alignment with *Jenny*'s pelvis and releases her hold on *Jenny*, who slowly falls onto the *Ballerina*'s back. The *Ballerina* leans further forward, bending her body, and slowly lifting *Jenny*'s. Slowly, she stands up, making *Jenny*, who is still lying on top of her, stand up too. From this upright position, the *Ballerina* rolls around *Jenny*, and they end up back-to-back. She leans forwards again, once more carrying *Jenny*, supporting her weight, and slightly lifting her feet off the ground. *Jenny*'s big body becomes lighter, the *Ballerina*'s body stronger. In this interaction the gorda challenges size and gender roles, where the bigger person is masculinized and, regardless of gender, is supposed to carry the lighter feminized person. Here, the fat woman is the one lifted. Rather than laboring to carry the

*Ballerina* as she did in the opening of this scene, she rests on the thin woman's body, surrendering her weight.

The thin white woman supports and assists the fat Black woman, reversing typical roles and histories of Black servitude. As their dance continues, they take turns carrying each other on their backs, and then hold their weight butt to butt. Last, the *Ballerina* bends her knees, extends her arms forward, maintaining contact with *Jenny*'s butt. She ends up on the floor on all fours, with *Jenny* sitting on top of her. This moment can be read as a metaphor in which the gorda has conquered the thin ideal; she will not be oppressed by it. *Jenny* then takes off her blindfold, looks down at the *Ballerina*, gets off her back, and both dancers lie on the floor looking at each other. In the following scene, they will do a series of poses, mirroring each other. From this moment on, the encounters between both characters will not be antagonistic. They have reached a point of encounter, of collaboration, and solidarity.

The final dance of *Cabaret Unkempt* is a solo by Duany. The lights are dim with tones of green and blue, the music and movement have elements of Afro Cuban dance and allusions to Yemayá, the Yoruba Orisha of the ocean. *Jenny* is wearing a long black slip. At some point she opens invisible pockets on the top of the dress, takes out a Slinky from each and incorporates the toy into her choreography. The dance is very sensual and beautiful; onstage, the Slinky does not read as comedic. It suggests both the bounciness and sagginess of big or aging body parts. For instance, as *Jenny* stretches the wire toy across her arm, the Slinky mirrors its shape and movement. The toy also functions as a metaphor—made visible by the toy's metallic waves—for magnified pleasure. While the

piece contains elements of camp—the costume and exaggerated, burlesque-like gestures—*Jenny*'s “fat dance” lacks a campy, tongue-in-cheek tone. It is serious, vulnerable, and sensual.



Figure 34: Promotional picture courtesy of Las Negras Collective.

In *Cabaret Unkempt* Duany creates a space where her body is center stage. Sometimes this space is marked by playfulness and sarcasm, sometimes beauty and sensuality; at all times, Duany performs with precision, agility, and confidence. In doing so, she challenges the idea that a fat person is lazy, unfit, and clumsy. However, she does not necessarily try to imitate the movements designed for lighter bodies like high jumps, long extensions, and contortions. Instead she highlights and celebrates her size through dance, exploring the relationship of her fat body to gravity and to another body as well as

the distinct qualities her roundness, saggy skin, and volume—all movements that a thin body cannot produce. In this way, Duany not only demonstrates that a gorda can dance, but that this gorda is a virtuosic creator of dance.

#### **CONCLUSION: DUANY'S ODE TO HERSELF**

In *Cabaret Unkempt's* final scene, *Jenny* is wearing a gold satin halter leotard, similar to those used by aerialist in classic circus acts. The sounds of the 16mm film projector's motor and the clicking of the turning reels fill the silence. After a few seconds a sad, nostalgic, contemporary circus waltz starts playing.<sup>125</sup> *Jenny* stands before the projector directing her strong gaze towards the audience, in a powerful and defiant stance. Once more, her belly becomes the screen as video art images project a mouth, then an eye, and finally a child. With a small hop, as if she was about to lift a barbell, *Jenny* raises her arms upward and then bends her hands at the wrists, starting a movement sequence. Her arms look like two swans facing each other, as if they were an entity all their own. Then *Jenny* undulates her hands inward while lowering her arms, and closes her fists making a downward bicep curl, flexing her arms and evoking the circus' strongman. She smiles playfully. Then she turns her back to the audience so that the projection is now on her butt and back. She, then, slowly extends her right arm sideways, like a bird spreading her wings.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>The song is by Cirkestra, a quintet (accordion, violin, tuba, drums, reeds: flute, clarinet, oboe, sax, bassoon) that plays original circus music by composer, founding member, and director Peter Bufano inspired by classic circus tunes, jazz, tango, klezmer, and eastern European folk music.

<sup>126</sup> The arm choreography continues with more circus evocative gestures, then it turns into a caress, as *Jenny* delineates her arms and breasts.

*Jenny*'s costume and the music in this scene are reminiscent of the circus freak show—the other role, besides the operatic diva, that enabled a fat woman to take center stage. As American Studies scholars Katherine H. Adams and Michael L. Keen explain, from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries while the circus provided a viable and hospitable place for fat women to work, in performance they were presented as abnormal and ludicrous. “The lecturer generally inflated the woman’s weight, called attention to her arms or thighs, and proffered jokes about chairs that she had broken” (Adams and Keen 134). As *Jenny*'s dance sequence suggests, it is precisely to her arms that this scene's movement and monologue is dedicated. However, the beauty of her movement, the softness of her voice, and her kind words reinstate the Fat Lady's dignity.



Figure 35: *Jenny* and the *ballerina*. From the MACLA webpage.

“Sapphire Wings,” the performance’s final monologue, is Duany’s ode to her arms. Even though Duany has undressed and exposed her body throughout the piece, she has been

wearing form-fitting control garments that stylize her figure. However, for the duration of the performance, her arms are the only part of her body that have been totally naked and under no control. A generous amount of skin and fat hang from her arms, exposed and vulnerable to the audience's gaze and judgment. In the monologue, *Jenny* admits she used to hate her arms, and used to hide them. After the music ends, she turns off the projector and stands in silence next to it. She extends her right arm sideways, looks at it, smiles, and says with a sweet soft voice, "I used to call these my sapphire wings, between each of these feathers lays a tomb of unearthed love stories, caverns of lost memories, and bold uncertainties."

*Jenny* refers to the soft and loose flesh that hangs from her arms as sapphire wings, instead of the more common and pejorative "bat wings," "bingo wings," or "arm flabs." Sapphire is a precious stone known for its strength. In metaphysics, sapphire symbolizes wisdom, power, and inner insight. The black sapphire specifically is thought to guard the bearer against bullying and negativity from others (Eason 202), and it is also used to make bulletproof windows. Thus, sapphire literally and symbolically serves as armor, as protection. Sapphire also conjures the stereotype of the strong character, the masculinized and emasculating Black woman. By speaking to her wings tenderly and presenting herself vulnerably, Duany appropriates the Sapphire stereotype as strong but also feminine.

Throughout her life, the size of *Jenny*'s arms was a source of pain and shame, but they are also her strength. With her arm still extended and looking at the audience, *Jenny* continues her confession: "There was a time when all I wanted to do was clip them." The

“clipping” here suggests plastic surgery, but also refers to clipping birds’ wings to reduce their mobility, and impair their flying. In many cases, this procedure leaves the animals unable to escape from predators and other dangers. Through this elegant metaphor, Duany once more criticizes the violence and pain of weight loss and plastic surgery, and the ways in which it diminishes and disempowers the fat body. To restore the value of her body, *Jenny* positions herself within the natural world as stone and bird—or as a mystical stone-bird—transforming herself from human to the supernatural.

*Jenny* expresses how she, like many fat or aging women, detested her arms; yet the character’s soft caress, sweet stare, and choice of name also imply intimate appreciation and love. Shamelessly, *Jenny* declares while looking at her extended arm:

There was a time when all I wanted to do was clip them; the sight of them reminded me of an unkempt soul. Until I resurrected the history of the unreciprocated love affair with myself, giving way to those well-kept gems that fueled my persistent passion for so long.

In addition, she shares that her lover also admires them, thus challenging the idea that the fat woman is asexual and not worthy of love. She concludes by claiming her fullness, and inviting the audience to look at her arms as part of her whole. In a firm voice, with her arms slightly bent and eventually fully extended, she gazes at her right arm, both warning and inviting the audience:

But we can’t see the beauty, when we have a scalpel in our eye. Hold onto the verdicts! I know it’s easier to witness skin with no souls, laughter with no diaphragm, fear with no gut and love with no heart... Caress these wings and let your memories validate your experiences, and maybe... just maybe... you will realize how human I truly am.

Then, without waiting for a response or validation, *Jenny* leaves the stage. In diva-like fashion, the gorda restores her humanity and worthiness by making herself beyond human. She declares with her words and actions that she is whole, that she no longer needs anyone else's approval; she doesn't need the protection of sapphire wings anymore—she can have her arms back. It is not her lack of self-love, moral fault, or bigger than average body, but society's restrictive idea of what it means to be a woman that projects on her those stigmas. It is on us, the audience, to overcome closed mindedness and prejudice; we are the ones who have to be humanized.

## Chapter 4: All High and Mighty: Performing Visibility in Nancy Millan's *La Mujer Invisible*<sup>127</sup>

The lights dim and Nancy<sup>128</sup> steps on the stage where *La Mujer Invisible*'s rock band has been tuning their instruments. The audience at the the Patio of La Sala Beckett in Río Piedras<sup>129</sup> have been chattering and enjoying their drinks, but now they turn their focus to the stage, cheering and clapping when Nancy appears. Nancy's brown curly hair hangs down around her shoulders. She is wearing a low-cut, black-and-white polka dot dress that accentuates her large, curvy body. Her sexy, stretchy, black, faux leather knee-high boots delineate her big, well-formed calves. She smiles at the audience briefly, then turns to get her electric guitar, leaving them waiting for her attention.

Nancy focuses on her instrument and takes her time to tune it. When she is ready, she walks to her microphone center stage and begins to softly strum her guitar. Finally, Nancy looks up, as she starts singing in a sweet hypnotizing voice, “¿Cómo fueeeeeee que llegué aaaaaa este lugaaaaaar?” (“*How did I get to this place?*”)<sup>130</sup> After a few chords, the rest of the band chimes in; the rhythm of the song accelerates, but it retains its melancholic quality as she sings “Realidad alterna” (“Alternative Reality”):

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<sup>127</sup> In Spanish only the first word in a title is capitalized. However, I follow the format Millán used in her script for her performance and songs. In some instances she capitalized the titles, in other she didn't.

<sup>128</sup> The name *Nancy* refers to Nancy Millán's stage persona. When I use Millán, I am specifically referring to the artist.

<sup>129</sup> La Sala Beckett is a small independent theatre in Río Piedras. It also offers casual dining in its terrace referred to as patio. The patio has a tiny stage available for performances.

<sup>130</sup> All lyrics and performance text are transcribed by me from a video recording of the performance. I chose to highlight the lyrics in italics to underscore their musicality, and differentiate them from the prose.

*Cómo fue que llegué a este lugar  
donde el sol da el pecho  
y la luna sale a matar  
Amantes, distraídos en el lecho del mar  
Cómo fue que llegué a este lugar  
Tengo espinas en las manos  
y el corazón al revés  
¿Por qué no me ves, por qué no me ves?  
(Coro)*

*Realidad alterna o mera terquedad  
Que me arden las piernas  
de este no caminar  
Realidad alterna o invisibilidad  
Que tengo amargas las venas  
de tanta soledad*

*How did I get to this place  
where the sun hits you in the chest  
and the moon is out to kill  
Lovers distracted on the sea's bed  
How did I get to this place  
I have thorns in my hands  
and my heart is backwards  
Why can't you see me?  
(Refrain)  
Alternative reality or just stubbornness  
My legs burn  
from not walking  
Alternative reality or invisibility  
My veins are bitter  
from all this loneliness*

The audience listens in silence, captivated until the last chord of the song. One audience member cannot control herself, and as she feels the song's last notes approaching, she shouts, "Yeah!" Others follow, cheering and clapping, satisfied.



Figure 36: Nancy singing "Realidad alterna." Screenshot from Nancy Millán's YouTube channel.

*Nancy*, still moving slowly, takes off her guitar and carefully sets it back on its stand. Then she turns to the audience, who is again waiting in patient silence for her. She smiles with flirty eyes and her suave voice greets them, “Buenas noches.” [Beat.] “¿Cómo están?” (“Good night, how are you?”) Some audience members answer, “¡Bien!” (“Well!”) *Nancy* looks around taking in the audience, then smiling mischievously she adds, “Hice esta reaparición solamente para ustedes,” (“I made this reappearance just for you”) and the audience claps and cheers once more, sharing their excitement and gratitude with their diva, the invisible woman.

In this chapter I examine how, through her performance of *La Mujer Invisible*, Nancy Millán engages with the ways in which gorda bodies are heavily constrained and policed by normative society as well as paradoxically hyper-visible and invisible. I argue that through her embodiment of the diva Millán challenges invisibility. Through song she creates what music scholar Josh Kun calls an *audiotopia* or a musical utopia, “a meeting of worlds and meanings” (“Audiotopia” 13) that offers the listener and/or musician the opportunity to acknowledge difference and create “new maps for re-imagining the present social world” (Audiotopia 22-3). Furthermore, through her evocation of Medusa’s destructive power—her ability to turn those who look at her with fear into stone—Millán “looks” back to past personal experiences revealing how gender, race, sexuality, and mental health stigmas intersect with fatness. Then, from the vantage point that time and the stage give her, she assertively “talks back”—what cultural critic bell hooks defines as an act of resistance, when a woman boldly speaks her mind. hooks further contends that “moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed ... a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible” (*Talking Back* 9). Thus, Millán responds, resists, and challenges the ocular tyranny that seeks to marginalize fat female bodies of color. In doing so, she finds healing through performance.

Some of the questions that guide this chapter are: how does Millán use stage presence, costuming, and her voice to embody the diva? How does she perform visibility? How does she deploy the mythical Medusa as a metaphor for gorda empowerment? What weight-based stereotypes does she challenge and how? How does Millán use her songs to respond to or critique previous experiences of marginalization? In what ways does her music create an audiotopia or meeting space in which to encounter and seduce her audience into new understandings of a world where the gorda is embraced?

In the section “From Puerto Rico to New York: Following an Impossible Dream,” I offer a brief overview of Millán’s career and how *La Mujer Invisible* was born out of her necessity to heal the anger and pain caused by a lifetime of social invisibility and size-based prejudice. I also discuss the dramaturgical influences that helped in the conceptualization and development of her performance. My assertions are based on an extensive personal interview with Millán, as well as informal conversations with the artist. While Millán notified me of *La Mujer Invisible*’s dramaturgical influences, the interpretation of each of the three genres (solo performance, American neo cabaret, and rock musical) are mine. The following section offers a brief synopsis of the performance.

In the next three sections, I conduct a close reading of the recorded performance of *La Mujer Invisible* on March 10, 2012 at the Patio of La Sala Beckett in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico. The section “The Diva as Medusa: Turning Fat Fear to Stone by Gazing/Talking Back” analyzes how, in performing divadom and vocal virtuosity, Millán reclaims Medusa’s feared power of anger, wisdom, sexuality, and race in order to bring visibility to the stigmatization of fatness as it relates to female bodies of color. The section “Medusa’s Hair: Reclaiming Blackness” illustrates how Millán explores the connections between the stigmatization of fatness as excessive and undesirable as it relates to gender

and race. In the final analysis section, titled “To *Feel* Gorda and *Feel Like* Gorda: Audioscapes and Audiotopias,” I investigate how Millán uses her voice and music in order to create an audiotopia, a space where the audience truly meets the gorda, feels her sensibilities, and empathizes with her. Through these empowering performatives — looking and talking back, re-claiming her Blackness, and conjuring an audiotopia— Millán invites her audience to see her as she sees herself: as a visible and tangible woman.

### **FROM PUERTO RICO TO NEW YORK: FOLLOWING AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM**

Nancy Millán is a theatre, film, and television actress and singer-songwriter from Puerto Rico. In the early 1990s she began pursuing a degree in Natural Sciences at the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras (UPR), but ultimately changed her major to Drama.<sup>131</sup> As she explains in *La Mujer Invisible*, this change proved to be a challenge:

Cuando decidí que quería estudiar teatro porque eso era lo que me gritaba el corazón, se me vinieron encima todas las inseguridades. En [el Departamento de Ciencias Naturales], mi peso, mi pelo, mi size de zapato no eran un issue.

When I decided that I wanted to study theatre, because that was my heart’s desire, all my insecurities came over me. In the Natural Sciences Department my weight, my hair, my shoe size were not an issue. (Millán “Interview”)

What this quote implies is that in the Drama Department, her appearance was as important—if not more important—than her talent.<sup>132</sup> Soon after changing majors a professor and professional director<sup>133</sup> recognized her talent. He approached Millán and

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<sup>131</sup> All facts about Millán’s life in this chapter’s section is based on my interview with her. She completed her B.A. in Theatre Education at the UPR and an M.A. in Theatre Arts from SUNY Albany in 1999.

<sup>132</sup> Millán is light skinned and has hazel eyes, two features that would play to her advantage given the preferred characteristics in commercial TV. However, she is fat, which is considered an undesirable physical trait, and has curly hair, a racial marker of Blackness also considered undesirable.

<sup>133</sup> In the performance Millán does not name the professor, but she imitates his voice and gestures. Based on Millán’s imitation (and I later confirmed with her), it seemed to me the teacher who gave her this advice is

recommended that she lose weight in order to be more *casteable* or to be cast in a wider variety of characters and types (Millán *La Mujer Invisible*). At the time, Puerto Rico's local television industry, where Spanish is the lingua franca, was still an important one. As Communications and Culture scholar Yeidy M. Rivero explains, Puerto Ricans "prefer to watch locally produced programs or shows that are 'culturally similar' to their own experiences" (8), and at the time the UPR Drama Department was the workshop from where most actors in the popular *novelas* or soap operas, sit-coms, comedy, and variety shows were cast.<sup>134</sup>

Millán accepted the fact that given her weight, her opportunities and the characters available to her were limited. During her years as a member of the UPR Traveling Theatre Company and later in professional theatre in Puerto Rico, she mostly played maids, best friends, and older women. In 1997 she moved from Puerto Rico to New York City to pursue an acting career. There she worked with the Society for the Educational Arts (SEA), a bilingual theater for young audiences, where she performed in productions like *Rosa de dos aromas* and received a nomination for a Latina ACE award. She also auditioned for English speaking theatre, TV, and film. Millán was not surprised to be auditioning for and playing supporting characters in a few plays and independent movies; again and again, she found herself playing mothers or older women.

After a year, Millán had a breakthrough and realized that fat women were mostly absent in theatre, TV, and film. A screenwriter who had seen her perform in a play invited Millán to audition for her movie. At the audition Millán was surprised to learn that the character was twice her age. For the first time in her life, she questioned why she

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Dean Zayas, Puerto Rico's most famous novela and theatre director. Zayas helped many of his students, often the most attractive ones, jump into a professional career before completing their degrees.

<sup>134</sup> Today, Latin American or U.S. media conglomerates own all commercially operated stations. Very few locally produced shows are left, and few actors or TV hosts come from the UPR Drama Department, or have any formal training in the performing arts.

was rarely called to audition for roles in her age group or for main characters. She started paying attention to other plays, TV shows, and movies and finally understood:

¡Ay, es que yo soy invisible!... Porque cuando tú cuentas historias, y en todas las historias toda la gente se ve igual o es del mismo grupo étnico, racial o sexual, si nunca cuentas historias donde hay diversidad, entonces haces a toda esa gente invisible... ¡¿Por qué yo no puedo ser una heroína romántica?!

Oh, it's because I am invisible!... Because when you tell stories, and in all the stories everyone looks the same or everyone belongs to the same racial, ethnic, or sexual group, if you never tell stories where there is diversity, then you are making all those people invisible ... Why can't I be a romantic heroine?!" (Millán "Interview")

Millán developed a critical analysis of not only her own experiences, but the entire industry itself, understanding that fat women, just like people of color, are underrepresented and invisibilized in TV, film, and theatre. This would later inspire the title and part of the structure of *La Mujer Invisible*, in which she shared personal stories followed by rhetorical questions or critical analysis.

Frustrated, Millán retired from acting and decided to pursue a career as a singer-song writer in the indie scene, where weight was not as important and limiting. Along with Rafy Quiñones, a Puerto Rican singer, she started a rock band named Tara's Road (Millán "Interview"). For two years they performed in alternative Manhattan venues such as The Elbow Room and the famous rock club The Bitter End. She wrote a song for the band based on her experiences titled "The Invisible Woman," in which she asserted that she would not be invisible anymore. Millán also composed songs like "Don't Play with Boys" and "Self-help," which she would later translate into Spanish and incorporate in the solo performance *La Mujer Invisible*.

Millán's first draft of *La Mujer Invisible* was a reflective essay she wrote in order to explore and recall how, since childhood, she had learned that being fat was wrong. In

2003, three years after she had retired from acting, a friend persuaded her to play a character for his new play. When Millán went to the reading, her character was an older woman. Millán refused to play the character unless it was rewritten as her own age. The playwright complied, however this incident reignited her exasperation about feeling invisible as a fat woman:

Antes de que regresé [sic] a Puerto Rico [en 2003] mi mamá me preguntó que por qué estaba tan molesta, y yo le dije, yo lo quiero saber también. Y me senté a escribir un ensayo, una diatriba como de veinte páginas que se llama “Rock and Roll, Botero y otros enredos.”

Before moving back to Puerto Rico [in 2003] my mother asked me why I was so angry, and I told her that I wanted to know myself. I sat down and wrote a twenty page long diatribe titled “Rock and Roll, Botero and Other Hair Tangles.” (Millán “Interview”)

Exploring her feelings of invisibility through this essay, Millán realized that as a gorda she was misrepresented or invisibilized not just in the acting industry, but also in most aspects of her life since she was a child. Understanding this, she decided to use her essay to develop a solo performance.

During the three years Millán spent immersed in the New York City alternative music scene, she was introduced to the American neo-cabaret. The neo-cabaret is usually an intimate solo performance in a small venue. The repertoire may focus on popular Broadway shows or “everything from classic show tunes to pop songs” (Yachinich 66). Between songs, the singer candidly shares anecdotes that usually give context to why they chose each song. Millán developed *La Mujer Invisible* with the neo-cabaret in mind; she wanted to do a similar style of performance but one that featured her original music, instead of cover songs.

It was also in New York where Millán was introduced to the rock musical genre, another dramaturgical influence on *La Mujer Invisible*. The rock musical has mostly developed off-off-Broadway, in small theatres and alternative venues where the high energy, familiarity, and audience rapport of the rock concert can be achieved (Pareles). As ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Wollmann explains, the rock musical follows the ideology of 1960s rock, where artists “bared their souls in composition and performance” (24). Wollmann refers to this as an authenticity value that does not translate well to Broadway, which in most cases has kept rock musicals on the fringe.

Millán was inspired by *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, a rock musical that follows the story of a fictional diva. Hedwig is a gay man that underwent a botched gender reassignment surgery in order to escape East Germany as the wife of her American male lover. Hedwig is also the lead singer of an unsuccessful rock band, and the play follows the band’s tour to less than enthusiastic audiences in dive bars, restaurants, and cafés. In between songs, Hedwig decides to share her life story with the audience and expresses her anger over the hardships she has experienced. She also talks about the frustration she feels about her mutilated body.<sup>135</sup> By the end of the play, Hedwig comes to terms with her unique body<sup>136</sup> and celebrates who she is. She invites the audience to be themselves and embrace and accept their queer identities.

Millán wanted to combine the intimacy and honesty of the neo-cabaret with the theatrical elements of the rock musical, such as a scripted text and original music compositions. Specifically, I would argue that *La Mujer Invisible* was influenced by *Hedwig*’s confessional style, the diva persona, as well as the emotional journey that leads

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<sup>135</sup> The mediocre reconstruction of her vagina healed closed, so she was left with no proper genitals.

<sup>136</sup> While usually described as transgender, Hedwig says she is a man trapped in a woman’s body and a woman trapped in a man’s body. The author, John Cameron Mitchell, said in an interview with theater critic Richard Ouzounian that Hedwig is not strictly transgender because, “She’s more than a woman or a man. She’s a gender of one and that is accidentally so beautiful.”

the protagonist to embrace her body as part of who she is, and proclaim her wholeness. Thus, *La Mujer Invisible* resonates with *Hedwig's* queer, transgressive sensibilities.

*La Mujer Invisible* was also influenced by Eve Ensler's solo performance *The Vagina Monologues*.<sup>137</sup> Millán was interested in its candid delivery style, and its criticism of dominant society's devaluation of women's bodies. It is important to note, that even though both *The Vagina Monologues* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* are well known, mainstream plays today, originally they were not. These genres, due to their intimate format, do not require big, expensive theatre venues; therefore they can be produced in smaller spaces with fewer resources. As a result, they rely more on the presence of the performers than on scenery or elaborate spectacle. Queer, feminist, and performers of color have invested in these genres as they provide an amicable space and audience for the development of fringe work. For example, feminist Asian American performer Kristina Wong, queer Dominican performer Wadys Jáquez, and queer Cuban performer Carmelita Tropicana have developed most of their work as solo performers. Some notable performers in the American neo cabaret are transgender performer Justin Vivian Bond and queer performer Taylor Mac, both are white. Millán, who had a traditional theatre background, was interested in the non-traditional performance styles that had mostly develop outside the mainstream, and she was living in New York City when she became exposed to them.

In 2003, seven years after she moved to New York, Millán returned to Puerto Rico where she devised and produced *La Mujer Invisible*. It was first performed at the *Teatro Coribantes' Festival del grito*<sup>138</sup> in San Juan. Ricardo Santana directed the show

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<sup>137</sup> Ensler's performance was discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>138</sup> Teatro Coribantes is a Puerto Rican theatre company founded in 1982, housed since 2006 in its own performance space at the Ponce de León Avenue in Hato Rey. They inaugurated their first year with the Festival del grito ("Shout Festival"), a fringe festival of sorts that had only one iteration, and the now nine year old *Festival del tercer amor* ("Third Love Festival"), dedicated to queer theatre.

and performed as one of the vocalists. Jomel Rivera participated as musical director and guitarist and developed the arrangements for Millán songs. Raúl Gaztambide played the bass and David Pérez the drums. Noelia Ortiz was a vocalist. In the beginning, Santana and Ortíz were just back-up singers, but as the work has evolved, they have become the voices of some of the characters in Millán's story. In some adaptations, Millán has performed a shorter format of the piece with just the guitarist or by herself.

After its first run, and for the past decade, *La Mujer Invisible* has been performed at main stages like *Teatro Arcelay*<sup>139</sup> in Caguas (2007) and *Centro de Bellas Artes*<sup>140</sup> in San Juan (2013), as well as alternative performance venues in San Juan like the *Nuyorican Café* (2004), *Taller Cé* (2006 and 2008)<sup>141</sup> and *La Respuesta* (2007)<sup>142</sup> music bars, the *Patio of Sala Becket* (2012), and *Broadway Café* in Santurce (2013).<sup>143</sup> In 2009, the full production was performed internationally to a live and online audience at the La Guardia Performing Arts Center in New York City as part of *Around the World in 24 Hours*, a festival hosted by the international directors collective The Internationalists.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> The Teatro Arcelay is a public theatre in the city of Caguas. This city is known for its support of the arts and culture. They have an annual theatre festival where, besides offering the artists the rehearsal and performance space, they cover advertisement costs, they give a portion of the tickets to their citizens for free, and the rest of the box office profit goes to the artists.

<sup>140</sup> The Centro de Bellas Artes is run by a public corporation, and it is Puerto Rico's main and biggest performance arts center. Rental costs and tickets are expensive compared to other theatres, but it is considered prestigious to perform there.

<sup>141</sup> Taller Cé was a café teatro, or performance-bar, owned by the Cooperativa de cantautores ("Singer-songwriters' Co-op"). This alternative performance venue operated at Robles Street in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico from 2005 to 2010. In those five years it became an important space for music, performance, and other cultural events.

<sup>142</sup> The Nuyorican Café and La Respuesta are alternative venues are mainly bars with a performance space available for rental for live music, performances, and other cultural events. Nuyorican Café is located in old San Juan and it is best known for its live salsa music, La Respuesta is in Santurce, and more often houses all kinds of events from hip hop to indie rock, and from clown performance to drag queens.

<sup>143</sup> Broadway Café is a café teatro in Santurce that offers a space for all kinds of alternative performances.

<sup>144</sup> The collective's Facebook page describes this as "An annual event hosted by The Internationalists, spanning 24 HOURS and held live in multiple venues around the world linked together using the best in Internet technologies. Performers are able to interact with each other, panel discussions are given a wide and vast audience and people online have the opportunity to chat and share their experiences in REAL

That same year, *La Mujer Invisible* was presented at Teatro Círculo in Manhattan to a mostly Latino audience. It has also been presented at special occasions like the Woman's Week Event of the Puerto Rico's Agronomist Association (2011) and at Gly (2012), a plus-size clothing boutique, on their client appreciation day.

Millán has performed *La Mujer Invisible* on and off for over a decade. This is an unusually long life for a theatre performance in Puerto Rico where commercial theatre productions are usually rehearsed for a month or two, run for one or two weekends and, more often than not, are never performed again. In my fifteen-year experience doing experimental independent theatre in Puerto Rico, I can assert that non-commercial theatre usually enjoys a longer rehearsal process, however, given the cost of production, especially venue fees, these performances rarely run for more than a couple of weekends. Theatre scholar Lowell Fiet further explains that for both commercial and non-commercial theatre and performance some of the challenges are the limited number of theatre spaces, the high rental costs of rehearsal and performance spaces, the limited amount of public and private support, all which can result in high ticket prices and low audience attendance (62-63). There are exceptions to this of course, especially for the few groups that enjoy or enjoyed having their own performance or rehearsal space like the comedy troupe Teatro Breve or the site-specific play *Cortadito o capuchino* produced by the Abracadabra Counter Café,<sup>145</sup> which was supposed to have five performances and ended up running for a full year. Agua, Sol y Sereno Theatre Company's play *Una de cal y una de arena* has run on and off for over fifteen years (Vélez Candelario). Nevertheless, in Puerto Rico a long-lived theatre performance is certainly uncommon. *La Mujer*

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TIME while performances are happening." I could not find evidence of the event happening before or after 2009.

<sup>145</sup> Israel Lugo, one of the actors of the play is also the owner of the café, which presumably means they do not need to incur rental costs.

*Invisible*'s long life speaks to the show's merits but, unfortunately, also speaks to the relevance of Millán's work, and the reality that gordas are still invisible in theatre and local and national media.

### **LA MUJER INVISIBLE: A SYNOPSIS**

*La Mujer Invisible* is a 70 minute-long solo performance where Millán as *Nancy*, her stage persona, sings, plays the electric guitar, and shares her personal stories. Even though it is a solo performance, she is not alone on stage. *Nancy* is accompanied by her rock band made up of the musical director and guitarist, a bass player, a drummer, and two back-up singers. The back-up singers are a thin man and a fat woman dressed in black who are mostly inconspicuous, standing behind and to the left of *Nancy*, the protagonist. At certain moments they walk up to *Nancy* and standing next to her, they impersonate some of the characters in *Nancy*'s stories, like her friends, her father, a teacher, and her doctors. They interact with *Nancy*, aiding the storytelling and adding an element of camp to the performance as they use exaggerated facial gestures, affected voices, and props (like wigs, hats, and other headpieces) to imbue the characters with a larger-than-life quality.

The performance, which is in Spanish vernacular,<sup>146</sup> consists of seven songs written by Millán, which are a reflection of her deepest feelings: sadness, love, anger, despair, and hope. Some of them were specifically written for the show, others preceded it. After each song, *Nancy* addresses the audience with familiarity, as if she was talking to a friend. In her reflective testimonials she uses elements of humor and irony as she looks back on her past experiences in order to understand how she learned that being fat meant

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<sup>146</sup> In Puerto Rico's Spanish, a variant of the Caribbean dialect, it is typical to occasionally insert English words and phrases in mid-sentence, and to use words derived from English (a.k.a Anglicisms).

being ugly and undeserving of love and success. Audience members, especially when the performance is presented at non-traditional performance spaces, engage in dialogue by commenting, cheering, or answering some of Millán's remarks and comments.

*La Mujer Invisible* starts with the band on stage. The lights come up and they start to play the song "Realidad alterna" ("Alternative Reality"), a semi-upbeat rock ballad that quickly sets the tone for what will be the rest of the show. The song starts with the question, "¿Cómo fue que llegué a este lugar?" ("How did I get to this place?"), and later the refrain asks, "¿Por qué no me ves?" ("Why can't you see me?"). Thus, the lyrics frame the performance as the search for the answer to this question: how did *Nancy* become invisible or how did she learn that being a fat woman of color was wrong and deemed her socially worthless?

In the following scene, *Nancy* explains how from a very young age she wanted to be a performer, and how she soon realized that her weight might interfere with her aspirations. She first narrates how she used to play alone in her bedroom and pretend she was a rock star or a novela protagonist. However, because she had never seen a fat singer or performer, even if unconsciously, she understood the impossibility of her dream. As she grew up, however, *Nancy* fell in love with theatre and, as she recounts, she decided to major in acting in college. Yet, as an actor she very quickly found herself confronted with all the same fears, insecurities, and frustrations that had plagued her as a child. With a sad and frustrated expression, *Nancy* finishes the scene saying "Eso fue como volver a mi niñez, a mi adolescencia." ("That was like going back to my childhood, my teenage years.") Then, the band starts to play an upbeat melody, and *Nancy* sings the song "Tardes de sábado" ("Saturday Afternoons"), which says:

*Aprendamos a soñar*

*Let's learn to dream*

*con un nuevo material*

*with a new material*

...

...

*El miedo antes fue no más que una palabra* *Fear used to be no more than a word*

*pero ahora tiene forma elástica*

*but now it has an elastic form*

*vida propia y espástica*

*a life of its own, a spastic life*

The song closes this scene where she addressed her personal fears and insecurities and foreshadows the following scene where she will further explore this theme.

In the next scene *Nancy* begins by talking about her pessimistic tendencies, and how they have colored and often determined many aspects of her life. She talks about her search to compensate for her innate fatalism, often at the urging of friends and family, and how she failed in her attempts at new age affirmation techniques, aromatherapy, and meditation. *Nancy* tells the story of how she eventually ended up seeing a psychiatrist who introduced her to the most enticing and apparently effective solution of all: prescribed psychotropic medications. The meds work so well that she makes the optimistic choice of moving to New York City. But it is not long, she tells us, before *Nancy* found herself in the psychiatric unit at Mount Sinai Hospital. The doctors from the hospital are humorously portrayed by the back-up singers, who exaggerate their voices and gestures. In the end, she tells us, she left the hospital more depressed than when she went in. The scene ends with the melancholic song “Auto ayuda” (“Self-help”), which is a poetic critique of all the positive thinking advice she received and which, despite her best efforts, did not work for her. It also declares her right to be sad. “Puedo ser libre / puedo ser libre / puedo llorar por la niña que no fui.” (“I can be free, I can be me / I can cry for the girl I wasn’t.”)

The next scene delves further into the topic of self-love. *Nancy* tells us about a vegan ex-boyfriend who argued that pessimism and depression were learned behaviors. She wonders if she was simply born hating herself or if maybe it was a combination of factors such as brain chemistry, hyper-sensitivity, racism, colonialism, or just the fact that when she was a child adults would say to her “you used to be so cute” meaning when she was smaller and, not coincidentally, thinner. The scene ends with *Nancy* saying that she chooses to believe that she deserves happiness, and that when she looks in the mirror she is capable of liking what she sees. She affirms this declaration in song with “No me hace falta” (“I don’t need...”):

<i>No me hace falta que me mires</i>	<i>I don't need you to look at me</i>
<i>No me hace falta que me admires</i>	<i>I don't need you to admire me</i>
<i>Pierde cuidado y nunca olvides</i>	<i>Don't you worry and don't you forget</i>
<i>Que tu ya no me defines</i>	<i>That you no longer define me</i>

Thus, *Nancy* reaffirms she is no longer under the influence of those that made her believe she was not attractive and declares that she does not need their approval anymore.

In an unexpected twist, *Nancy* admits in the next scene that, nevertheless, she still has days where she looks in the mirror and is full of self-hatred. Then she asserts that even though her parents loved her, they did not teach her to love herself. She talks of them telling her how fat she was and how she needed to lose weight, otherwise nobody would love her. *Nancy* comes to the conclusion that her low self-esteem and existential pessimism most likely originates from her childhood. Then she moves on to talk about school as another place where she learned similar lessons. *Nancy* talks of her teacher Mrs. Cerezo—played by one of the female back-up singers—who taught her to be ashamed of

being a tomboy, and how if she was hurt playing with boys it was her own fault. As a result she became confused and guilt ridden to the extent that when she was sexually harassed at age 10 by a 15 year-old boy she chose to stay quiet about it. *Nancy* says she was terrified about the things the boy said he would do to her, but she believed it was her fault for being friends with boys in the first place. The scene ends with the upbeat and funny song “No juegues con nenes” (“Don’t Play with Boys”). The title is self-explanatory, and the lyrics lists how a proper girl should behave if she wants to stay out of trouble.

This sets the tone for the subsequent scene where *Nancy* talks about her romantic life. She begins by admitting to a secret *mantra* in her head that always says “no one will ever love you.” She tells how this mantra was temporarily silenced when Michael, a handsome friend ended up falling for her. Despite the fact that he did not have any issues with her body, when he broke up with her, once more her insecurities took over. *Nancy* admits to taking that break-up (and all break-ups after that) as the ultimate evidence of the veracity of her self-hating mantra. However, she adds, a part of her knows break-ups are just a part of life, so *Nancy* ends the scene with a passionate love song titled “Ying y Yang” (“Ying and Yang”).<sup>147</sup> “*Ven para que te bebas / en agua dulce mis venas / Ven para que te quiera / esta noche entera*” (“*Come and drink / my vein’s sweet water / Come and I will love you / all night long*”).

Next, *Nancy* shares her love of makeover shows because she says she can relate to the self-loathing revealed in its participants. She talks specifically of her hatred for her hair, and how she was taught by teachers and parents alike that straight hair was good, while coily hair was bad. In this scene, which I will later analyze, we meet Mrs. Sánchez and Mrs. Delfina, two teachers who fed this belief to her, played by the back-up singers

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<sup>147</sup> The correct spelling should be Yin and Yang, however, I am keeping Millán’s spelling.

to comedic effect. Having neither straight nor coily hair she shares her ongoing confusion on the subject, and how she eventually understood the implications of this distinctions as they related to race. *Nancy* refuses to comply with Puerto Rico’s racist social ideologies and embraces her curly hair as sign of her Blackness. The song “Medusa” is a rebellious upbeat song and a declaration of her pride in her hair. “*Cuál es tu obsesión / con mi pelo ensortijón*” (“*What is your obsession / with my curly hair*”).

In the final scene *Nancy* tackles the subject of her fatness head on. She describes all the diets she has tried and failed at, and the many ways in which she is told that her fatness is a problem. *Nancy* tells the audience how these experiences have resulted in her feeling invisible, thus the title of her show. For a myriad of reasons—not being represented in the media, not being seen as cast-able except as an old lady or a witch—*Nancy* shares her struggle with not feeling seen. Apparently, according to society, happiness, love, and success are assigned only to those thin enough to deserve it. She does not know what the solution to this is, but she shares with the audience her struggle with it, and her sense of loneliness. The show does not end on a happy note but the final song, *La Mujer Invisible* (“The Invisible Woman”), offers a glimmer of hope. It is a joyful ode to her most hopeful and powerful self, in spite of everything.

*Ya no me pueden ignorar*

*I can no longer be ignored*

*Este es el tiempo de brillar*

*This is the time to shine*

### **THE DIVA AS MEDUSA: TURNING FAT FEAR TO STONE BY GAZING/TALKING BACK**

Through her absence, *Nancy* establishes herself as a diva, even before the performance begins. The musicians are positioned upstage and the back-up singers stand center stage left; all are dressed in black. They are not taking up much space or calling

attention to themselves. It is clear that the band is there for *her*. There is an empty space upstage center where the diva's microphone stands alone. She is invisible, but perceived and expected. The audience knows of her existence, and they are waiting for her, the divine creature, to materialize. They want to see the diva and to hear her virtuous voice.

Through her costume—the only thing of decorative value on stage—*Nancy* embodies divadom as soon as she enters. Even if an audience member doesn't know what she looks like, they can recognize her by the way she is dressed. Her costume has changed since she first started doing the show. The original costuming consisted of skinny jeans, stiletto heels, and a sheer blouse that gave the audience a glimpse of her *panza*. Most recently, she wore a black formfitting blouse, matching pencil skirt, faux-pearl multi-strand necklace and bracelet, black knee-high boots, and a small tear drop hat with a pink rose. In the performance I am analyzing in this chapter, she wore black knee-high boots and a short, low-cut, black-and-white polka dot swing dress that accentuated her curvy body.<sup>148</sup> With these costume choices, *Nancy* challenges fashion rules for fat ladies.<sup>149</sup> She does not try to conceal her big body; instead the gorda proudly shows it. Cultural critic Wayne Koestenbaum precisely asserts, “The diva can't separate self from vocation: her body is her art” (87). Hence, the diva's virtuosity or technical skill and captivating personal style, her singing voice, is corporeal. Her excessive aural talent echoes through the volume of her body.

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<sup>148</sup> Because of Puerto Rico's warm climate, this type of boot is unusual and extravagant.

<sup>149</sup> The clothing choices for plus-size women now compared to twenty years ago are immensely different. There used to be few available, affordable, and fashion forward choices; today there is wider selection available. Until recently, fashion rules for fat women focused on not drawing attention to their bodies and instead covering them up or concealing their size as much as possible. Some of the most known rules are: wear black, do not wear skinny jeans or form fitting clothing, hide your “problem areas” with oversized clothes, do not wear stripes, polka dots, or any patterns, do not draw attention to your belly or booty, use blazers to conceal your waist.

It is through sound that the diva's subjectivity is registered. In her opening song *Nancy* raises the question that frames *La Mujer Invisible*, "How did I get to this place?" "Why can't you see me?" The song's tempo and her melancholic voice evoke the feeling of loneliness that *Nancy* refers to in the refrain: "Alternative reality or invisibility?/ My veins are bitter from all this loneliness." With this song, *Nancy* brings attention to the paradox of the fat woman: she is both invisible and hyper-visible. Later in the performance, she will earnestly elaborate on this paradox:

La invisibilidad es un tema que me agobia, y que se fue haciendo más evidente según pasaron los años, y –sobre todo– cuando decidí ser actriz. Sí, parece increíble que una persona tan grande se sienta invisible, pero es real.

Invisibility is a subject that overwhelms me, and it became more evident as years went by, especially when I decided to become an actress. Yes, it may seem unbelievable that a person so big feels invisible, yet it is real.

This resonates with Size-acceptance activist Charisse W. Goodman's claims about the U.S. American media's obsession with thinness in women. "Not only are women sent the very powerful and relentless messages that being thin takes precedence over all other goals, but a woman who is heavy will have to search far and wide for any mainstream validation of her worth and attractiveness" (8). In other words, fat women are policed and scrutinized on one hand and rendered socially invisible on the other.

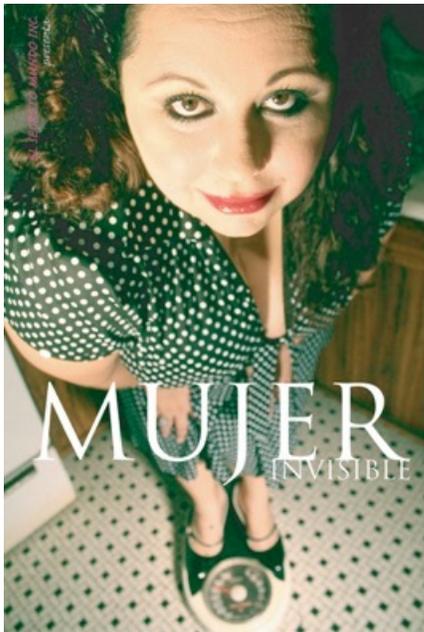


Figure 37: Promotional picture of *La Mujer Invisible*. Courtesy of Nancy Millán.

The diva challenges this invisibility when she unapologetically takes center stage. *Nancy* enters the performance space carrying herself with confidence, knowing that her audience has been waiting for her. Her presence and her voice are a gift to the audience; she indicates this after she sings when she tells them in Spanish, “I made this reappearance just for you.” Seeing the diva, being in her presence, listening to her voice live, *is* a privilege. However, the audience is not the only one watching; the *gorda* is looking back. As Koestenbaum further remarks, “The diva shatters the fourth wall dividing stage and the audience when she stares straight into the crowd and finds a familiar fan’s face” (43). In other words, the diva can see her audience and makes sure that they know this. Thus, she reverses the gaze and claims her agency.

As the author of *La Mujer Invisible*, Millán further explores the power of her own gaze by conjuring Medusa as a metaphoric response to the ocular tyranny under which gorda bodies live. In the ominous song “Medusa” Nancy sings, “*Nunca algo bueno que decir / y me miras con terror / como si fuera yo Medusa / lista con mi pelo a destruir*” (“*You do not have anything good to say / instead you see me with terror / as if I were Medusa / ready to destroy with my hair.*”) In Greek mythology, Medusa is one of the Gorgon sisters,<sup>150</sup> who possessed deadly, magical powers and lived in the dark. As a result, she was rarely seen but if a man encountered her, she could kill him by turning him instantly into stone with her gaze. Medusa was raped in the temple of Athena and as punishment, Athena turned Medusa’s curly hair into venomous serpents. She is often depicted with her mouth open, as in Caravaggio’s famous painting, suggesting her deadly powers reside in her voice as well as her hair. Her voice has been envisioned in literature as a scary shriek (Ross, Fox, Karpshyn)—evidence of her rage. In *La Mujer Invisible*, Nancy conjures Medusa and petrifies those who look at her with fear.

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<sup>150</sup> All the three Gorgons share the same powers, however only Medusa is mortal. Her curly hair was turned into snakes after she was raped. Later, Perseus decapitated her and used her head, which retained its powers, as a weapon. Thus, she was a victim of sexual violence.



Figure 38: Caravaggio's Medusa. Retrieved from the virtual Uffizi Gallery page.

It is in the action of looking back at those who look at her with fear that *Nancy*, like Medusa, gains her agency by stopping fear and turning it to stone. Not only does she look back at the audience, seeing those who see her, but she also looks back over her life, remembering and re-membering. In looking back from her current vantage point of the empowered diva, she gains a new perspective on her past. Koestenbaum argues that when a diva reflects on her past, “The vocation of diva permits her to read her life backwards and see clear meanings, hints of tremendousness, where there was once shame” (90). For *Nancy*, looking back is not only about her individual process of erasing past shame, recuperating her severed body (as fat women are often told they have a pretty face but their bodies are what they should loath<sup>151</sup>), and moving into a space of self-acceptance. *Nancy* also remembers in order to find the answer to the question of invisibility. Instead

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<sup>151</sup> Besides Duany and Millán reporting this, I repeatedly found evidence of this common, back handed compliment on blogs by women who are or were fat. For example, Ramou Sarr writes about this in her blog post “But You Have Such a Pretty Face! And Other Things You Should Stop Telling Your Fat Friends” found on [www.hellogiggles.com](http://www.hellogiggles.com).

of her original inquiry —why am I invisible?— she arrives at a more empowered one: why can't you see me?

Defiant and assertive, the gorda not only looks back, but she talks back as well. *Nancy*, a sharp-tongued woman, speaks from her own perspective; she freely shares her vulnerabilities and emotions, as well as her critical analysis of the relationship between fatness, gender, sexuality, race, and mental health stigma. For example, *Nancy* remembers telling a friend she was not interested in a guy that was after her, to which her friend responded: “¡Mira a ésta! ¡Dándose puesto!” (“Look at her! Acting so high and mighty!”) What this exchange implies is that *Nancy* is being presumptuous, that as a fat woman she cannot afford to be picky. In other words, she does not have many options and must be content with any man that wants her. Even more so, it assumes that she is or should be craving a man's—any man's—attention.

*Nancy* continues her story, incisively exploring the societal implications of her friend's remark and talking back to these implications. First, with quizzical expression and an ironic tone she says, “¿Y qué quiere decir? ¿Qué la gorda no puede darse puesto?” (“What is that supposed to mean? That the gorda cannot act high and mighty?”) *Nancy* names what her friend has left unsaid, the stigma of the undesirability of the fat female body. Furthermore, she names the “F” word: fat, as it works as a noun and not just an adjective: la gorda. In naming it, she embraces fat as a noun that names her identity and rejects fat-shame. This is more evident when *Nancy* raises her chin proudly, slightly and suggestively swaying her shoulders and hips back and forth when she says:

Ay, pues yo quiero pensar que ¡sí! [Una mujer desde el público grita: ¡Pues claro!] Yo quiero pensar que soy bella, que soy fabulosa, que soy divina; que mi talento va a vencer cualquier obstáculo y cualquier prejuicio.

Well, I want to think I can! [A woman from the audience yells back: Of course!] I want to think I am beautiful, I am fabulous, and I am divine; that my talent will overcome any obstacle and prejudice.

It is through *Nancy's* incisive tongue that she rebels against her invisibility. Moreover, this verbal “gesture of defiance” allows her to heal, celebrate, and regenerate her gorda self.

Millán’s concern with invisibility is not only about fat women’s exclusion or misrepresentation, but also about the lack of opportunities for fat women performers to practice as cultural workers. This becomes clear when, for a moment, *Nancy* stops talking about her body and appearance. She stretches her arms out, her palms held upwards in a gesture that communicates acceptance and confidence. Then she continues, “que yo voy a hacer una diferencia en el mundo, porque yo tengo algo que decir, y lo voy a decir con gracia.” (“That I will make a difference in the world, because I have something to say, and I will say it gracefully.”) Here, *Nancy* affirms her social value as an individual part of the collective, an artist who is using her artistry to comment, question, and challenge social issues such as fat prejudice. She suggests that precisely because she is a fat woman of color, she has a distinctive perspective to offer in service of those who endure invisibilization in silence.

*Nancy* goes on, confidently declaring her sexual worth because of who she is, not because of a man’s approval, carefully articulating every word she says: “que el hombre que esté a mi lado tiene suerte de amanecer en *mi* cama!” (“That the man who is by my side, is lucky to wake up in my bed!”) She takes a pause, looks down at her body for a second, locks eyes with her audience, and says with a radiant smile, “Yo me miro al espejo y me gustan mis curvas, y me digo que hay muchas maneras de ser bella.” (“I look at myself in the mirror, and I like my curves, and I tell myself that there are many ways

of being beautiful.”) The audience bursts into a loud, collective cheer, and *Nancy* immediately turns around to get her guitar. In this moment, *Nancy*—Medusa-like with her direct gaze and open mouth—refuses to accept the violence directed towards her body. *Nancy* interprets her past experiences anew and makes visible the stigma of the undesirable fat female body.

The gorda takes the stage to declare her existence, her womanhood, and to heal through her creativity. The diva might need her audience’s appreciation to fully embody divadom, but in the scene just described, *Nancy* does not pause to take pleasure in the applause she receives. Millán/*Nancy* is not seeking their admiration; instead she wants to be heard and to share her experiences. It is in writing/speaking<sup>152</sup> that she finds healing, and she gives birth to new epistemologies. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous argues, “It is in writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that 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” (881). Cixous urges women to write themselves and in so doing, to reclaim their voices, sexual bodies, and knowledge which patriarchal society has suppressed.

In the first half of *La Mujer Invisible* the existence and impact of depression is the main answer to the opening song’s question: “How did I get to this place?” And in pondering that question *Nancy* is performing a *desahogo*. The Spanish word *desahogo* translates as venting or releasing emotion. Literally *des-ahogo* means un-choking, un-drowning, un-suffocating; it conveys the urgency of speaking, as remaining silent could result in death. *Nancy* begins her *desahogo* by remembering with candid humor how, as a child, she would pretend to be a novela protagonist or rock star, performing or giving

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<sup>152</sup> As explained earlier, Millán wrote an essay, in order to vent and understand her anger, that later became the first draft of *La Mujer Invisible*.

interviews in popular local shows. Due to the lack of positive representation of fat women in the media, *Nancy*'s child self eventually came to the conclusion that she could not be an actress or singer.

A stereotypical trope in the construction of fatness is that women are fat because they have low self-esteem or that fatness is conducive to low self-esteem (Wann, Goodman, Poulton, Levy-Navarro). *Nancy* admits she suffered from low self-esteem and pessimism and goes on to explore why. "Sí, porque yo no recuerdo el día exacto en que me di cuenta que era un crimen el verme como me veía, eso lo he sabido siempre." ("Yes, because I can't remember the exact day I realized looking like I did was a crime. I've known that all my life.") She pauses as if reflecting on what she just said, then claps as if having an "Eureka!" moment, and finally says sarcastically, "¡Es que nací con poca autoestima!" ("I must have been born with low self-esteem!") *Nancy* uses irony here to underscore that low self-esteem is not a reality for some fat women because they are defective; rather, it is the result of living in a society that constantly rejects those who are different. In the following scenes, *Nancy* analyzes how, throughout her life, all the messages she received from media, teachers, family, and friends told her constantly that she was worthless. "Si eres gorda, nadie te va a querer." ("If you are fat no one is going to love you.") In other words, she argues that being fat is not the cause or the result of low self-esteem; it is the social construction of fatness as undesirable, ugly, and morally and physically defective that affected her confidence and sense of worth.

*Nancy* admits that she suffered from severe depression. After trying alternative methods like yoga, meditation, and positive affirmations she ended up seeking psychiatric help. While today psychological therapy is widely accepted in Western society, for much of the last century psychiatric treatment carried the stigma of madness

and was attributed to deviance. Nonchalantly, *Nancy* shares her experience with the psychiatrist she saw in Puerto Rico:

Hablamos muchísimo, pero lo mejor, fueron las pastillitas para la felicidad de las cuales yo he tomado seis tipos: Prozac, Efexxor, Welbutrin, Litio, Zoloft y... no me acuerdo, son tantas que no me acuerdo. Yo estaba tratando de librarme de la desesperanza, la soledad y el hastío con 100 mg dos veces al día.

We talked a lot, but the best part were the happiness pills. Of which I've taken six kinds: Prozac, Efexxor, Welbutrin, Lithium, Zoloft, and... another one, whose name I can't remember, there are too many, I can't remember. I was trying to free myself from the hopelessness, loneliness, and weariness with 100 mg twice a day.

Casually stating the fact that she was under psychotropic medication and identifying the list of medicines that carry their own stigma,<sup>153</sup> *Nancy* rejects the shame associated with mental illness. Furthermore, in revealing this private experience, she brings a subject that is rarely discussed publicly by those who suffer from it out in the open.<sup>154</sup> *Nancy* asserts that she received comfort and emotional balance from the drugs. Instead of robbing her of agency, these medications helped her cope with her condition.

The medications improved her condition and confidence so much, that *Nancy* decided to move to New York City. In the midst of trying to fulfill her artistic dreams, she ended up hospitalized. *Nancy* does not discuss in detail her experiences in New York, if she was still using meds, why she was depressed again, or how long she suffered before it was too much to handle. She only tells the audience:

Y en medio de la clichosa lucha por lograr el sueño de Broadway o Sony Music es como llegamos a Mount Sinai, 99th Street and Madison Avenue, 5th floor, psychiatric wing. Allí estaba porque me estaba muriendo; había perdido por completo la esperanza.

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<sup>153</sup> For example, Lithium is commonly used for the treatment of bipolar disorder, which is considered more serious than depression. Also, medication carries the stigma of being addictive.

<sup>154</sup> The recent death of actor Robin Williams, who suffered from depression for years and ultimately took his own life, brought the silence around mental illness to light.

And in the midst of the Broadway or Sony Music cliché, we arrive at Mount Sinai, 99th Street and Madison Avenue, 5th floor, psychiatric wing. I was there because I was dying; I had lost all hope.

*Nancy* will eventually mention that she was depressed because “soy gorda y fea y mi vida es una mierda” (“I am fat and ugly and my life sucks”), and because she had not been able to fulfill her dreams or find love. Once more, *Nancy* looks fear in the eye—the fear of mental illness—and turns it into stone by disclosing her experiences in the psychiatric ward. Her assertion that she was dying could suggest that she was depressed to the point of having suicidal thoughts or at least losing her desire to live.

Instead of discussing the medical treatment she received, *Nancy* shares her experiences with the doctors who did not treat her with dignity. With the help of her back-up singers, *Nancy* recounts this anecdote:

DR. I’M-YOUNG-AND-HOT-AND-I-KNOW-IT-ALL:<sup>155</sup> *El corista le dice con frialdad.* Nancy, levántate que tenemos que ir a terapia ahora. (“*Male back-up singer addresses her coldly.* Nancy, wake up, we have to go to therapy now.”)

NANCY: *Confundida.* Eeeh ... ¡¿Ahora?! (“*Confused.* Eeeh...now?!”)

DR. YOUNG: *Exasperado.* ¡Sí! Ahora, ven. (“*Exasperated.* Yes! Now, come on.”)

NANCY: *Rogando.* Pero déjame lavarme la cara. (“*Pleading.* But let me wash my face.”)

DR. YOUNG: *Apresurándola.* ¡Vamos que no hay tiempo! (“*Hurrying her up.* Come on, there’s no time!”)

NANCY: *Nerviosa y resignada.* Ok. (“*Nervous and resigned.* Ok.”)

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<sup>155</sup> *Nancy* previously introduced these two and other doctors with names that described how they behaved around the patients.

DR. YOUNG: *A la otra corista*. Dr. Who-Are-You, aquí está la paciente Nancy que sufre de depresión severa. (“*Addressing the female back-up singer*. Dr. Who-Are-You, here is the patient Nancy, who is suffering from severe depression.”)

DR. WHO-ARE-YOU: *Ceremoniosa*. Hola Nancy, yo soy Dr. Who-Are-You-I-don’t-really-care, y estos son los estudiantes de medicina insensible. (“*Ceremoniously*. Hi Nancy, I’m Dr. Who-Are-You-I-don’t-really-care, and these are the students of the Insensible Medical School.”)

*Nancy*, who has been looking at the singers/doctors with an embarrassed expression, turns to the audience, breaking the temporary fourth wall.<sup>156</sup> With an angry voice and expression she explains there are twenty interns there to observe her during her session with the doctor. “Me habían sacado de la cama sin dejarme lavarme la cara, peinarme el pelo, ponerme el *brassiere*, y para colmo yo tenía puestas mis payamas de oveja. ¡Yo tendré baja autoestima, pero todo tiene un límite!” (“They took me out of bed without brushing my teeth, brushing my hair, putting on a bra, and to make things worse, I was wearing my sheep pajamas. I may have low self-esteem, but everything has a limit!”)

As a patient in the hospital, *Nancy* is stripped of her privacy, dignity, and humanity. She was not given an explanation as to why she is called for, asked if she would agree to be part of the interns’ observation, or given the time to be presentable in front of strangers. The assumption may be that because she is depressed or because she is fat, she doesn’t care about her appearance. A common stigma of people who suffer from severe depression is that they are undisciplined, unpredictable, and that their pain is

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<sup>156</sup> I call it “temporary fourth wall” since most of the time *Nancy* addresses the audience directly, even the back-up singers add comments to her story telling. There are few instances where she stays engaged in the re-creation of a past event, and this is one of them.

unnecessary and self-inflicted (Wolpert 222). The stigmatization of people with depression is similar to that faced by fat individuals. Goodman further explains: “The boundless psychological damage done by weight prejudice is considered to be self-inflicted by fat women themselves rather than by the malice and ignorance of weight bigots” (42). When *Nancy* says, “I may have low self-esteem, but everything has its limits,” she implies the concurrence of both prejudices. Furthermore, the names Millán gives the doctors and medical students allude not only to the lack of compassion these individuals show their patients, but how the mistreatment of mental health patients is an institutionalized problem.<sup>157</sup>

Through performance, Millán creates an opportunity to look back at past oppressions, express her anger and frustration and perform a *desahogo*. Furthermore, it allows her to develop a full sense of self, when as a fat woman of color she is never considered whole. *Nancy* explains that in the hospital she did not find healing. She actually left more depressed than when she was admitted, still looking for answers. The answers she was seeking became the same ones that compelled Millán to write and then perform *La Mujer Invisible*. *Nancy* makes this more evident when at the end of the performance she says earnestly, “Es duro desaprender lo aprendido, es duro cambiar el paradigma, el panorama y el programa. Por eso esta necesidad narcisista de poner en palabras lo que siento, que alguien más escuche.” (“It is hard to unlearn what you have learned, it is hard to change the paradigm, the panorama, and the program. That’s the reason behind this narcissistic necessity to put into words what I feel, so that someone listens.”) *Nancy* described her autobiographical performance as a “narcissistic impulse,”

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<sup>157</sup> While there is very little data concerning mental health providers, there is data that indicates “primary care providers have reported less respect for patients with obesity compared with those without, and low respect has been shown to predict less positive affective communication and information giving” (Phelan et. al. 321).

alluding to a double bind in which she and many fat women find themselves. Her fatness is stigmatized as low self-esteem and yet her confidence is seen as “all high and mighty” arrogance. Most importantly, here she asserts that performance is a tool for her to transform the detrimental experiences of marginalization into an empowering moment of self-affirmation in front of an audience that shows empathy and solidarity.



Figure 39: Performance of *La Mujer Invisible* at Teatro Arcelay de Caguas (2007). Photo courtesy of Nancy Millán.

As a diva, Millán is able to create a special connection with her audience since she is talking directly to them and responding back to their comments. She shares her personal experiences and speaks in the first person as *Nancy*, creating a space of intimacy. In an interview, Millán told me that after each performance many different kinds of people come backstage, feeling moved by the play and compelled to share

stories about how they also felt invisible. However, performing at the plus-size store Gly Boutique for a mostly plus-size female audience was especially significant.

Nos sentamos juntas después del show y todo el mundo compartió sus experiencias: cómo nos molestaban cuando pequeñas, los distintos apodos que otros niños nos ponían, los consejos no solicitados sobre cómo perder peso que nos daban los amigos y familiares. Fue terapéutico.

We sat together after the performance and everyone shared their experiences: how we were teased as children, the different nicknames other kids gave us, the unrequested weight loss advice given by friends and strangers alike. It was therapeutic. (Millán)

In other words, *La Mujer Invisible* has particular resonance for those who have experienced the same kind of marginalization as its protagonist. It is a healing moment, not only for Millán, but for her audience as well. It is a moment in which gorda bodies, just like in women's autobiography in general, are moved "from the background to the foreground" (Miller, Taylor, and Carver) and in doing so, *La Mujer Invisible* incites a community response.

### **MEDUSA'S HAIR: RECLAIMING BLACKNESS**

While Medusa's power is typically located in her petrifying gaze, in *La Mujer Invisible*, Millán also explores the ways in which Medusa's hair speaks to racial anxieties in Puerto Rico and how her powerful gaze challenges them. Medusa's curly serpent hair is the most evident marker of her race. Her hair has a life of its own, and it is deadly and frightening according to the Greek myth. However, in other cultures the serpents symbolized female wisdom; that which the Greeks considered strange, dangerous, and scary, was revered in other cultures and seen as a positive symbol of power. For example, in Libya Medusa was believed to be one expression of the goddess of the Moon trinity.

Her serpent hair symbolized that Medusa was a goddess of wisdom, sexuality, healing, and death (Walker 629). After the Greek conquest of Northern Africa, she was rearticulated as a monster—most famously in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*—symbolizing the dangers of her female power and her Black or Brown otherness.<sup>158</sup> Hélène Cixous also remarks, “Medusa is a representation of the Other by virtue of her absolute and terrifying difference” (876). In other words, Medusa, like the gorda, does not conform to the standards of womanhood, and as a result she is feared and considered expendable. Like all that is different she had to be destroyed, violently deprived of her body.

In what Nancy calls “the second part of this group therapy,” she interrupts her narrative about fatness to address hair and its relationship to race in Puerto Rico. The official discourse of race defines Puerto Rican “race” and culture and the Puerto Rican him/herself, as the result of *mestizaje* or the mixture of three races: *Taíno* Indian,<sup>159</sup> Spanish, and African. However, the ideal result of this mixture is represented in national iconography as a light skinned Puerto Rican with straight, dark hair. This is the process known as *blanquizaje*,<sup>160</sup> whitening or “fixing of the race,” where, as anthropologist Isar

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<sup>158</sup> There is also speculation in different online blogs and webpages that Medusa’s hair represents dreadlocks, and that she may have been the leader of one of the Amazon tribes of North Africa, and that her beheading in the myth might have symbolized the Greeks’ conquest. There is also the possibility that this Amazon leader was indeed decapitated by the Greek army in order to show complete domination over the female-ruled tribes. However, I could not find any reliable source to cite.

<sup>159</sup> Taíno is the name that the Columbus gave to the natives living in most of the Caribbean Islands. Taíno means friend, good, or noble in the Arawak language, which the natives spoke, and presumably was not how they named themselves. According to historians the Taínos as a cohesive cultural group were exterminated through illness and famine or through “inter-marriage” with Spanish and Africans. It has been proven through DNA testing that there is still Taíno racial ancestry present in the population. For more on this study read: Bustamante, C. D., Burchard, E. G. & De La Vega, F. M. *et al.* *Nature* 475, 163-165 (2011). Since the 1970s different groups have identified themselves as Taíno and tried to preserve or reconstruct the culture with the help of the Spanish colonizers’ chronicles and oral history. Some claim pure Taíno pedigree, accurate practice of customs and right to the land. For more on contemporary Taínos go to [http://www.powhatanmuseum.com/Tainos\\_Past\\_Present.html](http://www.powhatanmuseum.com/Tainos_Past_Present.html).

<sup>160</sup> Spanish colonizers established in their American colonies a system of castes that determined the access to power according to the level of racial mixture. This mixture was evaluated based on physical features where “white” features might allow upward movement of status while “Black” features made social

Godreau explains, Blackness is underrepresented and “socially marked on the Island as inferior, ugly, dirty, unintelligent, backward, reduced to a primitive hyper-sexuality (particularly in the case of black women)” (71). As a result, phenotype works as a racial marker, and those associated with Blackness are loathed, and should be as concealed as possible.

*Nancy* explores how she developed her conception of race growing up in this context. She begins by talking about her current obsession with makeover shows and how they are mostly targeted towards women, suggesting that women need to change their appearances. What shocks *Nancy* the most is women’s capacity to hate our bodies and our different body parts. “Yo he odiado much[a]s de [esas partes del cuerpo]. El más obvio es el cuerpo que iba a hacer que nadie me quisiera. Pero antes tenía que odiar mi pelo.” (“I have hated many of those [body parts]. The most obvious being the body that would make it impossible for anybody to love me. However, first I had to hate my hair.”) *Nancy* explains that, when she was growing up, there were only two types of hair: *pelo bueno* or good hair, and *pelo malo* or bad hair. No explanation is needed, since every Puerto Rican is familiar with the so-called *pelo malo* or natural Black hair.<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, *Nancy* goes on to mention the terms used to describe “bad hair” in the Puerto Rican argot: “maranta, mapo de presidio, escobillón de municipio, pelo de pulpo, esponja de fregar, brillo, etc.” (“Arrowroot plant, penitentiary mop, city broom, octopus’ hair, dishwashing sponge, brillo pad, etc.”) This litany of derogatory slang stresses how curled or tightly coiled hair texture is assumed to be ugly, undesirable, and filthy.

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mobility difficult or impossible. For more, and a definition of the different castes go to <http://nativeheritageproject.com/2013/06/15/las-castas-spanish-racial-classifications/>.

<sup>161</sup> I use the term *Black hair* to refer to the hair of those of African descent as defined in Ingrid Banks book *Hair Matters*. I do not use the term to describe its color, more so its texture and quality: nappy; kinky; pbad”adnky; pyse the term to describe its color, mo

*Nancy* re-creates a lecture on personal hygiene and good image given by her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Sánchez. The female back-up singer puts her hair up in a bun and with a deep voice and formal tone says, “No importa qué tipo de pelo se tiene, si se lo arregla bien, y se mantiene limpio, uno se ve bien.” (“Regardless of what type of hair one has, if you take good care of it and keep it clean, it looks good.”) *Nancy*, who listens as the “teacher” speaks, turns to the audience and comments, “Ok, nada raro hasta ahí.” (“Ok, nothing weird up to here.”) The lecture continues:

**MRS. SÁNCHEZ:** Por ejemplo, hay una señora que es mi supervisora, y ella es una señora de color, pero siempre tiene el pelo como una seda. (“For example, there’s a woman who is my supervisor, and she is a colored woman,<sup>162</sup> but her hair is always silk-like.”)

**NANCY:** *Al público perpleja.* ¡¿Pelo como seda?! (“*To the audience looking perplexed.* Silk-like hair?!”)

**MRS. SÁNCHEZ:** *Gestualizando con sus manos para enfatizar lo que está describiendo.* Esa señora siempre está tan bien arreglada, tan bien puesta. Y el pelo brillosito, liso, perfecto. Como seda. (“*Gesturing with her hands to underscore her description.* That lady is always fixed up nicely. And her hair is shiny, straight, perfect, just like silk.”)

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<sup>162</sup> “De color,” or of color is an euphemism in Puerto Rico for Black. Others are *negrita/o* (diminutive for Black), *trigueña/o*, *morena/o* or *prieta/o*. *Trigueña/o*, *mulata/o* and *jabá/o* are used to denounce different skin hues and mixed race. *Negra/o* or Black, is often considered an insult, especially depending on context, although there are people, activists, and communities that embrace the identity of Black as their proper identity. Ironically, *negrita/o* and *negra/o* can also be used as term of endearment regardless of the person’s race.

The implications of Mrs. Sánchez’s example of good hygiene and image are as much in what she says about her supervisors’ hair as in what she leaves unsaid. She implies that despite the “fact” that her supervisor is Black, she looked clean and elegant because she took “good care” of her hair and had it under strict control. In other words, if she had it natural it would look ugly and filthy. Furthermore, Mrs. Sánchez perceives this “well kept” hair as something unusual, as her amazement shows. Not only was it straight and shiny, altering its appearance; its texture was altered too, making it smooth and thin, and even though in Puerto Rico any combination of skin tone and hair texture is commonly found, this seems unusual to the teacher.



Figure 40: Noelia Ortiz playing Mrs. Sánchez. Screenshot of my recording of *La Mujer Invisible*’s performance at el Patio de la Sala Beckett (2012).

The supervisor’s hair looked “perfect” or, in other words, straight. Thus, the teacher implies there are ways to represent Blackness that are socially acceptable and that allow for upward social movement, since the Black woman is her superior. Whatever

falls outside those norms is unacceptable and sends the wrong message. After Mrs. Sánchez's lecture is over, *Nancy* continues the narration:

Y ustedes saben cómo son los niños, así que tal y como hice yo, hicieron los otros. Miré a mi alrededor del salón y vimos [sic] a una nena negra con pelo crespo, y pensé: “¿y por qué no es tu pelo como una seda, y está, por el contrario, todo parado saliéndose del rabito que te hizo esta mañana tu mamá?”

And you know how kids are, so just like I did, other children did too. I looked around and we saw [sic] a Black girl with kinky hair, and I thought: “Why isn't your hair like silk, and instead it is all coming out from the pony tail your mother fixed for you this morning?”

*Nancy* and her classmates understood their teacher's unspoken message about Blackness. The message created anxiety and, without hesitation, they look among themselves to see if they complied with the standards of so-called good image and hygiene. It is also apparent that only one girl was wearing her hair natural, and she was most likely the only visibly Black girl in the room.<sup>163</sup> The children are learning the subtle racist discourse present in their culture and how they fit into it. Then, as her child self, *Nancy* turns the inquiry inward: “¿Y mi pelo? ¿Tiene mi pelo que ser como seda o está perdonado el mío pues no es malo del todo?” (“And my hair? Does my hair have to be silk-like too, or is it forgiven since it is not completely bad?”)

*Nancy* had previously explained how her hair was always curly and out of control. As a result, she was only allowed to have it very short until high school. She was aware that her hair was undesirable and unmanageable, but it is at this moment that she learns it is supposed to also say something about her character. Presumably, it is also at this moment when she consciously learns about racial difference. While trying to decide what kind of hair she has, *Nancy* walks towards her two back-up singers. The man has straight,

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<sup>163</sup> Since the example the teacher gave was not only raced but gendered it is unclear if there were any Black boys in the classroom.

blonde hair, and the woman wears her hair in an Afro. *Nancy* looks back and forth between them confusedly, uncertain of whom to stand near. She moves next to one, then the other, then back to the first; finally she stands between the two of them.

By taking a position between the two singers *Nancy*, a light skinned woman, is doing more than determining her hair type. She is assuming her racial identity as mulatta or jabá,<sup>164</sup> not mestiza or white. *Nancy* is explicitly acknowledging the ways her hair foregrounds her Blackness, thus performing an act of transgression of social codes and discourses of blanquizado. Despite Black feminist and anti-racist activists who claim the beauty of Black hair and Blackness, in Puerto Rico these features are still perceived in the collective consciousness as undesirable. Women who have Brown or light skin are expected to conceal their Blackness through what Yeidy M. Rivero calls “cosmetic whitening” or lightening the skin, refining the nose, and straightening the hair (71). A person with Brown skin and straight dark hair is often described as Indian, which, because of the mythification of Taínos as benign savages belonging to a distant past, is desirable. Social codes require women with Black or curly hair—regardless of their skin tone—to straighten it, especially in professional environments. Therefore, the necessity of having hair like silk serves the purpose of concealing or taming Blackness.

*Nancy* makes a statement against racism by positioning herself as mixed, claiming her Blackness as an integral part of her identity, and asserting through a song that she won’t deny her ancestry. After she stood between the musicians, she explains how as a child she loathed her hair and actually learned to hate it before learning to hate her body. While she previously stated that she knew her body was unacceptable, she did not necessarily hate it until she was older. Then, with one hand planted on her hip and the

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<sup>164</sup> In Puerto Rican vernacular a jabá or jabáo is a person that has white or very light skin, but presents other characteristics of presumably Black phenotype, especially curly and coily hair.

other pointing a menacing finger at the audience, *Nancy* declares with a firm voice, “Esa tiranía en mi vida obviamente se acabó, y me dedico a mirar con odio a todo aquel que desprecie la textura de mi pelo o que insinúe que se vería mejor estirado.” (“Obviously, this tyranny is over for me, and I look with hate and disdain at anyone who despises the texture of my hair, or that hints that it would look better straightened.”) She looks around the audience with a sharp menacing look, as if making sure there is not any tyrant among them. Here, *Nancy* takes pride in her Blackness and refuses to conform to racist social standards of beauty. Furthermore, she performs Medusa’s powerful gaze, scrutinizing the audience, ready to petrify her haters.



Figure 41: Ricardo Santana playing Mrs. Delfina. Screenshot of my recording of *La Mujer Invisible*'s performance at el Patio de la Sala Beckett. (2012).

In the next anecdote, *Nancy* shows how gordas must reckon with their bodies as always and already characterized as "excessive" in the eyes of dominant culture. With the help of the male back-up singer, she dramatizes another encounter with a teacher during her teens. The singer plays the part of Nancy's ninth grade teacher:

**MRS. DELFINA:** Nena ven acá un momento. (“Girl, come here please.”)

**NANCY:** ¿Qué pasó misi? (“What is it ma’am?”)

**MRS. DELFINA:** Tú deberías peinarte como Lucy Pereda. Sí, porque así te sacas el pelo de la cara, y así te vas a ver más saludable, más delgada y más arregladita. (“You should fix your hair like Lucy Pereda.<sup>165</sup> Yes, because then you’ll be pulling your hair out of your face, and that will make you look healthier, thinner, and nicer.”)

Young *Nancy* looks confused and ashamed by the teacher’s remarks and does not know how to respond. Adult *Nancy* comes out of character and says to the audience, “traducción: recógete la maranta esa que no hay nada peor que una gorda con el pelo grande.” (“translation: pull up your nappy hair, there is nothing worse than a fat girl with big hair.”) She then explains that even though she did not like Lucy Pereda’s hairdo, she went home and tried the style just in case Mrs. Delfina was right.



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<sup>165</sup> Lucy Pereda is a Cuban born TV hostess who started her career in Puerto Rico. She was known in the 1980s for her ability to write backwards on a transparent “blackboard” and for her signature hair style, a tight ballerina bun. Today Pereda lives in Miami and is a Latin/a American celebrity.

Figure 42: Lucy Pereda's cookbook *De mi cocina: poca grasa, pero mucho sabor*.

("Little Fat but Lots of Taste.") Retrieved from [www.lucyperedatv.com](http://www.lucyperedatv.com).

Through this encounter, young Nancy found an answer to her question "is my hair forgiven since it is not completely bad?" The answer: no, it is not. However, as Nancy's previous declaration of pride shows, and the song that follows this scene underscores, Millán makes visible the intersectionality between the undesirability of her fatness, gender, and race. On all accounts, that which is considered undesirable—her size, her hair, and the particulars of her race—is viewed as excessive. However, she reclaims these parts of herself as integral to her identity, thus, resisting normative ideologies that require discipline and obedience from bodies perceived as outside the norm. Nancy ends this scene with the song "Medusa," refusing to diminish herself to conform to society's oppressive standards:

<i>Cuál es la obsesión con mi pelo ensortijón que me mandas a peinar Ay, déjame respirar Nunca algo bueno que decir y me miras con terror como si fuera yo Medusa lista con mi pelo a destruir Que mi pelo hace tus matas crecer pero es hora de madurar y esto incluye el pelear con mi genética ancestral</i>	<i>What is your obsession with my curly hair you order me to brush it Oh, just let me breath You never have anything good to say and you look at me with terror as if I was Medusa ready with my hair to destroy You say my hair makes your plants grow but it is time to grow up and that includes to stop the fighting with my ancestral genetics</i>
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#### **TO FEEL GORDA AND FEEL LIKE GORDA: AUDIOSCAPES AND AUDIOTOPIAS**

Through music and lyrics, *Nancy* shares personal intimacies that express the subjectivities of her lived experience as a fat woman of color. The performative

audioscape she presents allows the audience to enter into the world of the diva—even if momentarily—and to sense what it means to love and be loved, as well as forsaken, from the gorda’s perspective. Furthermore, *Nancy*’s sonic virtuosity seduces the audience into loving her, as the sound of her voice fluidly travels from her body, across space and to the listener’s ears and body. The audience’s act of listening is a process of encounter and border crossing where difference is rendered aurally perceptible and multiple, and where “contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other but coexist and live through each other” (Kun, “Aural Border” 6). In other words, music creates a space—sometimes real, other times imaginary—where strangers can meet and recognize their different identities, thus experiencing a feeling of strangeness. Kun argues that this strangeness may allow for expanded experiences of empathy and intimacy, allowing individuals to comprehend that which is beyond the safe zones of the familiar (“Audiotopia” 14).

Audiotopias are especially empowering for the gorda because her oppression is rooted in a culture that privileges the visual and constructs the visual of her body as undesirable. In *La Mujer Invisible* we<sup>166</sup> encounter the gorda’s subjectivity through *Nancy*’s songs and the audiotopia she creates through them. From this encounter, we may see our differences or similarities and, ideally, create new epistemologies, understandings, and solidarity. By situating sound production as a mode of narration in *La Mujer Invisible*, *Nancy* directly shares her personal stories with the audience, crosses the traditional fourth wall, and enters into the emotional and kinetic realm. Not only do her songs and their lyrics influence the listeners emotionally, but through sound waves they impact the audience physically, touching their skin and entering their bodies.

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<sup>166</sup> In this section, I include myself as an audience member, based both on my memories and the physical and emotional effect her songs and performance have had on me.

In the song “No juegues con nenes” (“Don’t Play with Boys,”) *Nancy* engages her audience in an awkward encounter in which the playfulness of the music contrasts with the disturbing story of sexual harassment that the song tells. With the help of her female back-up singer, *Nancy* dramatizes an anecdote about a teacher scolding her for playing with boys. Days after being scolded, *Nancy* tells her teacher that a boy had pushed her; her teacher responded that it was her own fault because she was playing with boys. *Nancy* continues the story years later, when an older boy harassed her, threatened to rape her, and started a rumor in their neighborhood that she offered him anal sex in the park. *Nancy* pauses, takes her electric guitar, and hangs the strap over her shoulder. In a pleading tone, as if asking for understanding, she confesses that she felt terrified, guilty, and ashamed and opted to say nothing. With ferocity *Nancy* immediately starts strumming her guitar rapidly. The rest of the band follows suit and joins her in the fast tempo melody of “No juegues con nenes”:

<i>Basura tó-xi-ca</i> <sup>167</sup>	<i>To-xic trash</i>
<i>que esperamos algún día deseas pero</i>	<i>that we hope some day you’ll want but</i>
<i>si te hieren hoooooy</i>	<i>if you are hurt todaaaaaay</i>
<i>es tu culpaAaaaaa</i>	<i>it is your fault</i>
<i>No juegues con nenes</i>	<i>Don’t play with boys</i>

*Nancy*’s mezzo-soprano voice begins in a deep baritone as she sings the first line of each verse in staccato, separating each syllable, sending them out toward the audience like projectiles. In this moment, the audience is receiving the same hostile messages that she

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<sup>167</sup> Here, I take a poetic license of sorts using hyphens and repetition of some vowels in the effort to capture a sense of the sound of the song as Millán sang it, in order to help the reader imagine it.

received as a girl: that boys (and sex with boys) is inherently dangerous and that, because she has been told this, it is her duty to avoid inciting them to hurt her.

This song offers a critique of gender, heterosexuality, and sexism as institutionally constructed normative frameworks. Furthermore, it underscores the fear of tacit queerness in early youth environments, which must be policed and kept in check. As English Literature scholars Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley argue: “Childhood itself is afforded a modicum of queerness when the people worry so much more about how the child turns out than about how the child exists as child” (xiv). They further assert that a child is seen as queer if she or he resists socially acceptable gender roles, shows interest in sex, expresses erotic attachment to children of the same sex, or shows intense interest in significantly older kids (x). In other words, in Western societies children are at once assumed to be asexual while they are also expected to magically learn appropriate behaviors according to their perceived or assumed biological gender. Deviance from this heteronormative script is viewed as a disruption of the dominant social order and a civic threat.

As the song continues, the rhythm is hard to resist and many audience members find themselves participating by bouncing up and down or marking the fast-paced rhythm with their heads. Thus, the song inspires a kinetic response from its listeners, and they become part of the performance as active participants. Fans who know the song join in, singing the refrain’s playful, elongated notes: “*Nenaaaaa, no juegues cooon nenes*” (“*Giiiiiiirl, don’t play with boooooys.*”) Others who are just learning the words and are brave enough to try them out loud, also chime in as *Nancy* and her back-up singers repeat the line. In this way, the performance “enables, constructs, and imagines the mapping of new places and cartographies of possibility” (Kun, “Aural Border” 6). In other words, *Nancy*’s songs are not merely background music or accompaniments to her stories. They

are a space in and of themselves, where we learn about the gorda and about ourselves as we join her in her musical *limpia* (“symbolic cleansing”) of that which caused her pain in the past.

The back-up singers are also agents that aid *Nancy* in her aural and visual performance. For this song they are in costume, wearing pigtail wigs that seem to be made of purple aluminum strands. They are dancing in the style of 1960s go-go dancers with fast hip movements and big arm gestures. Sometimes they use their hands to highlight the lyrics of the song. For example, when *Nancy* sings, “*Sé re-ca-ta-daaaa,*” (“*Be de-cor-ouuus,*”) the back-up singers repeat the line in distorted voices while placing their hands palms down under their chins, blinking their eyelashes repeatedly, and mocking the ridiculousness of the lyrics’ demand.

The image of the sexy-sweet go-go dancer evokes the conflicting message girls receive when they are expected to be wholesome and, at the same time, attractive to the opposite sex. *Nancy*’s expression and body language contrast her back-up dancers parody, as she remains cool. The lyrics continue, “*A la ne-na ca-si la vio-lan ella no habló, porque pensóóó que la culpa suya eraaaaaa...*” (“*The litt-le girl was almost raped she didn’t say a word, because she thoooooought it was her faaaaaaault...*”) These lines are shocking and disturbing; surrounded by bubblegum style pop music,<sup>168</sup> the lyrics utter the very real fear *Nancy* felt when she was harassed. In her story she says the boy threatened her and listed the violent, sexual things he would do to her. Thus, it is clear he is verbally molesting her. The implications of this encounter become even more violent

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<sup>168</sup> Bubblegum pop or bubblegum rock is a style of pop rock music first developed in the 60s and 70s, and marketed for pre-teen and teens. Some of its characteristics are an upbeat sound, catchy melody, simple chords and harmonies, sing-along chorus, child-like feel, and often the use of words that refer to sugary treats. A classic example is the song “Sugar, Sugar” by The Archies. For more, read *Bubblegum Music is the Naked Truth: The Dark History of Prepubescent Pop, from the Banana Splits to Britney Spears* edited by Kim Cooper and David Smay.

as the song clearly states that this is a story about a young child experiencing gender violence from an older bully that threatens to rape her. Moreover, the lyrics are clear that she was defenseless—she could not reach out for help because of the social rules that blame the victims of sexual violence.

*Nancy* uses silence and sound to further underscore the gravity of these unjust social standards. The playful music of “No juegues con nenes” evokes the happiness and innocence of childhood, while *Nancy*’s harsh lyrics and bittersweet delivery transmit the feelings of distress and the fear of deviance these mixed messages produced in her as a child, feelings she did not quite understand at the time. The music and movement stop for a couple of seconds. Then, *Nancy* breaks the silence and sings:

*¡Ella jugó!*

*She played!*

After this line, *Nancy* breaks the performed coolness she has maintained through this song. She brings her open palms to each side of her face and with wide-eyes and a slack-jawed expression, she lets out a scandalized, “Ah!” Her humorous gesture mocks the unreasonable expectations placed on girls’ behavior, and how challenging these expectations are perceived as a moral and social code violation.

The music resumes with a vengeance, immediately followed by the refrain that reverberates and fills the space with its queerness. The dancers double the rhythm of their dance, and further exaggerate their arm and head movements. *Nancy* on the contrary, remains impassive:

*Sé se-ño-ri-taaaa no machua*

*Be a la-dy*

*no juegues con neneees*

*not a buuuuuutch*

*AaaAaaaaaaaaaaaa*

*AaaAaaaaaaaaaaaa*

Then she ads in a low whisper:

*No juegues coon neneeeees*

*Don't play with booooy*

Finally she utters what the ultimate moral panic is really about when a girl is told she should not play with boys. The fear is of her queerness, of her being “more like a boy” by liking what boys (presumably) like: girls. At the same time, *Nancy*'s serious, cool delivery of her song, her refraining from any sensuality in movement or expression, inhabits the space of the masculine. While *Nancy* performs as a “buuuuutch” the bubblegum pop of the song's sound and the back-up singers satirical performance imbue the performance with queer “girlieness.”

In contrast to “No juegues con nenes,” “Ying y Yang” is a rock ballad sung with captivating intensity. In the preceding scene, *Nancy* narrated her first love story, which ended in heartbreak and was followed by her depression. After sharing other love-related anecdotes, *Nancy* ends with a story about running into her first love years later in New York, where he told her he has never felt with another woman what he felt making love with her. With contempt and self-satisfaction she adds that she, on the contrary, is over him. Then, she sings “Ying y Yang,” underscoring how she is both capable of loving, but most importantly, capable of being loved and desired.

The guitar slowly plays its sensual notes, accompanied by the soft reverberation of the drums and the almost imperceptible sound of the bass. *Nancy* stands still, as if hypnotized by the music that fills the space. The downtempo melody contrasts with the song's first lyrics:

*Hombre, no perdamos tiempoooo*

*Man, let's not waste another minuuuuuute*

*no demooooos más rodeos*

*let's stoooooop fooling around*

*Nancy* elongates her notes, taking her time and savoring them. The atmosphere becomes lighter with the dream-like quality of the music, and the sweet sensuous caress of *Nancy's* voice. Palms down, she slowly lifts her arms to her side as if they were floating or underwater.

*Queeeeeeeeeee somos el sueeeñoooo*

*Thaaaaaat we are the dreaaaaaaam*

*deeeeeeee un indio dioooooos*

*of an Hinduuuu gooooood*

*No nos quedemooooos ineeerteeeeees*

*Let's not staaaaaay ineeert*

*Puede que mañanaaaaa despiertes.*

*Maybe tomorroow you'll wake uuup.*

*Nancy's* arms move up and down majestically, like an octopus. Her swaying shoulders and hips follow the aquatic dance. Then her hands start rotating. On each hand, her index finger and thumb touch and form a circle, while the rest of the fingers open like a fan in a Hindi meditation *mudra* or hand gesture.

The song is seducing the audience; through sound, voice, and movement they fall under *Nancy's* spell. They are drawn to her and taken into the romantic, intimate mood of lovemaking. As the title suggests, the song conjures the concept of yin yang, the harmony and wholeness of opposite forces. Millán uses water as a metaphor, both in the lyrics and in her movement, for a serene sensuality. The implicit meaning of the song emulates the fire in passion and sexuality. Fire and water are in dynamic balance through *Nancy's* song. She also invokes Hinduism—a tradition that celebrates human sexuality—when she sings “we are the dream of a Hindu god,” makes the *mudra* with her hand, and performs flowing arm movements that are evocative of traditional Indian dance forms.



Once she is completely out of breath, the instruments stop playing abruptly, and only the drums are left to mark the last few beats. Her improvisation narrates the long climax of multiple orgasms. She takes a deep breath, exhales, and opens her eyes looking directly at the audience. They keep silent for a few more seconds as if scared to break the magic. Then, they cheer and clap wildly.

Through *Nancy*'s voice and lyrics, her tender sensuality and sexuality, we are able to experience an audiotopia: a meeting place of communion and connection not governed by normative visual codes. As an aural practice, this moment allows us to glean from other worlds to enrich our views and amplify our perspectives. *Nancy* establishes a gateway, a portal, from which to experience that which is beyond our everyday lives. Through the multi-sensory experience of "Ying y Yang," we as an audience confront our own relationships to dominant cultural codes that tell us gorda bodies do not deserve love. *Nancy*'s performance of both music and movement creates a performative space that provokes us to feel and experience her, an audiotopia that maps new ways of knowing and understanding. This is a moment and a space where we can "encounter, move around in, inhabit, be safe in, learn from" the gorda (Kun, "Audiotopia" 2). By performing her difference, Millán invites us to learn about and from her as we recognize her self-love. Through this intimate autobiographic performance, the audience is given the permission and opportunity to hear *Nancy*, to feel *Nancy*, and to feel like *Nancy*; we are allowed to know *Nancy* like a lover might know her.

#### **CONCLUSION: FROM INVISIBILITY TO VISIBILITY**

*La Mujer Invisible* is a testament to Millán's search for answers to the frustration, anger, and pain caused by living in a society that deems her invisible as a fat woman of

color. And as tragic as experiencing marginalization can be, *Nancy* tells her stories with humor, even if imbued with sarcasm, as she looks back on and critically revises her experiences growing up, through Medusa's deadly eyes. In true gorda fashion, she talks back bluntly and assertively, responding to those who fear her fat body and refusing to accept the destructive messages she receives, sometimes even from those closest to her. *Nancy* doesn't shy away from talking about her depression and denounces the lack of compassion and dignity that she encountered while hospitalized as a mental health patient. She is especially determined to take on those who want her to loathe and tame her curly hair, a marker of her Blackness.

The biggest act of resistance and defiance that *Nancy* performs through *La Mujer Invisible* is the fact that, for more than an hour, she has been exactly what she was told she could never be: a diva. She has fulfilled her childhood dreams, and just like in her fantasies, she is loved and admired. But most importantly, she has used the very same body she was supposed to loathe, to create a space of encounter, an audiotopia, where she is seen and heard, and where she gives back with her voice. Her last lines articulate how gordas desire to be visible and center stage are not an act of pretentiousness, but a call for solidarity because, "No hay nada peor que sentirse invisible y sola en esta constante pelea con las voces: 'Nadie te va a querer,' 'Eres grotesca, eres fea,' 'Péinate ese pelo'." ("There is nothing worse than feeling invisible and alone in this constant fight with the voices: 'No one is going to love you,' 'You are grotesque, you are ugly,' 'Brush your hair'.") *Nancy* concludes *La Mujer Invisible* with a beautiful song, her sweet voice contrasting with the ferocious rock music, as she declares:

*He sido la mujer invisible*

*I have been the invisible woman*

*por demasiado tiempo ya*

*for too long*

*He sido una mujer sin historia*

*I have been a woman without history*

*pero eso se ha de acabar*

*but that is going to end*

*Ya no me pueden ignorar*

*They can't ignore me anymore*

*Este es el tiempo de brillar*

*This is the time to shine*

*aunque tenga que gritar*

*even if I have to yell*

## **Conclusion: Thoughts on Being an Ally in Re-signifying Gorda**

On October 17, 2014 I attended a special performance of *FAT: The Play* at Dougherty Arts Center Theater. When I arrived, the theatre was packed and it seemed like everybody, but me, was dressed at their best, their kitsch best. The atmosphere was uplifting and tense at the same time. Not everyone had tickets and those of us who did felt like V.I.P.s and pitied (at least I did) those who were trying to talk their way in. We waited patiently in line for the doors to open, and when they finally did we happily paraded inside. There was a festive mood inside the theatre, as those who had reached the seats first looked around for their friends, greeting them from afar or inviting to join them. I saw some familiar faces and said hi to acquaintances from *allgo* and people I had seen at other shows in alternative venues around Austin. It felt like a party, as I continued to see more friendly faces. Laura<sup>169</sup> was sitting in the row behind me, and we chatted about my dissertation as Cassidy saw me and came to introduce me to her partner Ambrose. Rudy, who seemed to know everyone, made his appearance and became my date for the night. We sat in the front row.

Finally, the theatre doors closed, and we all cheered when the director of the play, Jules Minkoff, came to the front, greeted us and gave an introduction to the evening that lay ahead of us; a feast of fat positive performances of poetry, dance, and burlesque by a select group of guest performers. Among them was fat poet transgender activist Morgan Robyn Collado, who came on stage like a diva and through a heartfelt poem told the story of a lost love. Her powerful yet candid declaration of rage towards her ex-lover was presented as a cleansing and purging of the pain of a love betrayed. Collado read her

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<sup>169</sup> I refer to the friends and acquaintances I ran into by first name since I do not have authorization to use their full names, also as I am trying to convey in my description the sense of community that I felt during the performance.

poems, using her wild tongue, unapologetically code-switching from English to Spanish. She carelessly let the leaves of paper fall to the floor after she read it. As the story progressed, careless turned into purposeful as she threw the papers with rage towards her lover betrayal or towards herself for being foolish and falling in love with this person who did not deserve her. From bitter tears to sighs of delight, the performer took us through a moment of intense emotion and visual pleasure because she looked beautiful and powerful in all her vulnerability. At least that was my impression, and the enthusiastic cheering, applause, and excited side comments around me after Collado finished her poem seemed to confirm it.



Figure 43: Cover of Morgan Robyn's Collado book of poetry *Make Love to Rage*.

Retrieved from [www.publishyourbiuty.org](http://www.publishyourbiuty.org).

It is then when I realize Collado is gorda, and furthermore I think of how as a trans woman of color, another layer of excess adds up to the normative unacceptability of bodies. Later I asked a friend about Collado, and found out she is also an activist concerned with the murders of young trans women of color. According to Gender Studies

scholar Mitch Kellaway, “Women of color are the predominant group of trans people facing fatal violence every year worldwide.” As I am shocked, yet not completely surprised by this assertion, I also wonder, how many cis women of color suffer from violence because they are fat. Something I do not explore in this dissertation.

After other guest performers, a short intermission followed, and we came back to the theatre for *Fat: The Play*. This performance had its premier earlier in February at the Frontera Fest Short Fringe, where it won the best play award. The program stated that it had been devised by “fat queer-identified femmes living in Austin, TX” (Program). Through a series of vignettes this multi-racial cast explored questions like: “How do our different race, gender and class identities affect our experiences as fat people? How do we undo the internalized shame our culture has taught us? For so long this word has been used against us —to dehumanize us and to pathologize us” (Minkoff). These questions are similar to the questions I have been exploring in this dissertation as a Performance Studies scholar looking at the work of gorda artists I saw years ago. Thus, it made me realize how relevant the work of Grise and Mayorga, Duany, and Millán still is.



Figure 44: Dan Miller, Nicole Arteaga, and Althea Clemons performing in *FAT: The Play*. Retrieved from [fattheplay.bpt.me](http://fattheplay.bpt.me)

As an audience member at the live performance, I was reminded of how a performance is not a performance without the audience, of the things that a video recording can never capture, but most importantly it reaffirmed my assertion that for gorda to take the stage as she does, she needs the solidarity of her audience. As *Fat: The Play* asserts, for a fat person, being on stage is political, and I would add, it is also dangerous, because without an audience of allies, gorda could encounter the same harassment, bullying, or indifference that she has experienced off stage.

*Fat: The Play* also brought new questions I did not have the opportunity to explore in this dissertation. For example, the fact that its audience demographics were not the average I encounter when I go to other performance events, like the Fusebox Festival where the audience is predominantly white. There were a significant number of people of color in the audience, and this was an audience of queer communities and their allies. Even if we did not all know each other, for me it did not feel like a night with strangers. This reminded me of other similar nights at *Camp! Camp!* Austin's queer open-mic show that ran once a month from 2006-2008 (Matthews). Also, it reminded me of going to burlesque performances of big women troupes like *Fat Bottom* or *Big Star Burlesque* at queer identified events like the *Girls in the Nose* reunion in 2008. And I wonder if queer communities create a hospitable space for Fat liberation and positive embodiment. This is a question I would like to explore as I expand the scope of my research.

Another area I would like to explore is to expand my definition of gorda, as Morgan Robyn Collado and Caleb Luna's performance made me think of the constrictions of defining womanhood in biological terms. Latina/o performer Collado is transgender, and Luna defines himself in his blog *Queer, Fat, Hungry* as a "working class

fat brown queer femme cis man.” Luna shared in his<sup>170</sup> performance how as a fat person he did not fit into mainstream gay culture, where he felt the standard required was thinness. He then turned to bear culture, but did not fit in there either because as a femme, he did not identify with bear masculinity. Finally, it was among the more gender fluid queer culture, where his sexuality, his identity and his body felt at home. I would like to further queer the term gorda, in order to include in my research Latina/o femme identified cis men and Latina transgender women.



Figure 45: Caleb Luna and Althea Clemons performing in *FAT: The Play*. Retrieved from [fattheplay.bpt.me](http://fattheplay.bpt.me)

As I continue my research I also want to resume an exploration I began when I started this project. Discovering the field of Fat Studies challenged my own concepts of fatness, my perceptions of fatness in others vs. fatness in myself and how I relate with fat bodies in general. I started a diary of sorts which I titled Ph.D. Fat, where I reflected on

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<sup>170</sup> I am not sure he/his are the pronouns Luna identifies with.

my past as well as my day-to-day experiences with dieting, body loathing, and fatness. My goal is to eventually develop a performance. As an artist scholar, it is necessary for me to explore my research through my body, to embody theory as well as theorize performance. I am especially interested in how my research can transform me as an individual, and how I can have an impact through performance as well as, and beyond, sharing my findings in academia in order to be an ally against fat-phobia and shame.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Letter of Consent for Participation in Research

#### Consent for Participation in Research

**Title:** Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage

#### Introduction

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

#### Purpose of the Study

You have been asked to participate in a research study about **Latinas and the Performance of Fatness**. The purpose of this study is to analyze how Latina performers offer insights on the intersections and implications of constructions of fatness in relationship to Latina/o representations. Some of the questions addressed will be How do they represent fatness, and how do these representations address multiple assumptions and oppressions? How do they engage/confront audiences into relations with women of size? What insights do they bring to the intersections of fatness and ethnicity? How do these performances provide important interventions or contributions to the emerging field of fat studies?

#### What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to **discuss your creative process, objectives and reception of the performance**. This study will take two **one hour sessions** and will include approximately **three study participants**.

**Note: If participants will be audio/video recorded include this statement:**  
Your participation will be **audio or video recorded**.

#### What are the risks involved in this study?

There are no foreseeable risks to participating in this study.

#### What are the possible benefits of this study?

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study.

#### Do you have to participate?

No, your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin in anyway.

If you would like to participate **[insert instructions for the return of the signed forms]**.  
You will receive a copy of this form.

#### Will there be any compensation?

You will not receive any type of payment participating in this study.

**What are my confidentiality or privacy protections when participating in this research study?**

This study requires citing your contribution and using your name. If you would not like a portion or the whole interview to be used or cited you may withdraw your participation at any moment.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be/ be audio and/or video recorded. Any audio and/or video recordings will be stored securely and only researcher will have access to the recordings. You may have a copy of the recordings at your request. The data resulting from your participation may be used for future research for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. They will not be made accessible to other researchers without your consent.

**Whom to contact with questions about the study?**

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher **Beliza Torres Narváez** at 787-378-8848 or send an email to **belizat@gmail.com**. This study has been reviewed and approved by The University Institutional Review Board and the study number is [STUDY NUMBER].

**Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?**

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at **orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu**.

**Signature**

You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

**NOTE: Include the following if recording is optional:**

- I agree to be audio and/or video recorded.
- I do not want to be audio and/or video recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, procedures, benefits, and the risks involved in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Beliza Torres Narváez

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix 2: IRB Expedited Approval for Human Subject Research



OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

P.O. Box 7426, Austin, Texas 78713 - Mail Code A3200  
(512) 471-8871 - FAX (512) 471-8873

FWA # 00002030

Date: 01/27/12

PI: Beliza Torres Narvaaz

Dept: Theatre and Dance

Title: Gordas: Fat Latinas Taking the Stage

Re: IRB Expedited Approval for Protocol Number 2011-09-0038

Dear Beliza Torres Narvaaz:

In accordance with the Federal Regulations the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the above referenced research study and found it met the requirements for approval under the Expedited category noted below for the following period of time: 01/27/2012 to 01/26/2013 . Expires 12 a.m. [midnight] of this date.

Expedited category of approval:

- 1) Clinical studies of drugs and medical devices only when condition (a) or (b) is met. (a) Research on drugs for which an investigational new drug application (21 CFR Part 312) is not required. (Note: Research on marketed drugs that significantly increases the risks or decreases the acceptability of the risks associated with the use of the product is not eligible for expedited review.) (b) Research on medical devices for which (i) an investigational device exemption application (21 CFR Part 812) is not required; or (ii) the medical device is cleared/approved for marketing and the medical device is being used in accordance with its cleared/approved labeling.
- 2) Collection of blood samples by finger stick, heel stick, ear stick, or venipuncture as follows: (a) from healthy, non-pregnant adults who weigh at least 110 pounds. For these subjects, the amounts drawn may not exceed 550 ml in an 8 week period and collection may not occur more frequently than 2 times per week; or (b) from other adults and children, considering the age, weight, and health of the subjects, the collection procedure, the amount of blood to be collected, and the frequency with which it will be collected. For these subjects, the amount drawn may not exceed the lesser of 50 ml or 3 ml per kg in an 8 week period and collection may not occur more frequently than 2 times per week.
- 3) Prospective collection of biological specimens for research purposes by non-invasive means. Examples:
  - (a) Hair and nail clippings in a non-disfiguring manner.
  - (b) Deciduous teeth at time of exfoliation or if routine patient care indicates a need for extraction.
  - (c) Permanent teeth if routine patient care indicates a need for extraction.
  - (d) Excreta and external secretions (including sweat).

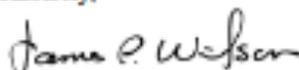
- (e) Uncannulated saliva collected either in an un-stimulated fashion or stimulated by chewing gumbase or wax or by applying a dilute citric solution to the tongue.
  - (f) Placenta removed at delivery.
  - (g) Amniotic fluid obtained at the time of rupture of the membrane prior to or during labor.
  - (h) Supra- and subgingival dental plaque and calculus, provided the collection procedure is not more invasive than routine prophylactic scaling of the teeth and the process is accomplished in accordance with accepted prophylactic techniques.
  - (i) Mucosal and skin cells collected by buccal scraping or swab, skin swab, or mouth washings.
  - (j) Sputum collected after saline mist nebulization.
  
- 4) Collection of data through non-invasive procedures (not involving general anesthesia or sedation) routinely employed in clinical practice, excluding procedures involving x-rays or microwaves. Where medical devices are employed, they must be cleared/approved for marketing. (Studies intended to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of the medical device are not generally eligible for expedited review, including studies of cleared medical devices for new indications).  
Examples:
  - (a) Physical sensors that are applied either to the surface of the body or at a distance and do not involve input of significant amounts of energy into the subject or an invasion of the subject's privacy.
  - (b) Weighing or testing sensory acuity.
  - (c) Magnetic resonance imaging.
  - (d) Electrocardiography, electroencephalography, thermography, detection of naturally occurring radioactivity, electroretinography, ultrasound, diagnostic infrared imaging, doppler blood flow, and echocardiography.
  - (e) Moderate exercise, muscular strength testing, body composition assessment, and flexibility testing where appropriate given the age, weight, and health of the individual.
  
- 5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for non-research purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).  
Note: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.
  
- 6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
  
- 7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.  
Note: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.
  
- Use the attached approved informed consent document(s).
  
- You have been granted a Waiver of Documentation of Consent according to 45 CFR 46.117 and/or 21 CFR 56.109(c)(1).
  
- You have been granted a Waiver of Informed Consent according to 45 CFR 46.116(d).

**Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator:**

1. Report immediately to the IRB any unanticipated problems.
2. Submit for review and approval by the IRB all modifications to the protocol or consent form(s). Ensure the proposed changes in the approved research are not applied without prior IRB review and approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject. Changes in approved research implemented without IRB review and approval initiated to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject must be promptly reported to the IRB, and will be reviewed under the unanticipated problems policy to determine whether the change was consistent with ensuring the subjects continued welfare.
3. Report any significant findings that become known in the course of the research that might affect the willingness of subjects to continue to participate.
4. Ensure that only persons formally approved by the IRB enroll subjects.
5. Use only a currently approved consent form, if applicable.  
Note: Approval periods are for 12 months or less.
6. Protect the confidentiality of all persons and personally identifiable data, and train your staff and collaborators on policies and procedures for ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of subjects and their information.
7. Submit a Continuing Review Application for continuing review by the IRB. Federal regulations require IRB review of on-going projects no less than once a year a reminder letter will be sent to you two months before your expiration date. If a reminder is not received from Office of Research Support (ORS) about your upcoming continuing review, it is still the primary responsibility of the Principal Investigator not to conduct research activities on or after the expiration date. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted, reviewed and approved, before the expiration date.
8. Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted to the ORS.
9. Include the IRB study number on all future correspondence relating to this protocol.

If you have any questions contact the ORS by phone at (512) 471-8871 or via e-mail at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

Sincerely,



James Wilson, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chair



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