

(Afro)Latinx Theatre: Embodiment and Articulation

By Olga Sanchez Saltveit

During the 16th century CE, three significant cultural entities met on the American continent, each comprised of numerous subcultures, some sovereign in their own right. The indigenous peoples of the continent, the Spanish and other Europeans, and the Africans of many nations transformed the future population and civilization of the New World through their encounters on this land. After centuries of marriages, love affairs, sex commerce, and rape, Latinx families and friends manifest physically in a spectrum of phenotypes, reflecting their African, Indigenous, European, and other ancestries. In contemporary theatre, people of all phenotypes populate the stage to represent Latinx; this is not color-blind casting, but truth. Yet while we may see ourselves on stage represented diversely, it is rarely because the play has called for such casting. Within the canon of US dramatic literature there is a surprising dearth of playwriting specifically about the (Afro)Latinx experience. The 21st century has engendered blogs, essays and poetry on the subject but the theatre field, particularly its texts, seems to be responding slowly. The US theatre field has a notorious history of under-representing and undervaluing theatre of color and of marginalized communities, which can deter potential playwrights from participating. Yet even within the growing canon of Latinx-identified theatre making, articulation (expression through the playwright's words) lags behind embodiment (the expression inherent in the physical body as seen on the stage). Here, I investigate a few new works that address the experiences and concerns of (Afro)Latinx in the US, and interview the playwrights, to begin to explore underlying causes for this dramaturgical lacuna.

LEXICON

The term “(Afro)Latinx” reflects the ambiguities that permeate this inquiry, which focuses on the manifestation of identity through theatre written and performed. To consciously combat the sexism inherent in the word “Latino,” which uses the male version of the noun under the patriarchal assumption that it will cover all the necessary bases, many began using the term Latina/o thereby actively promote gender equity. The relatively recent evolution to “Latinx” removes the gender-binary coding inherent in the “a/o” modifier altogether. “Latinx” is used for both singular and plural cases (Padilla).

“Afro-Latino” emerged as a term in the late 70s to identify Latinx whose phenotypes convey African heritage (Moreno). Out of consideration for those who identify as Afro-Latino but wonder why a hyphenated identity is necessary, I place the word “Afro” in parentheses as a temporary shorthand to frame a conversation; it may ultimately be discarded. By whatever name, Latinx are not a race; it is more accurate to say we are an ethnicity comprised of myriad cultures and backgrounds, formed by syncretism, juxtaposition, fusion and resistance.

“Afrodescendant” is a translation of the Latin American term *Afrodescendiente* which represents people also known as “Black” or “African-American” (but not exclusively from the US as that term often implies), used in contrast to national identifications such as “Colombian” or

“Mexican” which have failed to provide due rights. In Colombia, which has one of the largest populations of Afrodescendants in Latin America after Brazil, the term has been used successfully to rally the “fight against obscurity and against the silenced relevance of the Afro-Colombian presence in history and society” (Fernández Robaina). It is used throughout this paper with those efforts in mind.

EMBODIMENT

The presence of Afrodescendant actors in Latinx plays around the country exceeds the number of plays written about the (Afro)Latinx experience. Photographs of 21st century productions of Latinx plays (that is, written by authors who identify as Latina, Latino, Latinx, Hispanic, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban or any variation of the hyphenated identities such as Mexican-American) demonstrate the diversity of the actors representing Latinx on the stage. Figures 1 through 6, selected from productions around the country, present a few examples of multiracial casting where the script does not call for it specifically.



Fig. 1. *Alguna cosita que alivie el sufrir* (A Little Something to Ease the Pain) by René R. Alomá, with Ana Viña as Doña Cacha and Mario Ernesto Sánchez as her grandson, Tatín, at Teatro Avante’s 30th International Theatre Festival of Miami, 2015. Photo by Asela Torres.



Fig. 2. *Remojo (Soaking Beans)* is an evening of excerpts of new works in progress, featuring a diverse acting ensemble including Jesús Martínez, Sean Carvajal, Yaraní Del Valle, Antonio Vargas, Yaritza Pizarro and Flaco Navaja at Pregones/PRTT, NYC, 2015. Photo by Marisol Díaz. © Marisol Díaz, 2015.



Fig. 3. *Aire frío (Cold Air)* by Virgilio Piñera, represents a Cuban family and friends with Annia Bu, Ana Margarita Martínez-Casado, Zulema Clares and Idalmys Rodríguez, at Repertorio Español, New York City, 2015. Photo by Michael Palma.



Fig. 4. *Contigo pan y cebolla (With You Through Thick or Thin)* by Héctor Quintero, shows diversity among the generations of the Prieto family with Yvonne López Arenal, Micheline Calvert, Carlos Alberto Pérez, Liset Jiménez, Andy Barbosa, Joelvis Batista, José Quesada at Akuara Teatro, Miami, 2014. Photo by Ulises Regueiro.



Fig. 5. *Boomcracklefly* by Charise Castro Smith, is a world premier featuring two lovers, Andrew Tyler Jones as man in drag Fulana de Tal and Stephen Lisk as The Phoenix, his lover, at Milagro, Portland, OR, 2011. Photo by Russell E. Young.



Fig. 6. *Welcome to Arroyo's* by Kristoffer Diaz, is the west coast premiere featuring Amirah Vann as Amalia Arroyo and Andres Muna with as her older brother Alejandro, at The Old Globe, San Diego, 2010. Photo by Henry DiRocco.

In these six productions, actors whose bodies appear phenotypically Afrodescendant have been cast as family and friends of Latinx whose bodies reflect other phenotypes. As such the

productions embody the truth of the physiology and manifestation of Latinx identity, even when the plays do not specifically call for such casting. Latinx theatre may feature Latinx actors of all heritages on the stage without fear that artists, audiences or scholars will criticize this as inauthentic, or see it as a form of color-blind casting that challenges, diminishes or refutes the intentions of the text. The lack of dispute implies a tacit understanding that Latinx ethnicity is phenotypically heterogeneous.

Now, it must be stated that while such casting occurs from time to time, it has yet to become an industry standard, especially in commercial projects. Actor Crystal Roman recalls her frustration with the negative messages and rejections she received while auditioning.

When I would go to Latina casting calls for roles that I did find challenging, they would say, 'Well you don't sound Latina enough.' Then when I would go to a Black casting call, they would say, 'Wait a minute, we asked for a black woman.' I'd say, 'I'm a black woman. I just couldn't take it anymore (Haas).

Casting for commercial media, film, and television is notoriously driven by stereotyping, far more than in the theatre. Roman became so aggravated with this situation that she founded The Black Latina Movement, LLC, a production company which generates work specifically about the (Afro)Latinx experience. Her show, *Black Latina The Play* will be discussed later, as it expresses not only Roman's experiences of seeking work in the commercial entertainment industry but also the impact that prevalent media images have had on her day-to-day life. She is among the very few (Afro)Latinx playwrights in the US who have decided to write about their experiences for the theatre.

ARTICULATION

Why aren't more plays written about the (Afro)Latinx experience to begin with? Why do we see the embodiment of our diversity visible in casting, but do not hear the textual articulation of the experience, its history and personal implications? There can never be a simple answer to such a question, especially when asking why creative individuals *don't* do something, but a close look at a few works that do articulate (Afro)Latinx experiences illuminates the complexities and challenges involved.

Certainly, there is a growing presence in the broader community; according to a report from SUNY Albany, from 1990 to 2000 the total number of Afrodescendants who had immigrated from the Caribbean to the US increased by 63% to more than 1.5 million (Flores and Jiménez Román 324). This figure does not reflect the number of Afrodescendants who have arrived from other parts of Latin America; the U.S. National Library of Medicine reports that the total foreign-born population from Latin America residing in the US (of all phenotypes) nearly doubled during the same decade, from 7.4 to 14.4 million people (Tienda and Sánchez). Yet despite this increased presence, there exists a reluctance on the part of (Afro)Latinx to be so identified. Flores and Jiménez Román point out, "Latinos with noticeable African ancestry rarely identify themselves as 'Black'" (325). In a groundbreaking 2014 survey, the Pew Research Center asked Latinx adults about their racial identity.

When asked directly about their race, only 18% of Afro-Latinos identified their race or one of their races as black. In fact, higher shares of Afro-Latinos identified

as white alone or white in combination with another race (39%) or volunteered that their race or one of their races was Hispanic (24%). Only 9% identified as mixed race (López and Gonzalez-Barrera).

The earlier 2010 US census report corroborates this, showing that more than 50% of “Hispanic” respondents identified as White, about one-third self-identified as Some Other Race and only 3% identified themselves as Black. Rounding out the statistics, an additional 1% identified as American Indian, and less than 0.4% as Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander (Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010). This marginal self-identification occurred despite public relations efforts by the *afrolatin@* forum, a New York-based educational nonprofit, encouraging Latinx to identify racially as well as ethnically on the 2010 Census (Jiménez Román).

Flores and Jiménez Román posit that this reticence stems from a vested interest in maintaining the Latin American ideology of *mestizaje* (325). Rooted in the word *mestizo*, the Spanish name for people of mixed ancestry, the ideology of *mestizaje* was created after the wars of independence unseated Spanish rule, to promote the idea of a blended populace, free of the colonial system of social stratification. The Spanish system of social stratification had served to maintain the dominance of Spaniards over Creoles and exploited Indigenous and African groups (Fig. 7). Status within the hierarchy determined access to education, titles and other rights (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 7).

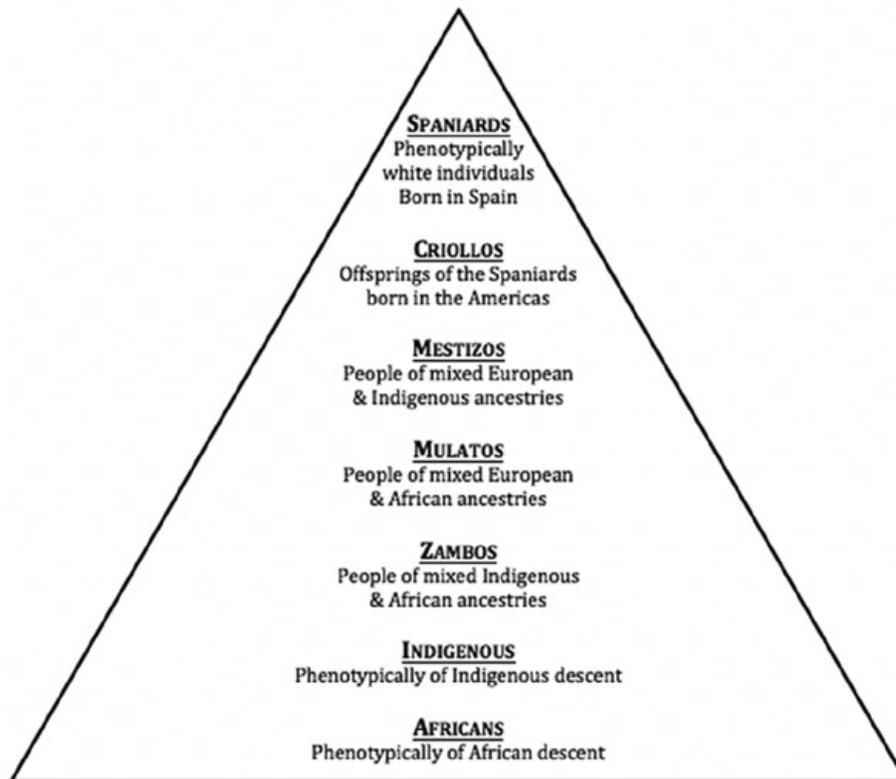


Fig. 7. *Latin American Social Caste Pyramid (LASCP)* (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 7)

Yet despite the efforts to erase these inequities through the application of the ideology of *mestizaje*, Cruz-Janzen reports that “Latinegros,” whom she defines as people “of obvious black ancestry,” continue to suffer marginalization in numerous ways.

Educational and career opportunities for Latinegros remain limited. In many Latino countries most Latinegros do not have access to a secondary school education or college ... Most dark-skinned persons work in menial low-paying jobs; positions that require a "good appearance" or contact with the public such as receptionists, bank tellers, or secretaries tend to be closed to them. Lighter-skinned Latinegros have better opportunities because they are favored over the darker-skinned ones (178).

Colorism, which privileges the lighter-skinned, also lurks within Latinx families, where it is not uncommon for family members to compare their appearances. Cruz-Janzen describes her personal experience growing up in Puerto Rico, where "Both sides of the family continually judged our looks; whoever had the most clearly defined white features was considered good-looking" (170). Miriam Muley, CEO of The 85th Niche, confirms, "There is definitely a ranking that occurs in our community based on skin tone, as well as our hair type and our facial features" (Rosario). Parents will urge their children to consider whom they marry in terms of whether their choice will help to "mejorar la raza," that is, "improve the race" (Haas; Del Carmen 2015).

In the United States, with its history of predominantly binary racial identifications, Latinx are often asked to choose between one identity and the other, Black or White, or they are assigned identities that may or may not correspond to their self-perception. Cruz-Janzen recounts her experience of moving to the US mainland in the 1960s.

Concerned Latino friends advised me to emphasize my Latinness and to downplay my African traits to avoid being confused with African Americans. Some teachers advised that I might as well be black because I would be treated like one by white Latinos and mainstream white Americans (171).

This binary negates the complex experiences of people who may reflect their African heritage phenotypically but whose cultural identity resonates through language and other traditions with Latin American, African, Spanish, Indigenous and/or other heritages. Identification assigned by others solely on the basis of appearance underestimates the rich experiences of any individual with potentially harmful repercussions. In a study of (Afro)Latinx families in psychotherapy, Baptiste found that the adolescents in the US were especially challenged by the "unique dual ethnicity and double-minority status" assigned to them by mainstream society. (Ramos, Jaccard, and Guilamo-Ramos 167).

With the rapid growth in the (Afro)Latinx population, the challenge of confronting the legacy of Latin American *mestizaje* as it plays out publically and within the family, and the harmful short-sightedness of US binary racism, the call for theatre that articulates these experiences is more necessary than ever. As playwright Jelisa Jay Robinson argues:

Afro-Latin@ theatre needs to reflect the intricate moments of personhood: the struggles of dealing with family, the whole finding-out-who-you-are debacle, and discovering your talents. That is what these plays need to reflect because this is life: People of Color on the stage living life, just being unapologetically Black and Latin@. We need Afro-Latin@ theatre. Not to fill a quota, or have the story for the Latin@ festivals, but so that young Afro-Latin@s can see themselves on the stage. So that young Afrodescendants can grapple with the intersectional points of

Blackness, and we can come together and feel the stories (Why We Need Afro-Latin@ Theatre).

It is not enough to simply have the embodiment of Afrodescendancy on the stage, the theatre needs a body of writing that articulates the complexities of the (Afro)Latinx experience, and that demands, through its text, that the (Afro)Latinx voice be heard.

(AFRO)LATINX THEATRE

To familiarize myself with the existing dramatic literature that speaks authentically to the (Afro)Latinx experience, I posted a call to the 1,676 members of the Latinx Theatre Commons (LTC)¹ Facebook group page in October, 2015: “Researching plays, writing, etc., that explores, celebrates, challenges US AfroLatino identity, experiences, history ... would greatly appreciate your recommendations, thank you!” This call was repeated in a small note posted in the LTC Monthly Digest, an e-newsletter reaching roughly 600 readers around the country (Sanchez). Out of more than two thousand potential readers only five people responded. Apart from two books and three blogs (none about theatre), three plays were recommended: *Yellow Eyes* by Migdalia Cruz, *The Stories of Us* by Jelisa Jay Robinson, and *Black Latina The Play* by Crystal Roman. Shortly afterwards, playwright Guadalís Del Carmen emerged on the LTC group page announcing a play reading of her *Tolstoy’s Daughters*.

All the plays mentioned above, as well as Del Carmen’s *My Father’s Keeper*, will be discussed here. All five touch upon the (Afro)Latinx experience but delve into very different themes with distinct voices and intentions. *Yellow Eyes* addresses the legacy of Latin American history. *My Father’s Keeper* looks at identity denial. *Tolstoy’s Daughters* investigates racialized politics. In non-linear and non-narrative fashion, *The Stories of Us* recounts a variety of interpersonal dynamics between (Afro)Latinx and African Americans; and *Black Latina The Play* focuses on women’s experiences and empowerment.

Yellow Eyes by Migdalia Cruz is the earliest of the plays, written in 2000. Based on the life of the playwright’s maternal great-grandparents, the play touches upon contemporary as well as historical experiences. *Yellow Eyes* centers on Isabel Nieves, a 13-year old girl living in the Bronx. Her 112-year old great-grandfather, José Maria Sotillo, an Afro-Puerto Rican survivor of slavery, has lived in NYC with his wife Ana Cecilia since 1947.

The play is set primarily in 1971 during the Black Power movement, which encouraged unity in the African American community. Unfortunately for Isabel, this means Black and Latinx students at school warn her not to hang out with her best friend Sharon, or date her boyfriend Ian, both of whom are African American. As tensions escalate, Isabel and Sharon fend off physical attacks, and Isabel, returning home, must explain the bruise on her face to her great-grandfather. Trying to help Isabel make sense of the violence she’s received, José Maria touches upon the themes of multiple identity:

JOSÉ MARIA. You’re three things, nena. You’re African, Spanish and Indian.

ISABEL. Indian?

JOSÉ MARIA. Taino. On your mother’s side. You’re all mixed-up, nena.

ISABEL. You’re telling me.

JOSÉ MARIA. You’re a jibara, nena. That’s a true Puerto Rican. That’s something to be proud of. I know people think jibaros are fools from the mountains—but that’s not so. Jibaros are what will keep our culture alive. They have all this blood from

everywhere and that makes them stronger than everybody else. You are like a tree with strong roots all connected to a different river. You can drink from them all. That will keep you proud.

ISABEL. Proud? I just feel confused. If I told those girls who beat me up that I was Black, they would say I wasn't because I don't look like them and because I got a Spanish last name (Cruz).

As Flores and Jiménez Román write, "Afro-Latinos are thus typically pulled in three directions at once, and share a complex, multi-dimensional optic on contemporary society" (327). Echoing W.E.B. DuBois, Flores and Jiménez Román name this three-stranded identification a "triple-consciousness." Isabel, who does not outwardly appear Afrodescendant, is nevertheless encouraged to embrace this triple consciousness, to find strength in this complexity.

Yet for all his good advice, José Maria has not found the answers to his questions of identity either. Memory scenes in the play parallel and contrast Isabel's and José Maria's experiences. In Act 1, scene 8, the stage directions show José Maria remembering his life as an enslaved fourteen-year-old. His younger self, Josélito, is:

...on his knees on the deck of a ship, which [he] is cleaning with a cloth and a bucket of water. HE is ranting at the wind. As HE speaks, a light slowly comes up on JOSÉ MARIA looking out his kitchen window recalling this memory.

JOSÉLITO. Don't do that! Don't make me think so much. Every time you come to me before a storm, I have this memory of my mother. On her knees. Begging to take me with her. But I don't know if it's real. It's a memory that's like a dream now (Cruz).

This sensation of disorientation, of not knowing what is real or imagined, is evoked in other parts of the play as well. For example, José Maria's wife Ana Cecilia, who is 99 years old, struggles with dementia set on by a relatively recent assault in the street, in which José Maria was knocked out cold and unable to protect her from rape. The trauma of her rape is foreshadowed in the second part of Josélito's speech:

JOSÉLITO. I used to dream of my father until I understood that a Spaniard had forced himself on her. That's how I came into this world. The gentle one my mother gave me and the one an animal forced on us both. My father is someone I think of when I see animals get slaughtered. When blood runs from warm flesh into the soil under it, I think of him. Sometimes I cut into my skin with seashells just to see that blood and remember. It always surprises me too—that I still have blood. "Hasn't it been drained out yet?" I wonder.

(Pause) How could any man do that?

(Pause; the next line is said in unison with JOSÉ MARIA.)

JOSÉLITO & JOSÉ MARIA. And what does that make me? (Cruz).

Throughout Afrodescendant history in the New World, rape has been a violence rarely prosecuted because of the devaluation of Africans and Afrodescendants who were denied certain rights and protections against injustice. However, the children of this violence were considered differently in different regions of the continent. Unlike the "one drop of blood" rule in U.S., where children with any sub-Saharan ancestry retained the same underprivileged status as their parents, in Latin

America, “one drop of white blood makes the person whiter.” Children of miscegenation, whether consensual or forced, whose features looked more Spanish, that is, European, could more easily ascend the sociopolitical ladder of power (Cruz-Janzen 172). While José María is clearly asking whether he has inherited his father’s depravity, this brief speech also reflects one of the most prevalent and profound questions posed by (Afro)Latinx who find themselves defined in different ways by different external entities: “what does that make me?”

One answer can be found in the gesture of friendship and solidarity displayed by Cruz, who named Isabel’s parents (never seen onstage) after her friends, the playwrights Carmen Rivera and Cándido Tirado²:

...because they also share a history that most Puerto Ricans do--that is a multiracial reality--with white European, brown Taino Indian & Black African blood in our veins and in our culture. It is that combination that makes us who we are as a people (Cruz interview).

In Cruz’s *Yellow Eyes*, Isabel’s understanding and embrace of her multiple heritages provides her the strength to live by her principles. As she says in the epilogue,

ISABEL. People look at me and think I don’t have any African blood. But it’s not on my skin—it’s inside—
(Pointing to her heart)
—here. It’s in the stories I tell. In the music that makes me move. In the things that make me smile. Or sometimes cry (Cruz).

The stories are often painful, but must be heard. The ability to acknowledge and embrace the experiences of her family that are articulated in *Yellow Eyes* enables Isabel to construct a healthy self-identity by trusting what is within her, not by listening to the opinions of those who judge her superficially.

By contrast, Guadalís Del Carmen’s play, *My Father’s Keeper* explores the avoidance of self-identification as an Afrodescendant. Set in Chicago during the 1990s, the Gonzalez family prepares for the funeral of their patriarch, Tirsio Armando Gonzalez, a Dominican immigrant. Flashback scenes reveal Tirsio’s double life; his wife and children are unaware of, or pretend not to know about, his homosexual affair. In addition to Tirsio’s closeted identity, the play investigates the denial of his racial identity. Del Carmen intentionally describes Tirsio, and his son Armando (Mondo), as a “Dark skinned Latino” in the Cast of Characters. The wife and daughter are “lighter in complexion than Tirsio” while Tirsio’s long-time lover, Daniel is “African American” (*Keeper*).

During the lovers’ first private encounter, Tirsio shares his concerns about his son with Daniel (identified in the dialogue as Danny):

TIRSIO. ... Is ah, this city is not easy for boy like him...
DANNY. What do you mean boy like him? (gossipy) Oooo! Is junior just like his daddy? (smiling coyly, starts kissing Tirsio's neck)
TIRSIO. No. Is, eh, he is trigueño³ and this city is very separated, where does he go? You know?
DANNY. Trigwhat?
TIRSIO. Trigueño, dark skin.
DANNY. Black?
TIRSIO. No, he's no black. He sa, indio. Eh, Indian?

DANNY. Indio. Sure. We're all Indio... (caresses Tirsio) I'm part Cherokee.

TIRSIO. Everyone separate in different places in the city. I, sa, (clears throat) think is different here.

DANNY. It's called segregation... (*Keeper*).

Danny confirms Tirsio's awareness of racism in the US. Although Tirsio denies that his son is Black, he wonders, "where does he go?" Beyond Mondo's volition, how will society view him, to which side of the racist divide will Mondo be assigned or gravitate toward?

In a telephone interview, Del Carmen shared that when asked to self-identify on a form, if neither Latino nor Hispanic were available options, she'd check White. "We're not taught that we're Black." However, as time went on she chose to identify with the African American community "because of how I've been treated. At Latino events people would ask me why I was there" (Del Carmen 2015). More recently, on social media, she articulated the challenge of having to select one community over another because no space exists where her complexity is reflected:

As a black Latina, I always feel a battle within me to pick a side. A battle that asks me what I choose to fight for. Going through my news feed every single Latinx post was about the soccer game. Yet, every black (AA) post was about the BET awards, more specifically Jesse Williams' powerful speech. This is my everyday. Trying to find the balance between my culture and my race. Because unfortunately, no matter how hard I try, my blackness and my latinidad refuse to be consolidated (Del Carmen 2016).

The African American community shares African diasporic history and heritage but not necessarily language or other (Afro)latinx cultural traditions. Sensing rejection by her Latinx community, Del Carmen also chooses to identify with an African American community that does not question her presence. This experience is illustrated *My Father's Keeper*, as Danny recalls his first encounter with Tirsio, and the surprise and delight of meeting a Spanish speaking Afrodescendant:

DANNY. Yes! You walked in with your wife and I thought I heard you two speaking Spanish. I thought I was still high from whatever I smoked the night before. I got closer and sure enough you were talking another language. I thought, "Who is this black dream speaking Spanish?!?!" I thought maybe you were a baseball player. I was hoping you played for the Cubs. I think they make more money than the Sox (*Keeper*).

However, with his response Tirsio actively distances himself from his identity as an Afrodescendant, finding pride in acknowledging his indigenous ancestry instead. He has internalized the racism of his community, targeting it elsewhere.

TIRSIO. I'm not black.

DANNY. You are black, you just happen to speak Spanish.

TIRSIO. I'm indio, Dominican. But not black. Haitians are black.

DANNY. (rolls his eyes) So much ego on one little island...

TIRSIO. It's not that little, and it is pride, not ego (*Keeper*).

Again, the legacy of *mestizaje* ideology appears. For Afrodescendants and the indigenous in the eighteenth century, *mestizaje* represented an acceptance of their humanity, a way to end public discussion about their supposed inferiority (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 8). Unfortunately, beliefs and practices of racism were far too embedded in Latin American society to be erased completely and its effects include disproportionately high rates of poverty among people of visible African ancestry (Jiménez Román). Furthermore, policies formed through the ideology of *mestizaje* have limited the quantifiable evidence that might help to improve such conditions, sustaining instead the racist material effects that were intended to be eradicated in the first place. Most Latin American countries simply did not collect statistics on the ethnicity or race of their people until recent demands for official acknowledgement of minority groups emerged (López and Gonzalez-Barrera).

In her subsequent play, *Tolstoy's Daughters*, Del Carmen delves deeper into the power of politics as she sets the action in an imaginary Latin American country of the near future, described as “the byproduct of colonization and consumerism. Corporations and government have complete control.” Del Carmen uses this setting to explore the impact of political forces on private life. The “daughters” are Katya Libertad Cordova, mid-20s, and Fanya María Cordova, early 20s. As with *My Father's Keeper*, Del Carmen describes several of the characters' physical attributes in the Cast of Characters. Katya “has strong dark beautiful features.” Her mother, Ester, her sister Fanya and her stepfather Daniel all have “light features,” as do Presidente Burgos and his son Ramón. Franco Montes is a revolutionary who “can be indigenous or black” and Rodolfo Lapaix, Franco's accomplice, has “Afro-Latino features” (*Tolstoy's*). Del Carmen's play depicts racially-informed political tension between those in power and those seeking change. Early in the play, Katya is recruited by Franco, who makes assumptions about her based on her appearance:

FRANCO. ... (looks around, whispers) look up Juan Bates. Ever heard of him? “To lose all independent thought, to lose your desire to fight, is worse than being a sheep on path to a slaughter house.” (sees that Katya has no clue about what he just quoted) That was Juan Bates. Have you ever heard of him?

KATYA. I'm gonna go.

FRANCO. Wait. I don't mean to...I just assumed since you were on Campus Avenue that you'd be down to know about some kick ass people and as a woman of color, Bates really hits the spot on black/ issues.

KATYA. You know nothing about me (*Tolstoy's*).

Indeed, by the end of the scene Franco learns that Juan Bates is Katya's father. For her part, Katya is surprised to hear Bates referred to as a hero rather than as a traitor. Speaking with her half-sister Fanya, whose father is a government official, Katya recalls,

Isn't that what we scare kids with? Juan Bates the Boogeyman. I remember those stories. (*sing songey*) If you don't go to sleep, el negrito Juan Bates will come get you and take you away (*Tolstoy's*).

The use of propaganda to influence thought and behavior is integrated in the play's structure. Between scenes, V.O. announcements are heard, including political messages and advertisements for sleeping pills and service robots. These interludes represent the government's tools to demoralize and distract the people. Through Katya's relationship with Franco she begins to perceive the workings of systematic and government-sanctioned oppression. However, the

revolutionaries also have a system of information service, in the editorials of an anonymous writer named Redtails who reports that active protestors are being arrested in record numbers. Presidente Burgos quickly discredits this:

PRESIDENTE BURGOS. Black and indigenous bodies dying at the government's will. I've never read something so ridiculous. A dead black body is a body that was up to no good before it was killed (*Tolstoy's*).

Rodolfo, Daniel's chauffeur and a revolutionary, confirms Redtails' report. His father has recently been shot by an unnamed assailant:

RODOLFO. He was just getting my mom some pan dulce. He wasn't armed or anything. He wasn't a violent man at all. It's all on the surveillance video Katya. They all watched it, it was on video, there was no mistaking what happened. But they dismissed it as evidence. He just, fit a description. My dad died for two reasons: he was a caring husband...and he was black (*Tolstoy's*).

Rodolfo makes it clear that his father's death is a product of systemic racism. The play is about revolution, about changing the system through an uprising of the oppressed and their allies, inspired by the words of Juan Bates:

...Mis hermanos, mis hermanas. I know that it hurts. To be beaten, mentally and physically. To be hungry. To be stripped of anything we hold so dear. But do not give in to the false comfort that imperialism has given, be vigilant to the truth and be prepared to be in the trenches of revolution (*Tolstoy's*).

In *Tolstoy's Daughters*, echoing the activism of *Afrodescendientes* in Colombia and other Latin American countries, it is only by banding together to dismantle inequitable social, political and economic policies with courage and camaraderie, that the oppressed can find the strength in numbers with which to overturn entrenched and powerful systems of subjugation.

The call for unification among disparate communities is also a theme in Jelisa Jay Robinson's *The Stories of Us*, which weaves together personal experiences and close events. Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Robinson identifies as "Morena American." Growing up, her African American friends couldn't understand why she would want to hang around the Latinx students and she recalls being told "you're not Black enough because you speak Spanish" (Robinson interview). Unlike *My Father's Keeper*, in which an African American and an (Afro)Latinx find not only friendship but love, *The Stories of Us* reflects tensions that may exist between communities over struggles for political power and economic security. Despite successful coalitions that have strengthened efforts toward social justice for decades, the growing demographic presence, economic impact and political engagement of Latinx in the US may be perceived as threats to the gains and continued efforts by the African American community still working toward equity and economic advancement.

Those who have done the hard work of coalition politics assert that 'the most important lesson was that conflict between communities is rarely, if ever, only about differences in culture or language. Not that such differences are inconsequential. However, economics are most often at the heart of intercommunity tension.' (Diaz-Veizades and Taehan Chang, quoted in Hernández 156).

It is this tension that Robinson wishes to diffuse, particularly among Afrodescendant communities. She feels it is important to acknowledge differences but to “also recognize that we come from the same place, we look like each other. My plays come from that necessity.” The vignettes in *The Stories of Us* include ones “about an African American woman and a Latino man, dating; a Black man honoring Celia Cruz; experiencing my own Blackness in Brazil; and a fight between Mexican Americans and Blacks that happened at my school.” Her goal for the play is straightforward, to build bridges between these communities. “African Americans only make up 5% of the Blacks in this hemisphere! We need to be figuring out ways to connect and understand, to build a Pan-African community” (Robinson interview).

While the play focuses on two communities, Robinson has been pleasantly surprised at how universal her audiences have found the play. *The Stories of Us* was produced in April 2016 at Teatro Vivo in Austin, and what Robinson heard most often from the diverse audience was, “this is my story too.” According to the audiences, her play reflects:

...never being Black enough, Latino enough, even the Asian community, never being enough. You’re trying to find belonging in the world and people are trying to put me in a box. The play is about love, at the center of everything is love, self-love. It’s an empowering play (Robinson interview).

Empowerment is the intention behind the final play reviewed in this piece, Crystal Roman’s *Black Latina the Play*. As mentioned earlier, the limitations created by casting directors as well as the limited roles available to Latinas and African American women frustrated Roman. To process her experiences, she decided to chronicle her feelings through writing. Four voices emerged representing anger, sadness, love, and empowerment, and the chronicle transformed into a one-woman show, with subsequent performances in ensembles of four to five women (Haas).

In a video excerpt of an ensemble production, five women dressed in orange jumpsuits reminiscent of prison garb begin the show with dance and song, launching into the first chapter, Anger. “I am so tired of this imprisonment of ignorance,” begins one. The rest follow, exasperated by a world unable to comprehend their complexity; by people who ask them, in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, whether they are Latina or Black; by those who appropriate their culture and physical attributes (via botox and bottom-enhancing undergarments) then recommend plastic surgery in return; and by the proliferation of light-skinned women on Spanish-language television. One woman asks another, “Would it be too much to ask to have you, me, us on the forefronts of the media? Or would it be too abrasive to acknowledge that yes, we have Black and Indian blood running through our veins?” They decide that they must take matters into their own hands. “Maybe, just maybe if we took a stronger stand for who we are instead of waiting for the fools who run the TV and the media to change, we would see more of us” (*Black Latina*).

As this chapter closes, they are heartened as they agree that as their numbers and solidarity grow, acceptance by society is inevitable. “...we are one, *somos uno, somos um*. Don’t try to repress us, hold us down or tell us we don’t exist. We do exist, even to the naked eye, it’s obvious we’re of mixed heritage.” The women, united, issue a warning to the audience, “More like us are coming ... we are here, we are ready, we are Black Latinas” (*Black Latina*).

The play culminates in acts of liberation with the chapter entitled Empowerment that outlines a three-step process by which these women will not merely survive but flourish: self-acceptance, celebration, and representation. The women affirm their self-acceptance, stating, “I have embraced this skin I am in,” and “No longer will the paper bag test and internalized racism affect me.” While the “paper bag test,” a discriminatory tool of colorism, was used predominantly

by African Americans in the early 20th century to deny admission to elite organizations on the basis of skin tone, Roman borrows the term here to describe the colorism and its legacy of internalized racism that is also found in Latinx culture (Ratliff). Recognizing that these superficial discriminations have only served to divide families, friends, and societies, the women in *Black Latina the Play* unite to enumerate and celebrate the contributions of Afrodescendants in the US, taking on the challenge to represent the complexity of the (Afro)Latinx experience, with strength, grace, pride, and unity:

... And so I am here now to open up the world to THIS fusion ... There are no chips on my shoulders, those chips have fallen to the ground and as I walk to my success I crush them beneath my feet dissolving all of the stigmas and complexes I have had. I am proud of my two sides, my two cultures ... We are one and are not a divided group (*Black Latina*).

These words from the final act of *Black Latina The Play* encapsulate a fundamental challenge for 21st century (Afro)Latinx residing in the US: to find acceptance for their holistic identity when forces within and without prefer the simplicity of binarism or the nuance of colorism, both oppressive strategies of social dominance. While the ideology of *mestizaje* strived to forge a homogenous identity from the diversity of heritages thriving in Latin America, it has not overcome the ingrained colonial social stratification inherited from Spain and its socioeconomic impacts. Afrodescendant and indigenous communities still struggle to overcome a history of obscurity while lighter-skinned, phenotypically European individuals remain the privileged representation and focus of Latin American narratives. To create the necessary changes, activism has rallied individuals and groups to come forward and raise awareness about neglected communities. In 1993, the passing of law 70 in Colombia “granted collective land titles for black communities and their right to the management of the resources found within them” (Afro-Colombians). In 2000, the “Latin American Regional Conference Against Racism,” held in Santiago de Chile, inspired and advanced anti-racism policy in the region, supporting greater visibility for the concerns of Afrodescendants and the Indigenous of Latin America (Campos Garcia). For its mid-decade census in 2015, Mexico included a new question that allowed respondents to self-identify as Black or Afro-Mexican for the first time (López and Gonzalez-Barrera).

These are positive strides for Latin America but as more (Afro)Latinx immigrate to the United States from there, they will encounter mainstream United States culture, a society historically divided along a simplistic White-Black binary, discriminatory and worse, violently hostile to Afrodescendants. Here in the US, we do not live in a post-racial society; racism targets Black people, regardless of nation of origin. Those who deny their “Blackness” may inadvertently put themselves in harm’s way, mistakenly trusting a toxic society. On a subtler level, the lack of awareness and understanding in the US about the existence and experiences of (Afro)Latinx reinforces binary thinking that can be harmful for youth who are in the process of developing their sense of identity. Crystal Roman addresses the impact on young women seeing Latinx represented only by lighter-skinned people in the media.

When you present a face that only represents a portion of the community, it causes a ripple effect that has deep rooted scars. Self-loathing and hatred seeps in and dissatisfaction of underrepresentation in the media forces young girls to question their beauty and value (Martinez).

Dramatic literature, the theatre, and other fields have the power to educate our audiences, artists and critics as well as provide opportunities for generations of (Afro)Latinx to see validating, empowering, intentional representations of their experiences. We have witnessed many breakthroughs in theatrical representation over the past fifty years including the late 20th century – early 21st century surge of LGBT-themed plays such as Tony Kushner’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Angels In America*, Richard Greenberg’s Tony Award winning *Take Me Out*, and *Fun Home*, a recent Tony Award winning musical by Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tesori. The more recent 21st century surge of playwriting by and about the Arab-American experience which has included plays such *Seven Parts of Desire* by Heather Raffo and *Back of the Throat* by Yussef El Guindi, has provided new opportunities for actors, who can now bring their authentic experiences to the rehearsal room and the stage. Additionally, this new work provides a more varied canon for producers that aligns more closely with changing audience demographics, and a rich field of inquiry for dramaturges and scholars of multiple disciplines. For audiences who do not identify personally with the work, such productions and the accompanying program notes, study guides, post-play conversations, and other ancillary contextualizing materials and events provide insight and build sensitivity through theatre’s mediated exposure. It can be argued that the illumination of previously invisible identities on our nation’s stages has contributed to the transformation of the public discourse, policy, and legislation.

Perhaps the greatest service provided by the plays discussed here, however, is in allowing (Afro)Latinx audiences to see their own experiences articulated on stage. The investment of time, talent, and resources toward the production of stories and images that do not shy away from the complexities of (Afro)Latinx life, provides important validation from the American theatre field, which represents US mainstream society, that these stories are valuable, worthy of respectful artistic investigation and of inclusion in the fabric of the American experience. However, this requires commitment on the part of playwrights to write the scripts. Why does articulation lag behind embodiment on the stage? A few clues with which to answer this difficult question may be found in the plays which *have* emerged to articulate the (Afro)Latinx experience. Migdalia Cruz’ *Yellow Eyes* shows us that the pain of recalling past violence and racial injustice is sometimes too great to speak about, even if it is healing. Family and social interactions, where one would hope to find refuge, can instead be emotional minefields, delivering unexpected assaults and effectively wounding one’s sense of trust. On another front, Guadalís Del Carmen’s play, *My Father’s Keeper*, demonstrates the epistemology of *mestizaje*, whereby Afrodescendant Latinx are taught to dismiss direct association with African ancestry. *Tolstoy’s Daughters*, also by Del Carmen, reveals the capacity of media and government (or any institution with means) to craft and disseminate propaganda that promotes racism and inequity, and to sanction policy and military power to enforce that injustice. *The Stories of Us* by Jelisa Jay Robinson reflects on the challenges and necessity of creating unity among disparate communities. The final play considered here, *Black Latina the Play* by Crystal Roman, articulates the day-to-day encounters with the ignorance and rejection found in a world seemingly unable to comprehend the existence of an (Afro)Latinx. Her defiant response to this world exudes the joy of representing oneself proudly, in writing and on the stage.

Navigating the waters of identity, history, cultural tradition, and oppression both external and internal, while sorting through conflicting dominant cultural messages about where one belongs or does not -- all these factors may simply leave one at a loss for words. However, the tide is turning as Cruz, Del Carmen, Robinson, and Roman, fueled by a necessity that overrides any challenges, generate the scripts that raise questions about the past and the future, about family and

society, about identity and belonging. May their work herald a new era of articulation for the (Afro)Latinx experience.

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NOTE

¹ The Latinx Theatre Commons, formerly known as the Latina/o Theatre Commons) “in partnership with HowlRound is a national movement that uses a commons-based approach to transform the narrative of the American theatre, to amplify the visibility of Latina/o/x performance making, and to champion equity through advocacy, art making, convening, and scholarship” (Latina/o Theatre Commons).

² Rivera and Tirado co-wrote *Celia: The Life and Music of Celia Cruz*, a musical based on the life of the world renowned Cuban singer who experienced profound racism in the music industry despite her enormous fame. This work, as well as *Lackawanna Blues* by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and *Mamacita and the Negrito* by Emilio Rodriguez came to my attention too late to be included in this article.

³ Another legacy of colonial social stratification, the word *trigueño* conveys different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. The root of the word is *trigo*, or wheat; *trigueño* literally means ‘wheat-colored’ but can describe a spectrum of skin color types, from dark brown to tan. In the Caribbean, *trigueño* is a polite euphemism for *negro* which one would not use to describe a person of the upper classes because of its earlier association with slavery (Margulis and Urresti 107).