

Review

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*Peer-reviewed



LITERARY MANAGERS
& DRAMATURGS
OF THE AMERICAS

Review

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Editors' Note:

The articles for this issue of LMDA's *Review* investigate the centrality of performed identities in theatre and dance. They speak to a desire for increased visibility of culture, tradition, and experience. They also consider the importance of nurturing a sense of community after several years of isolation to curb a global pandemic. How do dramaturgs elucidate strategies that inspire connections between artists and audiences? How do they foster ethical forms of representation and interpretation? What is at stake in creating art for a localized audience when everyday life, through social media and television, is so tightly conjoined to world events?

Penned by Dmitry Troyanovsky and Dan Smith, our issue commences with an invaluable missive of support and outline of action steps artists and cultural organizations can take to support Ukraine and its people. They draw attention to one of the world's many and immediate humanitarian crises and implore that we all can act. Linda Saborío writes of the excitement that permeated Chicago's Goodman Theatre when actors from José Cruz González's play *American Mariachi* took to the stage after more than a year of COVID-19 postponements. As Saborío notes, the production "exuded Latinx pride," for its affirmation of identity and its representation of Latinx customs and music; a dramaturgical composition that encouraged a pan-Latinx sense of community and challenged cultural constructions of gender identity. Kate Bredeson, as dramaturg, shares an interview with Oregon-based dancer-choreographers Muffie Delgado Connelly and Tahini Holt, which took place after their dance collaboration *Pulse Mountain* was delayed due to COVID-19. Their discussion invite introspection on the nature of collaborative practice both within the process of creation and in terms of audience engagement. How does one create an inviting performance space that fosters relationships among the community present in the room? How can the vibrations of humans dancing within a localized space occlude the disquiet of uncertainty in the outside world? Megan Geigner offers an examination of the Broadway shows *In Dahomey*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *Hamilton: An American Musical* in relation to minstrelsy. From a historical and text analysis lens, Geigner analyzes the genealogy of these works, which imbue differing responses from Black and white audiences. She makes the compelling argument that each employ minstrel conventions, which appeal to white audiences while simultaneously subversively "critiquing US racial politics."

These articles, this interview, and this manifesto provide a snapshot of history, art, scholarship, identity, and the state of the world through a dramaturgical sensibility. We hope they incite discourse and offer pathways for action.

Kristin Leahey & Elizabeth Coen

In loving memory of William F. Leahey III, M.D. *Per Ardua Ad Astra*.

—KL

War, Ukraine, and American Theatre: A Call to Action

by Dmitry Troyanovsky & Dan Smith



Figure 1: Mariupol Drama Theatre Destroyed by Russian airstrike. March 2022. Photo by Donetsk regional military administration.

When the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, addressed the US Congress on December 21, 2022, he made an eloquent case for the urgency of the Ukrainian cause:

This battle is not only for the territory, for this or another part of Europe. The battle is not only for life, freedom and security of Ukrainians or any other nation which Russia attempts to conquer. This struggle will define in what world our children and grandchildren will live, and then their children and grandchildren. It will define whether it will be a democracy of Ukrainians and for Americans — for all.¹

As co-authors, we are of different backgrounds and lived experiences but share an urgent belief in supporting Ukraine and its people through the theatre. Dmitry Troyanovsky is a theatre director — teaching at Brandeis University. Born in Kyiv, Ukraine (at the time when it was part of the former USSR), Dmitry moved to the United States as a Jewish refugee. When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Dmitry felt compelled to become an active advocate for the Ukrainian cause. In May of 2022, Dmitry traveled to Berlin to work as a volunteer interpreter at the Welcome Center for Ukrainian refugees at the city’s central train station. He described the experience in an essay published by *The Theatre Times*, titled “Refugees in Berlin: Excerpts from a sort of Berlin diary.”²

Dan Smith is a dramaturg and translator, teaching at Michigan State University. In supporting Dmitry’s vision for international collaboration, Dan hopes to combat his feelings of helplessness and empower other dramaturgs and educators to take concrete action.

As the war continues to rage, it may be easy for US theatre

¹ Volodymyr Zelensky, “Speech Before Congress,” (Washington D.C., December 21, 2022).

² Dmitry Troyanovsky, “Refugees in Berlin: Excerpts from a sort of Berlin Diary,” *The Theatre Times*, November 11, 2022.

artists to forget about Ukraine and turn our thoughts away from this devastation. However, several projects have already rejected this impulse. Last April, The Martin E. Segal Theatre Center organized “New York Theatre Artists for Ukraine,” a 12-hour online marathon of readings and conversations.³ The upcoming collaboration between Oleksandra Oliinik and Scott Illingworth, *Diaries from Ukraine*, deploys narrative testimony to share stories of Ukrainians affected by the war. Theatre companies and academic institutions around the country have hosted Ukrainian theatre benefits, which demonstrate some possibilities for engagement. And we would like to advocate for increased visibility for these existing projects and for further artistic ventures to support Ukraine and Ukrainian theatre.

We encourage American theatre practitioners, leaders, and administrators of performing arts organizations to build on these endeavors rather than maintaining business as usual. Though we may feel disempowered in the face of geopolitical chaos, American theatre makers should redouble our efforts to engage with one of the most consequential events of our lifetime. It is within our power to draw attention to the war by educating American audiences about the tragedy unfolding in Ukraine. We can express solidarity with Ukrainian people by sharing Ukrainian culture and by offering assistance to Ukrainian refugees in our communities. We can join our global colleagues in a theatrical conversation about war and world threats to freedom and democracy.

While this topic may feel overwhelming, we must resist relegating the war to the status of a faraway abstraction. We believe the war is ours, too, and justifies a robust theatrical conversation. What happens in Ukraine does not stay in Ukraine. Not just because of the revived specter of nuclear annihilation, but because Russia’s colonialist war in Ukraine is a part of a larger confrontation. One which Americans know all too well. It is a battle between democratic, open, forward-looking, liberal values and the nationalist, alt-right, xenophobic, neo-Fascist movements, which have risen in influence throughout the world. For years, the Russian government has been nurturing and stoking these antidemocratic stirrings nationally and internationally. Recently, we have witnessed the fragility of American democracy. The troubling events of January 6th should have served as a wakeup call. We learned that extremist politics fueled by resentment can escalate into

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³ “New York Theatre Artists for Ukraine: a 12-hour online marathon of readings and conversations with 24 New York Theatre institutions,” (Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, New York, April 16, 2022). [Link](#).

violence and chaos. Putin’s army, the forces hostile to a free, lawful, and democratic society, is already here. His victory in Ukraine, if allowed to happen, will almost certainly embolden these forces further, putting the future of American democracy at risk. So, no, the war in Ukraine is not a distant abstraction. American theatre institutions and practitioners must raise awareness of the atrocities being committed and find ways to engage locally with significant global questions of oppression, occupation, democracy, and resistance.

We can promote and preserve Ukrainian culture, which the Russian aggressors are systematically destroying. There is growing evidence of a deliberate cultural genocide across Ukraine, perpetrated by the Russian invaders. After all, Putin and his allies do not believe that Ukraine has a distinct cultural identity or a language separate from Russia’s.⁴ Ukrainian art has been woefully unexplored and underappreciated, which feeds into Russian colonialist propaganda.

Ukraine has a long history of cultural production. Americans are likely familiar with Mykola Hohol also known as Nikolai Gogol, a well-known writer who Russians frequently claim as their own. But do Americans know the most important 19th century Ukrainian poet, Taras Shevchenko or the philosopher, Hryhorii Skovoroda, known as the Ukrainian Socrates?

Engaging with just contemporary Ukrainian literature, music, dance, theatre, and film would lead to astonishment concerning Ukrainian culture’s vibrancy and depth. Kyiv features one of the edgiest electronic music scenes in the world. Conceptual artist Pavlo Makov represented Ukraine at the 2022 Venice Biennale d’Arte. Playwrights such as Natalya Vorozhbit, whose war text *Bad Roads* has been produced internationally, should be better known to the American theatre community. When our institutions give visibility to Ukrainian theatre, Ukrainian narratives, and Ukrainian history, we contribute to the defeat of an ideology that seeks to erase both the Ukrainian people and their culture. We can educate ourselves and our audiences about centuries worth of cultural and theatrical treasures.

We need to be bold and conscientious. We call on American theatre artists and institutions to disrupt traditional season planning in favor of urgently relevant programming. Some of the action items below can be implemented immediately

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⁴ Jason Farago et al., “A Culture in the Cross Hairs,” [New York Times](#), December 19, 2022.

at little or no cost. Other items require more long-term organization and financial investment.

- Partner with a Ukrainian cultural or philanthropic organization in your area. Set up a collection in the lobby to fundraise for the Ukrainian cause or to provide financial assistance to seven million displaced Ukrainians.
- Open spaces to Ukrainian refugees in your community. Give them complimentary access to performances. Organize free theatre classes for refugee children. Invite Ukrainians to experience the artistic riches of your cultural spaces. We cannot replace home for those who have been displaced, but we can help them feel a sense of belonging.
- Reserve time and space (e.g., a stage, a rehearsal room, a lobby) for Ukrainian refugees to use as they see fit: an open mic night, a concert, an installation, or a silent disco night. Make an effort to connect with the refugees. Learn their stories and inquire about their needs. The ability to partake in the arts is not just a human right, it is an opportunity for people to experience precious moments of normalcy during the worst moments of their lives.
- Support ongoing collaborations by taking part in [Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings](#), a global initiative to support Ukrainian playwrights.⁵ Consider doing a fully staged production of a text from the Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings collection.
- Set up a residency for Ukrainian theatre makers. Empower artists from Ukraine and from the Ukrainian diaspora, artists with intersectional and multi-rooted Ukrainian identities, who can illuminate the high stakes in authentic, culturally specific ways. Let such residencies result in public showings and presentations of new material.
- Commission and develop original performances focused on the war and the plight of the refugees. Collaborate with authors in Ukraine or Ukrainian playwrights in your community. This is an excellent

time for devised and verbatim pieces to bear witness to atrocity and to celebrate the Ukrainian spirit.

- Commission, workshop, and stage new translations or adaptations of Ukrainian theatre classics. *Cassandra*, Lesia Ukrainka's poetic retelling of the Trojan War from the point of view of the eponymous prophet, could be a timely addition to seasonal theatre offerings. Ivan Franko's *Stolen Happiness*, a parable about the perils of trying to benefit from the grief of others, is one of the most famous plays in the Ukrainian repertory and would merit consideration. Explore the work of Ivan Karpenko-Kary, one of the founders of professional Ukrainian theatre. His drama about a tragic love triangle, *Luckless*, or one of his comedies may be of interest.
- Schedule events to explore the riches of Ukrainian theatrical history that have been neglected in favor of a narrative of Russian icons that dominate studies of this region of the world. Programming might explore such artists as the legendary avant-garde director Les Kurbas or the modernist playwright Lesia Ukrainka. Those of us who are educators should incorporate Ukrainian works into the theatre history curriculum. The full text of Ukrainka's play *Forest Song* is available in an English translation [here](#).⁶
- Why not create an adaptation of a Ukrainian fairytale, in lieu of staging *The Christmas Carol*? For example, a timely entry into the Ukrainian worldview may be the story of Kotygoroshko, a plucky young hero who magically comes out of a tiny pea but goes on to vanquish a powerful dragon.
- Historically, theatre has been a place to grapple with the most important challenges facing society. Beyond programming that focuses on Ukraine or Ukrainian stories, American theatre companies can revisit relevant works from the world repertory addressing war, conflict, genocide, the rise of global fascist regimes, and threats to democracy. From ancient Greek drama to contemporary drama, tragically, there is no dearth of such texts. American theatre has to

5 John Freedman and Maksym Kurochkin, "[Worldwide Ukrainian Play Readings](#)," (Kyiv: The Center for International Theatre Development, 2022-23).

6 Lesia Ukrainka, *Forest Song*, Translated by Percival Cundy. (New York: Bookman Associates, 1950; Toronto: Electronic Library of Ukrainian Literature, 2005), [Link](#).

be nimble and responsive when it comes to what, we believe, is one of the most consequential conflicts of our time.

Do one of these things. Do all of them. Let us disrupt our standard practices by acknowledging the disruptions this war has caused Ukraine and beyond.

As members of the theatre community, we can take artistic and intellectual leadership on these issues by advocating for programming decisions that invite audiences to reflect on war, democracy, and Ukraine. No matter the size of our organizations, we can empower artists and spectators to resist feelings of helplessness. Through direct engagement with Ukrainian theatre artists of the past and present, we can stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian culture and people. ♦

DAN SMITH is a dramaturg, translator, theatre historian, and director based in the Department of Theatre at Michigan State University. His research interests include seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French theatre, history of sexuality, and translation studies. His translation of Marivaux's *Love in Disguise* and co-translation of Carlo Gozzi's *The Serpent Lady* have appeared in *The Mercurian*. He also collaborated with Constance Congdon on her adaptation of *The Imaginary Invalid* by Molière (Broadway Play Publishing, 2016). Dan is working on a book manuscript, tentatively titled *Dramaturgies of Translation: Collaboration, Culture, and Critique*. His scholarly work has been published in such journals as *L'Esprit Créateur*, *Theatre Topics*, *Brecht Yearbook*, *Performing Arts Journal*, and *Didaskalia*. He currently serves as Focus Group Representative for the Dramaturgy Focus Group in the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and as Editor of the journal *Theatre/Practice*.

Director **DMITRY TROYANOVSKY** stages productions, teaches, leads workshops, and develops new theatrical material at national and international institutions such as Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center (China), American Repertory Theatre, Opera Idaho, Bard Music Festival, Boston Playwrights' Theater, Actors' Shakespeare Project, Asolo Repertory Theatre, Baryshnikov Arts Center, Shanghai Theatre Academy, Moscow Art Theatre School, and 92 Street Y in New York. A refugee from the former Soviet Union (now Ukraine), Dmitry brings an outsider experience to his work. He is an MFA graduate of the American Repertory Theatre Institute for the Advanced Theatre Training at Harvard University. Dmitry teaches in the Department of Theater Arts at Brandeis University in Massachusetts.

[AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE: PEOPLE TO WATCH](#)

El Mariachi Is Not Just for Men: A Pan-Latinx Approach to Community, Culture, and Macho Paradigms in José Cruz González's *American Mariachi*

by Linda Saborío



Figure 1: (Left to Right) Eréndira Izguerra (Tía Carmen) and Gigi Cervantes (Amalia) in *American Mariachi* by José Cruz González, directed by Henry Godínez at Goodman Theatre, September 18–October 24, 2021. Photo by Liz Lauren.

Nearly a year and a half after the cast and crew abruptly halted production at the Dallas Theater Center due to Covid-19 restrictions, *American Mariachi* by playwright José Cruz González was revitalized under the direction of Henry Godínez at the Goodman Theatre in the heart of downtown Chicago. At the staging I attended in October 2021, spectators appeared to be quite enthusiastic about more than the reopening of the Goodman Theatre. The performance of *American Mariachi* exuded Latinx pride, affirmed the presence of historically underrepresented populations, and offered spectators an opportunity to identify with Latinx characters, customs, and music. Cruz González's play notably engaged spectators by including various mariachi musical pieces and iconic Latinx imagery. Moreover, by coupling this imagery with depictions of female disenfranchisement, restrictive gender roles, and deep-rooted family traditions, Cruz González invited audience members to dwell on the nature of *machismo* and how a male-centric musical genre such as mariachi can symbolize a cultural silencing of Latina's experiences. In exploring this idea of uncloaking a mythos of machismo, I will analyze first Cruz González's theatrical piece within the context of the Goodman's production, with particular attention paid to the recognition of Latinx experiences by a major American theatre and the importance of establishing a pan-Latinx sense of community. Second, my analysis will turn to a close reading of the script and how the play successfully denaturalizes a macho paradigm without demonizing men, family, and tradition. Instead of adopting a formulaic macho attitude, the characters — both men and women — discover a way to embrace family tradition and recast their gender identities through the creation of an all-female mariachi band.

STAGING AN AUTHENTIC LATINX EXPERIENCE AT THE GOODMAN THEATRE

The Goodman Theatre's performance of *American Mariachi* spoke to a Latinx experience and, more specifically, to a Chicago audience with a large presence of Latinx spectators yearning for self-representation and identification with their own culture and their own ethnic communities. The staging at the Goodman Theatre in downtown Chicago is noteworthy, especially given the historically hegemonic space of mainstream theatre.¹ Goodman's artistic director and curator Henry Godinez asserts that he produces plays explicitly by Latinx dramatists during the regular season to incorporate more underrepresented voices and attract a wider audience. According to Henry Godinez, Latinx audiences were eager to embrace the performance of *American Mariachi* as an "authentic" representation of diverse Latin American and US Latinx cultures.² Whereas other productions have regrettably managed to recycle stereotypes about Latinx populations, the Goodman's performance of *American Mariachi* succeeded at foregrounding experiences, customs, and even critical conceptions meaningful to pan-Latinx audiences.³ Further, as the playwright notes in his unpublished manuscript, initial performances of *American Mariachi* effectively required "early planning with theatres" because "community engagement was essential."⁴ Some rather creative measures were used to engage the community in early productions of the play, such as "mariachi organizations and mariachi classes," "lobby displays, lecture/presentations, community gatherings" and even "bringing local student mariachi groups to perform outside before the production."⁵ These measures of community engagement were key to empowering a

1 The Goodman Theatre has staged diverse artistry with inclusive casting since their 1978 performance of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. This inclusivity fosters greater community engagement and an insightful artistic vision.

2 Henry Godinez, email to Linda Saborío, 27 December 2021. In an email exchange with me, Henry Godinez mentions that in place of the annual Latinx Theatre Festival they have opted to produce Latinx plays as an integral part of the regular season at the Goodman Theatre.

3 As one example, see Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's study on Paul Simon's Broadway rendition of *The Capeman*.

4 José Cruz González, *American Mariachi*, (unpublished production draft, 2020), typescript, 5. *American Mariachi* was originally commissioned by and developed at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts Theatre Company. The play's world premiere occurred on February 2, 2018, at the Denver Center and was subsequently staged on March 29, 2018, at the Old Globe in San Diego. All citations of *American Mariachi* are from an unpublished production draft director Henry Godinez sent to me with the permission of the dramatist.

5 Cruz González, *American Mariachi*, 5.

Latinx population that may have felt alienated by such a large-scale performance. Even the simple gesture of using bilingual ushers to greet audience members set a welcoming tone at the Goodman Theatre performance.

Central to the various facets of community engagement is the mariachi music. Considered by Cruz González as another vital character in *American Mariachi*, the numerous mariachi musical scores performed during the Chicago production by both male and female musicians affirmed a space of cultural recognition, mutual understanding, and, perhaps more importantly, female potential.⁶ Cruz González remarks that through their work with professional mariachi groups, "who shared their cultural and musical knowledge of their genre," the cast "discovered that the music (songs and underscoring) was its own character — unlike traditional musical theatre numbers."⁷ As an icon of Mexican culture recognized extensively worldwide, mariachi music has its origins in an indigenous culture, the Coca people, who resided primarily in the states of Nayarit and Jalisco, Mexico. The indigenous word mariachi originally referred to a tree from the region of the Coca people and later was used in reference to the wooden platforms where *bailes folklóricos* were staged. Eventually, the word came to be synonymous with any musical group that played in the regions of the modern states of Michoacán, Guerrero, and Colima.⁸

Whereas mariachi music has distinctive roots in Mexican culture, the performance of *American Mariachi* engaged with a pan-Latinx audience. Henry Godinez acknowledges that the production "appeals first to a Mexican-based audience" but, he argues, "the core of the family dynamics and relationships I think appeals to a broader pan-Latinx audience. As a director in a large mainstream arts institution, I've always been looking for ways to foster inclusiveness without compromising authenticity."⁹ As the title of the play suggests, *American Mariachi* is an intercultural play that engages in diverse dramatic techniques, including code switching from English to Spanish, the use of Spanglish, live mariachi music, and iconic Latinx images such as the

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Godinez, email to Saborío, 2021.

8 Celestino Fernández and Jessie K. Finch, "Mariachi Music and Culture," in *Encyclopedia of Latino Culture: From Calaveras to Quinceañeras*, ed. Charles M. Tatum (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014), 953-54.

9 Godinez, email to Saborío, 2021.



Figure II: The cast of *American Mariachi* by José Cruz González, directed by Henry Godínez at Goodman Theatre, September 18–October 24, 2021. Photo by Liz Lauren.

Catrina. The title expands on a concept of “American” to include North, Central, and South America, while at the same time inserting Latinx historical experiences, such as the long-standing Mexican tradition of mariachi bands, into a dominant cultural imaginary where minority voices have fundamentally been silenced and ignored. The Goodman’s performance of *American Mariachi* expanded on facets of Mexican cultural identities by addressing discursive spaces and experiences significant to Latinx subjects across national borders. This is important to note because it provided audience members with an opportunity to not only identify with traditional family customs but also to engage critically with recognizable social patterns, including essentialized gender roles and *machista* structures.

The community engagement achieved by the Goodman’s performance had a dual purpose. On the one hand, the performance created a sense of pride for Latinx audience members who witnessed their own culture being received on a major American stage. On the other hand, the interconnection with the community invited meaningful introspection about historical, cultural, and often unquestioned norms of machismo. In the next section, my literary analysis of the play explores how sociosexual divisions of gender roles and conventional, gender-prescribed structures appear to be entangled with family loyalty and customs. The creation of an all-female mariachi band is not without limitations; yet the female characters in *American Mariachi* discover a way to embrace family tradition and preserve their femininity while interweaving themselves into an unmistakably masculine social system.

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH MARIACHI MUSIC

Historically, mariachi bands have been an exclusively all-male tradition both in terms of the composition of band members and singers as well as the spectators. The few noted exceptions are an all-female mariachi band known as Las Coronelas that performed in Mexico City in the mid-1940s, and Lucha Reyes, a female mariachi singer from the 1930s.¹⁰ The name Lucha is significant as the play *American Mariachi* recounts the story of a young female named Lucha who decides to stake a claim to a male-dominated Mexican tradition in the 1970s by creating an all-female mariachi band. Notably, the word *lucha* translates into English as struggle or fight, an appropriate name for a character who struggles to be understood as a female and fights to have a voice in a male-dominated public space. In the play, as Lucha struggles to balance family obligations — including serving as the principal caregiver for her mother who has Alzheimer’s disease — with being a full-time nursing student, she finds herself entrapped by gendered Latina roles and cultural traditions seeped in machismo. One day, Lucha happens upon an old recording of a love song from her mother’s past. While Lucha plays the record, her mother, in a moment of lucidity, immediately recognizes the song and begins to sing along. When the record is advertently broken and the song is supposedly lost forever, Lucha, who is unaware of

¹⁰ Fernández and Finch, “Mariachi Music and Culture,” 953-54. Fernández and Finch remark that since the 1960s, women have played a more prominent role in mariachi bands in the United States. They give recognition to some well-known female mariachi bands, including Mariachi Las Divas, Mariachi Las Reyna de Los Angeles, Mariachi Mujer 2000, and Las Adelitas. As they expressly note, however, this gender barrier with one of the most iconic music genres in Mexico has yet to be dismantled in its entirety.

the origins of the song, decides to recreate the music for her mother by forming an all-female mariachi band.

This desire to reconceptualize female identity within a historically machista musical genre is further accentuated by the era-specific setting for *American Mariachi*. The 1970s bore witness to a significant period of social and political movements for women (primarily, Anglo, pro-feminist social movements emerging from the 1960s) and for Chicanos (intentionally spelled with the masculine gender marker of “o”). Angie Chabram-Dernersesian justly argues in “I Throw Punches for my Race” that the Chicano movement in its

“The female characters in the play respond not only to a machista discourse but also a Chicano ideological structure premised largely on masculine representation.”

initial stages addressed issues of race/ethnicity and class but not specifically gender. In her analysis of male-authored texts like Armando B. Rendón’s *The Chicano Manifesto* and Philip D. Ortego’s *We are Chicanos*, Chabram-Dernersesian explains how the movement’s collective embodiment of a Chicano male produced an ethnic subject that was decidedly masculine: “While contesting racism, economic exploitation, and political domination, the author, Armando Rendón, reinforces dominant ideology by identifying ‘machismo’ as the symbolic principle of the Chicano revolt and adopting machismo as the guideline for Chicano family life.”¹¹ She further explains the role Chicanas were expected to embody in their support of what was evidently interpreted as a political and racial/ethnic struggle: “Within this logic, if Chicanas wished to receive the authorizing signature of predominant movement discourses and figure within the record of Mexican practices of resistance in the US, then they had to embody themselves as males,

¹¹ Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, “I Throw Punches for My Race, but I Don’t Want to Be a Man: Writing Us – Chica-nos (girl,us)/Chicanas – Into the Movement Script,” in *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian (New York: Routledge, 2006), 167.

adopt traditional family relations, and dwell only on their racial and/or ethnic oppression.”¹² To achieve recognition within the movement, Chicana activists and scholars had to develop their own mechanisms in which to inscribe their gendered subjecthood. This era of questioning subject positions (for both women and ethnic populations) is a compelling setting for *American Mariachi*. The female characters in the play respond not only to a machista discourse but also a Chicano ideological structure premised largely on masculine representation. Moreover, by approaching an assumed masculine standard of machismo from a retrospective position, the play offers audiences an opportunity to reconsider historically prescribed gender roles and patterns from their current positionalities. What gendered role does Lucha embody, or rather, has been inscribed on her and can she restructure it?

By creating an all-female mariachi group, appropriately named Las Coronelas after the 1940s Mexico City band, Lucha is clearly striving to reformulate socially prescribed gender norms. In all, there are five Latinas in the play who decide to join the all-female mariachi band: Lucha is the protagonist who organizes the creation of the mariachi band, cares for her mother and father, and is studying to be a nurse; Boli is her extroverted cousin with strong feminist ideals and is Lucha’s co-conspirator in forming the band; Soyla is a divorcee who owns her own hair salon; Isabel is a young, married woman who has to hide her participation in the band from a machista husband; and Gabby is an English-dominant Latina and born-again Christian who, throughout the course of the play, reconnects with her roots and the Spanish language. Of the five female mariachi members, only one is identified as not being of Mexican descent: Soyla, the *colombiana*. Although these five Latina characters in the play are representative of only two countries — Mexico and Colombia — the women embody a diverse (re)interpretation of Latina representation in the United States through their shared struggles against preconceived gender roles (i.e., caretakers of family members over personal careers) and both societal and cultural expectations as Latinas. A process of (re)interpreting Latina representation in this manner quite possibly allows for a reconfiguration of sexualities not sanctioned by a Latino, or any other, patriarchal order, thereby providing the female characters with the space to defy culturally engrained and historically accepted notions of gender and sexuality.

¹² Chabram-Dernersesian, “I Throw Punches for My Race,” 168.



Figure III: (Left to Right) Tiffany Solano (Lucha), Molly Hernández (Isabel), Amanda Raquel Martínez (Gabby), Gloria Vivica Benavides (Soyla), Christopher Llewyn Ramirez (Mateo) and Lucy Godínez (Boli) in *American Mariachi* by José Cruz González, directed by Henry Godínez at Goodman Theatre, September 18-October 24, 2021. Photo by Liz Lauren.

Whereas there continue to be limited representations of Latinas in mainstream media and printed press, and those that do exist tend to portray gendered stereotypes of Latinas (childbearing, uneducated, hypersexual, just to mention a few), in *American Mariachi* the female characters embody heterogeneous and non-prescriptive Latina-centered roles not confined by conventional patriarchal and, I might add, US dominant ideological standards. Unlike the more formulaic roles often assigned to Latinas in commercial theatre, such as housemaid or prostitute, in *American Mariachi* the Latina actors portray characters with whom many spectators can identify. The principal character, Lucha, does indeed interpret a traditional female role of caretaker for both her mother and father, yet she also plans to continue her studies to become a nurse, and Soyla, the *colombiana*, is a divorcee and proprietor of her own establishment, the aptly named Salón Superior de Soyla. Isabel seeks inclusion in the all-female mariachi band as a means of repositioning her entrenched designation of a modest, self-negating wife and mother-to-be. She struggles with the silencing of her voice and her anticipated gendered role as a married housewife, i.e., someone who is not exactly involved with public performances and most certainly not with a male-dominated musical genre such as mariachi music. This repertoire of progressive-minded and

culturally proud female characters in *American Mariachi* performs alternatives to normative feminized behavior, pushes the boundaries of machista conventions, and challenges a concept of gender socialization based solely on biological difference.

From the onset of the play, we witness Latinas grappling with machista attitudes and cultural norms based on socially authorized and reiterated gender roles. As one example, Boli shares an unsettling experience from when she was employed as a hotel maid and her supervisor's son made inappropriate and unsolicited sexual advances. When Boli indignantly refuses his advances, she loses her job, but the son remains unchastised. She explains, "Yup, the boss' son came into a hotel room I was cleaning and he grabbed my ass, again. Can you believe the *cojones*? I told that privileged Wonder Bread Casanova to go fu—"13 and later, "Then, when I go to clock out, his old man tells me not to come back 'cause I don't have a 'good work attitude.'"14 In the same scene, Boli asks Federico, Lucha's father, if she can "tag along" with him to observe his mariachi performance at a bar. Federico's reply exemplifies a recognized social attitude of

13 Cruz-González, *American Mariachi*, 8.

14 *Ibid.*, 9.

women’s place in a machista society: “Proper women don’t go into bars.”¹⁵ Boli’s quick response provides a hint of what is to come, “Times are a changing, *tío*.”¹⁶ As another example, Isabel’s husband, Mateo, described by the playwright as someone who “struggles with the traditions of ‘Macho’ culture and his love for his wife,”¹⁷ displays some rather telling attitudes about not just women, but men as well. When Mateo discovers that Isabel is clandestinely meeting with other Latinas to form a mariachi band, he angrily retorts, “¿*Mariachi*? Do you know what people say about mariachis? That they’re drunks and womanizers. So, what would that make the women?”¹⁸ According to Mateo, “proper” women do not participate in a culture of mariachi music because this male-entitled space is saturated with individuals who consume too much alcohol and mistreat women. Boli, who is always quick to recognize machista inferences, replies with a cheeky quip, “*Órale*, are you calling us prostitutes!?”¹⁹

The female characters in *American Mariachi* break the boundaries of female sexuality and ingeniously succeed in challenging a naturalized binary construct where men portray the oppressive, macho force and women embody a submissive role. As a result, these characters expose that same binary construct as a performance. Nonetheless, I must submit that Lucha’s path to inclusion in an all-male tradition does not end with a transformation of a macho mythos that is deeply enshrined in cultural tradition and patriarchal imperatives. Fully mindful that her own father would not approve of her forming an all-female mariachi band, Lucha finds that she must seek out the help of a *male* family acquaintance, her godfather Mino. Through Mino’s guidance, patience, and mentoring, Lucha and the other female band members can (re)connect with their roots and embrace a male-tradition to which they had no prior access. On the one hand, to transgress these prescribed roles, Lucha and her companions require a male’s assistance because, apparently, entry into the macho autonomy of mariachi music must be sanctified by males. Mino reminds Boli that “Mariachi is passed on from father to son. Forget

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15 Ibid., 10.
 16 Ibid., 10.
 17 Ibid., 1.
 18 Ibid., 30.
 19 Ibid., 10.

about it. Women can’t be mariachis.”²⁰ On the other hand, Mino’s role is not saturated with macho pride and masculine exposition. He serves instead as a guide into the tradition of mariachi music, a necessary guide for the all-female band to achieve any level of success. Mino’s various remarks to the group serve as an inspiration: “You have to pay attention and work together. The music has to flow through your soul.”²¹ As evidenced in the following exchange, Mino attempts to instruct the women to play as proper mariachi musicians, without allowing any exceptions for their gender:

MINO:

Mariachi requires sacrifice and discipline. You have to practice every day, ladies.

SOYLA:

Everyday? [sic]

BOLI:

The neighbors complain.

ISABEL:

My husband’s suspicious.

GABBY:

If my uncle Manny finds out—

MINO:

Excuses, excuses, *ya basta!* Have you ladies ever truly studied how mariachis play? The way they talk to one another without speaking? How their instruments complement one another and fit together in perfect time?

LUCHA, BOLI, GABBY, ISABEL, SOYLA:

No.

SOYLA:

We only see them at family parties or in the movies.

ISABEL:

We’re never allowed in bars.

MINO:

You’re musicians now. You have to see it from that point of view.

(beat, to himself)

MINO, continued:

Okay. We’re going on a field trip.

.....

20 Ibid., 51.

21 Ibid., 75.

SOYLA:

If I knew we were going out, I would have put on some make-up.²²

Throughout the process of learning to embrace a mariachi role, the women are not reconfigured as machos. Isabel is keenly aware of the risks she faces with joining the group, “My husband’s suspicious,” and reminds audiences that “We’re never allowed in bars.” Soyla elicits laughter from spectators with her comment about putting on make-up. These modest but critical statements remind us that the five struggling mariachi members are females dealing with the same gender biases and expectations as Latinas.

Moreover, Cruz González sprinkles some laughter-inducing comments throughout the scenes, cleverly using humor to invite spectators to explore and criticize a potentially contentious topic of machismo. Some of the humor foregrounds Latinas’ attitudes about male-centered concepts, attitudes that unquestionably need to and should be expressed more often in public settings. When Lucha ultimately convinces Mino to guide the Latinas on their journey to becoming mariachis, Lucha brings him a violin in need of repair that once belonged to her *tía* Carmen. The scene ends with the following conversation between Mino, Lucha, and Boli:

MINO:

I’ll see what I can do. (*taking violin*) May *Santa Cecilia* have mercy on us.
(*Mino exits.*)

BOLI:

Who’s *Santa Cecilia*?

LUCHA:

She’s the patron saint of mariachis, *fregona*.

BOLI:

It figures. She’s a woman, a saint, dead, and she’s still looking after men.²³

Eliciting abundant laughter from the audience, Boli’s comment about the patron saint, Santa Cecilia, is ironic on two levels: a female saint, not a male one, represents the male-enshrined icon of mariachi music and, while the female saint has long passed away, Boli finds irony in the fact that even in death, women are expected to care for men.

22 Ibid., 76–77.

23 Ibid., 65.

The persistence of machismo, prevalent in so many cultures, leads me to question the complexities involved in reconstituting a macho ideology as not static but instead as performative and transformational. How can we transgress socially accepted systematic beliefs of machismo? In “El Macho: How the Women of Teatro Luna Became Men,” Paloma Martínez-Cruz and Liza Ann Acosta justly argue that machismo is a “process of socialization” passed down from generation to generation and reinforced by societal pressures, including social media and personal relations.²⁴ Further, in Teatro Luna’s performances, this concept of machismo and gender is staged as “a political act that ultimately awakens audience members to their own complicity in the construal of machismo: the revelation that gender is a ritual, rather than a biological imperative, implies that we are each an officiant laying down the liturgy of el macho.”²⁵ In *American Mariachi*, the aforementioned “process of socialization” is ultimately called into question, and a concept of gender as a ritual or a performance — to borrow from Judith Butler’s groundbreaking work on gender performance — rather than biological determination, is presented to audience members to incite meaningful speculation. Both Mateo and Federico must come to terms with their macho attitudes or risk losing a loved one. For Mateo, this means recognizing that his gender practices are perhaps an echo of his own father’s ideals. In the following exchange, Isabel ultimately decides to confront Mateo about his entrenched positions on love and marriage:

MATEO:

You’ve been acting so strange lately.

ISABEL:

Me? You’re always hovering over me. “The dish towel goes here. That’s how my mom does it.” “How come you never use starch on my clothes?” “Why do you have to wear make-up to choir practice?”²⁶

In this scene, Isabel insists that Mateo recognize his perpetuation of a series of learned attitudes and expectations.

24 Paloma Martínez-Cruz and Liza Ann Acosta, “El Macho: How the Women of Teatro Luna Became Men,” in *Performing the US Latina & Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. Garcia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 283.

25 Martínez-Cruz and Acosta, “El Macho: How the Women of Teatro Luna Became Men,” 284.

26 Cruz-González, *American Mariachi*, 79.

Eventually Isabel asks Mateo, “Why can’t I have both?”²⁷ reminding spectators that female participation in activities outside conventional roles is often not a matter of choice — women must follow the socially scripted path assigned to their gender. Isabel’s question similarly prompts spectators to consider whether being a housewife and mother is mutually exclusive with being a mariachi musician — or any other form of public performer.

On a similar trajectory of self-discovery, Federico eventually is forced to reconsider his own faults, including the mistake of wrongly accusing his wife and close family acquaintance (who happens to be Lucha’s guide into the mariachi world, Mino) of having an illicit affair. In the following scene, we realize Amalia (Lucha’s mother) has passed away before Lucha and her mariachi group had the opportunity to perform the lost song for her. At this point in the play, Federico recognizes that he must learn to listen and adapt to his only daughter’s wishes before he loses her, too.

LUCHA:

I’m going to finish school and I’m going to keep playing mariachi.

FEDERICO:

Yes... Before your *mamá* passed, we made our peace. I listened. I heard you. I am a blind and stupid fool.
(*Federico starts to exit.*)

LUCHA:

‘Apá, would you and your mariachis like to join us?’

FEDERICO:

You want me to play with you?

LUCHA:

It would’ve made ‘Amá happy.

FEDERICO:

(*beat, calling out*)
Muchachos, los mariachis have invited us to play with them.²⁸

Federico’s macho pride and his insistence on upholding long-standing traditions are replaced with a desire to maintain a close relationship with his only daughter. Family is still important to Federico, but concepts of gender identity — especially machismo — loyalty, and sacrifice

27 Ibid., 81.

28 Ibid., 107.

are re-envisioned. Federico begins to understand that his macho attitude denied him years of a loving relationship with his wife, and it may do the same with his daughter. When Lucha invites Federico to play with her mariachi group, Federico not only accepts her offer but also bestows upon Lucha’s band the male-sanctified title of ‘los mariachis’ and insists that his fellow male band members, who are reluctant at first, perform with the women. “LOS MUCHACHOS. *No, jefe, con las mujeres, no.* FEDERICO. ¡Váyanse, pues! (*They start to go.*) FEDERICO. And you can find yourselves another group.”²⁹ Rather than risk breaking up Federico’s band, the members decide to join in the musical performance, and the play closes with Amalia’s rediscovered song being performed by a multi-gendered mariachi band including both Amalia’s daughter and her reconciled husband.

By the closing act of *American Mariachi*, an understanding of machismo is revealed not as a static repetition of male rights and privileges and a reiteration of norms, but instead as a dynamic, culturally embedded, and gendered experience with a distinct possibility of becoming something beyond the anticipated and accepted limits. The characters, humor, and iconic Latinx images in Cruz Gonzalez’s *American Mariachi* serve to create a convivial space in which spectators and readers can critically engage in a process of gender reconceptualization without sacrificing family and tradition. During the Goodman’s performance, audiences embraced their own culture on stage and became what Jill Dolan refers to in *Utopia in Performance* “participating citizens,” that particular moment when “audiences or participants feel themselves become part of the whole in an organic, nearly spiritual way.”³⁰ Using mariachi music, iconic images such as the Catrina, the Spanish language, and more, *American Mariachi* gives prominence to a community of Mexican and pan-Latinx experiences where a long-standing concept of machismo is exposed as a false sense of male entitlement and replaced instead with gender fluidity and female enfranchisement. ♦

29 Ibid., 108.

30 Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 11.

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“To Infinite Possibilities”: An Interview with Muffie Delgado Connelly and Tahni Holt

Interview by Kate Bredeson



Figure 1: Muffie Delgado Connelly in *Pulse Mountain*. Music Composition by Luke Wyland and Maxx Katz, Costume Design by Annie Novotny and Chloe Cox, Lighting Design by Jeff Forbes, and Dramaturgy by Kate Bredeson. Photo by Chelsea Petrakis.

On August 15, 2022, Portland, Oregon-based dancer-choreographers and community-makers Muffie Delgado Connelly, Tahni Holt, and I discussed their dance collaboration *Pulse Mountain*, for which I am the dramaturg. *Pulse Mountain* is an episodically-structured duet dance that celebrates the freedom of youth alongside the potential of aging and decay. Originally scheduled to premiere on July 21, 2022 at Building Five in northwest Portland, *Pulse Mountain* was delayed by a month due to COVID. We took advantage of the unexpected pause in production to think about this new work and the process of making it. Before we started our formal conversation, we chatted about Delgado Connelly’s work as choreographer on the production of *Tick, Tick, BOOM!* at Portland Center Stage, which opened shortly after our conversation, and how narrative and music as dramaturgical devices invite audiences to think and feel. Our discussion then segued into *Pulse Mountain*. We talked about questions of colonialism and identity in making work, source material, rehearsal and the pandemic, spectators, and collaboration, among other subjects. What follows is an edited version of our interview.

TAHNI HOLT:

Theatrical devices are in dance, too, of course: how do you get an audience to feel? So much of my work in the past really cared about this kind of expectation, and cared about skewing it, and messing with it, and not wanting to give that to an audience. My work wanted to make the audience members strive a little harder instead of giving them the formula. Maybe this was in part because I was never good at the formula. Just knowing the formula was there — it was something that I did go up against. In *Pulse Mountain*, and in working with you, Muffie, and with our previous work on *Sensation/Disorientation* in 2016-17, I’ve felt a chance to revel in not caring about any of that anymore — the devices.¹ And I love that.

¹ *Sensation/Disorientation*, choreography by Tahni Holt, featured Muffie Delgado Connelly in the company, and Kate Bredeson as dramaturg. White Bird presented the work in January 2017 in the Diver Studio Theatre at Reed College.

In this way, *Pulse Mountain* has been such a pleasure because it brings me back to childhood when the formal intentions weren't super loud; those devices weren't well-known to me at that point, and as a result, my kid self actually got swept up in the unexpected. Working on *Pulse Mountain* through COVID, all those formal things — rehearsal processes, expectations, dramatic structure, even the question of if or when there will be a public performance — just got quiet. All of that hasn't been what is concerning to me about this work in any way. Which brings me to the kid part of it — this is a dance about returning in part to the feeling of being a kid, all of that joy and wonder and freedom I found in the dance studios of my youth. And it's about the celebration of dance as opposed to big questions of how we push things one way or another for those in our audiences. Of course, there are things we're trying to disrupt and interrupt. But it's not structure, devices, and feelings. *Pulse Mountain* is about the craft of making.

KATE BREDESON:

Can you talk about the role of the spectators in this work?

TAHNI:

I notice how you, Kate, use the word spectator a lot. That's not how I experience our audience. Spectator makes me think of people watching something. And there's something about the way Muffie and I — because I think we intersect here —

MUFFIE DELGADO CONNELLY:

We do — from different perspectives —

TAHNI:

For me, it feels like a mycelium inclusion, where we are trying to break down and absorb organic matter to use as fuel for each other, the work, and our communities.

MUFFIE:

Yes, we're working in relation to each other, and to those who join us in our work. We work with their energetic bodies; they contribute to *Pulse Mountain* in the same way that the building in which we rehearse and perform — the beautiful and industrial Building Five — with its vast open and soaring space — contributes to the work. The land that we're standing on contributes to the work. We're working in relation to each other as artists and people, and to the music, the costumes, and to the time that led up to us being together. It's all in relationship to the work.

KATE:

When I use the word spectator, I don't mean to indicate a passive watcher. I mean it to describe an active participant, like Anne Bogart or Bertolt Brecht propose. To me, spectating is participating in presence and energy.

MUFFIE:

When you, Tahni, first talked about your work, and skewing things, and how people have to work a little bit more to be able to engage with the work, I was thinking about how radical that is — just the idea that the audience has to participate at all. To meet the artist anywhere in the work is, to me, a very decolonial principle. I love that the audience members are not there to just be performed for, that the artist is not supposed to be doing all of the labor to entertain, to give the audience members what they're supposed to like. Even though this isn't a new concept and there are a lot of artists and writers who have talked about this, I still think it's a far less common practice than people would like to think.

KATE:

That goes back to what we were just talking about with the formula for musicals, and theatre and dance, and there are certainly exceptions to those formulas, but they are used so often. What we are talking about is what is the role of the audience, or spectators, and are we interested in people passively ingesting the work, or being provoked or challenged by it through active engagement and participation?

MUFFIE:

I think I'm still questioning this. For me, it's an evolving part of our research, but I do feel like as we approach the performance of *Pulse Mountain*, there's an invitation to meet halfway. This work feels like an invitation. We talk a lot about welcoming. I want the audience to feel welcomed and absorbed into the space.

TAHNI:

Yes, what you're talking about is exactly the work, and it's not about being concerned with the comfortable and familiar tropes. Instead, our central question is: how do we invite ourselves here to this space, this process, and this work right now. Then, how do we invite all of us — audience members, spectators, our collaborators, and our community — here, now? How are we welcoming people in a particular way? I don't know if it's going to be successful. I



Figure II: Muffie Delgado Connelly and Tahni Holt in *Pulse Mountain*. Music Composition by Luke Wyland and Maxx Katz, Costume Design by Annie Novotny and Chloe Cox, Lighting Design by Jeff Forbes, and Dramaturgy by Kate Bredeson. Photo by Chelsea Petrakis.

don't think pushing people out of the work, or making them work extra hard, is what we are doing.

MUFFIE:

Welcoming is a very important part of what we are doing.

TAHNI:

Going back to musicals, since you're working on one right now, Muffie, in *Pulse Mountain* we're using our voices, and our voices are being used in really beautiful ways, even though neither one of us are professional singers. So there's a naïveté to it as well, something un-crafted. But we're not using this lack of polish as a device to push people out of the performance.

MUFFIE:

I can only speak from my perspective. There is something for me that feels like a privilege I see in white culture — and white feminism in particular — of being able to push back in a particular way. And that feels untruthful to me, and to a lot of people of color. That pushing back for a white person, and a white woman in particular, is a very true expression, but it doesn't feel anywhere in relation to the kind of things that I push up against. *Pulse Mountain* is in relation to this question, and this difference. In order for there to be space for me in the performance, and for my truth to be in the performance, Tahni and I are navigating a way for this truth to exist. This is all part of the answer to the question about

what *Pulse Mountain* is trying to do. We are trying to move beyond formulas to infinite possibilities, and to make space for the different kinds of true expression that exist for me and for her.

KATE:

One of the things I've noticed in the rehearsal room is the amount of source material you use: images from art and tarot, words from a variety of literary and scientific texts, songs, and so on. I see how meaningful these references are to you and how this material has given you two a clear shared vocabulary built on years of research. Can you discuss this vocabulary you have developed and how the source material has shaped your project?

TAHNI:

These sources you mention are our guides. All of our research is in relation to the guides that have come into this process. There are guides in the room, and sometimes it can be deeply spiritual. There is no need to show these to the community. The role of the guides is to help us figure out the logic of this work and to figure out what we're doing together. We call them in. That's the deep research that has been transpiring, and that's how we've mapped out the work. They're not supposed to be seen. Instead, they are part of the layers of what is happening. One example that we're open to sharing is the Crone.

KATE:

What is the Crone to you?

TAHNI:

The Crone has traveled through a life, has traveled through many lives. They are deeply rooted in who they are.

MUFFIE:

And we're learning. We're not there yet.

KATE:

We started this conversation talking about what it's like to be a kid and now we are talking about the Crone.

MUFFIE:

The Crone is timeless. It feels like we have been dancing with all ages and all times, including pre-human life and form, post-human life and form, and into pasts and futures. The work is definitely living in relation to all of that in time and space.

KATE:

What is the origin story of *Pulse Mountain*? When did the seeds of this, and you two as collaborators, start?

TAHNI:

2016 in *Sensation/Disorientation* is when the seeds of Muffie and Tahni intersected.

MUFFIE:

We wouldn't be doing this process if we hadn't left off with *Sensation/Disorientation* when and where we did. We had a very long intense process of over a year with it, and I remember finishing it and feeling like there was unfinished work between us. I definitely left *Sensation/Disorientation* feeling like I had a lot of questions. In that project we were such a group, an amoeba, and my flavor was so specific that I had to do a lot of anchoring towards the group. I was very curious about what the possibilities and potentials could be if I didn't have to do all of that labor towards and with the group. And then Tahni came to me about doing this new project. It was originally Tahni's work before it became a collaborative process, and initially I was coming on to Tahni's project. And we started building a rehearsal process.

TAHNI:

You said no at first.

MUFFIE:

I did! That had everything to do with my positionality. Colonialism is a super real thing that works full time against me having time and space to work on my own voice and vision. So it's a thing that I'm constantly having to negotiate; it feels like quicksand. I'm constantly asking: how do I do this? Where do I go next? Where's the place where I get to work on this project and have this resource in this space? So in general, I'm always trying to say no to everything. When Tahni asked if I wanted to work on a project, I said I have to make space for my work right now.

TAHNI:

After *Sensation/Disorientation* I also felt like there just had to be a world in which Muffie and I got to work together again. I felt that very strongly, and I knew at the time that the only way to make that happen was to get some sort of funding and to invite you in. It wasn't that I wanted to do this as my project. I saw you working on a very particular part of your own voice and work that really didn't include me.

KATE:

Muffie, when did it shift from a feeling of you participating in Tahni's work to something else?

MUFFIE:

That was how it started, and then it shifted when we let go of crafting a formal piece, and this was when everything was cancelled early in 2020 due to COVID. Then it just became a rehearsal process. We thought, well, we've already got this rehearsal time and space carved out in our lives. The whole world is shut down. And both of us were at home being full time parents and full-time teachers to our kids.

TAHNI:

Home, stuck, full-time.

MUFFIE:

So we asked: "Do we want to stop coming in here and rolling around together?"

MUFFIE & TAHNI:

Absolutely not!

MUFFIE:

This was when things shifted. And things cracked open for us.



Figure III: Tahni Holt and Muffie Delgado Connelly in *Pulse Mountain*. Music Composition by Luke Wyland and Maxx Katz, Costume Design by Annie Novotny and Chloe Cox, Lighting Design by Jeff Forbes, and Dramaturgy by Kate Bredeson. Photo by Chelsea Petrakis.

TAHNI:

It was such a relief for me. This working relationship was so much more than what I was asking for or wanting.

MUFFIE:

It is a collaboration, with all that a collaboration entails. There are very real dynamics that we are always navigating that feel tricky. And it's real slippery on my end. I don't know how it feels for you, Tahni, probably slippery, too, and on my end, it feels real slippery sometimes. Sometimes I can talk myself out of feeling like I'm truly in the room,

KATE:

In *Sensation/Disorientation* there were always six or seven people, maybe eight in the room, and it's really different when it's just two.

TAHNI:

You can't disappear when there are two people.

MUFFIE:

There have been a lot of shifting dynamics around Tahni and me getting comfortable and making space for each other in a way where we can fully show up, and also having a thorough enough communication process and a deep enough friendship to be able to have real honesty. Sometimes Tahni says, "I've got to make space for you. So I'm going to back up," and I say, "I actually need you

to support me right now. If you want to support me, you actually step forward and take over in this moment." It's crucial that we can toss the baton back and forth in that way, and to be able to say what one of us needs in the moment, which is something with which we all struggle. Sometimes, according to where we are, Tahni can fully be in the lead, and it can look like it's her project, but that's a decision we're making together. And sometimes it launches over to me. We hold different places.

TAHNI:

What I love so deeply about the creation of *Pulse Mountain* is how much I learn about myself, and our friendship and collaboration, Muffie. You, Muffie, bring in the light. It's incredible to be able to truly collaborate like this. When you talked about how to say what you really need — that type of space is so vulnerable. There's a huge vulnerability to that. I'm very good at not showing up for it. If I want to, I can pretend to have that vulnerability. I remember this conversation we had once where I said, I don't know if I can do something. And you said, "You don't have to do it." There was something about you releasing me from having to do it that allowed me to move forward.

MUFFIE:

There has been a lot of that over the past few years. Time was really on our side. *Pulse Mountain* needed this time. It needed a lot of time.

KATE:

Thinking about process and collaboration and time, can you both talk in a bigger picture way about what you are interested in now as artists? What are the things that are core to you as people and artists, especially in response to the past few years, and how is this reflected in *Pulse Mountain*?

MUFFIE:

My work is largely invisible in the world. It really exists between the people who are closest to me and myself. The work that makes it out onto a stage is pretty far removed from my own actual work that I undertake in my own practice. So, for me, what's most exciting about *Pulse Mountain*, and what's interesting to me about it, and what I'm most proud of, is not only what is going to be seen in the community, but what Tahni and I have built between us. That's what will remain when this work is over. It's what *Pulse Mountain* is doing, and how it will continue to impact dance, our lives as individuals, and the people with whom we work in our somatic practices, and how it's going to be passed on through FLOCK, the dance center that Tahni founded in 2014, and where we are now two of four co-stewards. In this way, *Pulse Mountain* makes me think about the future. My hope is that the people who come to see *Pulse Mountain* get to feel and experience some of our shared impulse to collaborate and look forward.

TAHNI:

Yes. There's something about this collaborative process with Muffie that is the future. There's something about the process as we've experienced in the last nearly three years, and how this is the only way forward. It's a lifetime of learning and unlearning. There's something about this that is the flower of this performance.

MUFFIE:

I love that.

TAHNI:

This performance is like how there are all these roots of the flower. Then this flower arrives. It only arrives because of all that planting and watering and sun and composting. Something about this performance cycles into all of that. Like the mycelium inclusion. I guess that's what feels a bit futuristic to me about *Pulse Mountain*. The audience members feel the process of making the work. At least that's what I hope.

MUFFIE:

Maybe subtly. Maybe very subtly.

TAHNI:

For me, in *Pulse Mountain*, and more broadly, it feels like the world is swelling. And that is in the work.

KATE:

We were set to open on July 21 and then we shut down due to COVID. As you've been reflecting on and living in the pause since late July, is anything new that you've discovered?

TAHNI:

I immediately went into my way of being and said, "This just sucks." And Muffie said, "It will all work out, it will happen when it's supposed to happen." And then it was fine. I had this sense of responsibility for the crews and the financial responsibility. All this stuff was feeling very like a pressure cooker. And then Muffie said it will happen at the beginning of October, and I said it can't work out then, and then it did.

MUFFIE:

In July, we felt ready. I was really proud of us. And, still, some more time wouldn't hurt. And having more time together with Maxx and Luke, the musicians, and you, the dramaturg. And now we have an extra month.

KATE:

I'm really struck in this conversation of thinking about kids, the Crone, age, and time, and how having more time with all of this feels like part of the fabric of the work. What you're describing about this multi-year journey, reveling in the process, it feels like part of the work.

MUFFIE:

It is a shape-shifting, responsive and adaptive work that at every step of the way between January 2020 and until now became what it needed to be for every season. It wasn't just COVID. There were many political events, racial revelations, a lot of uncovering of truths that came out in the world, Trump, #metoo, the Portland Protests, the fires, Kavanaugh, abortion rights, and we were a part of all of this. *Pulse Mountain* became good at adapting to what we needed it to be, and it has been a life preserver for us. This work didn't have the privilege of just being a dance piece. There was too much real-life shit going on. And so, whatever it needs to be, that's what it's going to be.

We've used the image of both islands and planets to think about *Pulse Mountain*. In rehearsal, we'd talk about moving from one planet to another. And then the work shape-shifts, and in this conversation, it's a flower. Astrologer Renee Sills talks about water, and we see a lot of water in this work. She was talking about how fascinating water is because it can be a river, and then an iceberg, and then a cloud, and now it's in your blood. *Pulse Mountain* feels like this. It's a shapeshifter.

KATE:

So much of this process was mostly just the two of you, and then as we ramped up in July, musicians Maxx Katz and Luke Wyland, and me as dramaturg, and lighting designer Jeff Forbes, and costume designers Annie Novotny and Chloe Cox, all showed up to join you. Can you talk about what adding in these elements brings to what had largely been a two-person process?

TAHNI:

It brings this feeling of "Oh, this is actually going to happen! There is a form to this thing! Now we get to make a shape out of it at this moment!" and that's super exciting. We felt that all of these people were gifts. I have so much gratitude for everyone that has been a part of *Pulse Mountain*, and I felt so much gratitude for people who bought tickets. We couldn't have people involved along the way due to COVID — we didn't even know if there would be a public performance — and then, when the process opened up and our collaborators joined us it was like being showered with all these gifts from other people, and the gifts were a loud, "Yes," with people saying that they wanted to be on this team.

MUFFIE:

It amplified how I feel like *Pulse Mountain*, as a process and a performance, is a practice of "yes." It's a pleasure practice. That's what this work is, and so that's what happens when you put that vibration out; it comes back. It's a pulse mountain — that pleasure, that pulsation of energy is the center of this work. That's what this is.

Pulse Mountain played October 6-8, 2022 at Building Five in Portland, Oregon. *Pulse Mountain* is Muffie Delgado Connelly and Tahni Holt, Music Composition by Luke Wyland and Maxx Katz, Costume Design by Annie Novotny and Chloe Cox, Lighting Design by Jeff Forbes, and Dramaturgy by Kate Bredeson. ♦

KATE BREDESON (she/her) is a dramaturg, a director, and a theatre historian. Her project as a scholar and artist is to research, write about, and practice the ways in which performance can be a tool for radical activism and protest. As a dramaturg, she worked with Tahni Holt on *Rubble Bodies* (2018) and *Sensation/Disorientation* (2017), and is the recipient of two national dramaturgy fellowships from the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas: the 2011 Residency Grant, and the 2016-17 Mark Bly Creative Fellowship. The Bly Fellowship is what launched her work with Holt and Delgado Connelly. Her book *Occupying the Stage: The Theater of May '68* is published by Northwestern (2018). She is currently at work editing anarchist theatre director Judith Malina's lifetime diaries. Kate is Professor of Theatre at Reed College.

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TAHNI HOLT (she/they) is a dance artist whose career is devoted and in service to dance through performance, teaching, community gathering, ongoing collaborations, and somatic studies. Holt's work invites ongoing states of mystery and unknowing to reside in the liminal space, where unraveling is not a marker of failure but one of great power and intrigue. Her choreographic work has been performed throughout the U.S at On the Boards (Seattle), Fusebox Festival (Austin), The Lucky Penny (Atlanta), DiverseWorks (Houston), Velocity Dance (Seattle), and PICA's TBA Festival (Portland). She is founder of FLOCK Dance Center, for which she is now one of four FLOCK stewards. With Luke Wyland, she runs It's a Fucking Miracle, a popup dance class. Holt is a certified Alexander Technique teacher and mother.

[WEBSITE](#)

MUFFIE DELGADO CONNELLY (she/her) is a dance artist, movement researcher, teacher, and somatic practitioner. Her movement work is part of her activist practice, and in both arenas, she is informed by her identity as a Chicago-born Xicana mother. Her work as a performer and choreographer has been presented across the United States at Links Hall (Chicago), Packer Schopf Gallery (Chicago), The Art Institute of Chicago, Movement Research Festival (New York), The Gibney Dance Center (New York), and in Portland at White Bird, Performance Works Northwest, the Newmark Theater, and Portland Center Stage. She is a yearly guest teacher at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Delgado Connelly is one of four artistic leaders of dance center FLOCK.

[WEBSITE](#)

Genealogy of Minstrelsy in BIPOC Broadway Hits: *In Dabomey*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *Hamilton: An American Musical*

by Megan E. Geigner

“...white audiences and audiences of color have dramatically different experiences watching the same play.”

Newspaper articles and social media posts abounded when actress Tonya Pinkins, who was playing Lena in a 2022 revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin the Sun* at the Public Theater, published an open letter to *The New York Times* theatre critic Jesse Green in response to his review of the production. The show ran from September to November of 2022 and was the first off-Broadway revival of the play since its debut in 1959. In his review, Green identified Walter Lee as the play's protagonist, to which Pinkins asked Green, "What play did you see? A cursory view of the director's playbill notes explicitly that this production's intent is to center the three women because [the director] asked, 'Why is a play by a queer Black woman with four Black women characters known as a play about a Black man's dreams?'"¹ Indeed, scholars familiar with Hansberry's other writing suggest that *A Raisin in the Sun* detours from her politics. As Soyica Diggs Colbert writes in *Radical Revision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*, "The success of *A Raisin in the Sun*, a family drama, constrained her public image [...as that] of a liberal darling rather than a radical."² While Pinkins argues that Green (and others) could not understand the play due to misogynoir, or the inability for audiences to see Black women as main characters, which is no doubt true, there is more happening here that reveals the incongruity between Hansberry's script and how white audiences receive it. Robert O'Hara directed the production; as a playwright and director, O'Hara often toys with assumptions of the white gaze. He brought this sensibility to *A Raisin in the Sun* by having

1 Tonya Pinkins, "Open Letter To Jesse Green of the New York Times: An Apologia Pro Vita Lena Younger." [ZORA Medium](#), November 12, 2022.

2 Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Radical Revision: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 14.

Walter Lee directly address the audience near the end of the play when he engages in a moment of minstrelsy, saying “O, yassuh boss! Yassssuh, Great white Father!” Greene criticized this choice by saying that O’Hara made the character “step completely out of the frame of the play [...to turn] a horrifying speech into a brutal moment of minstrelsy.”³ This was not a moment “outside the play,” however, but one of the few moments that Hansberry’s radical politics shine in the play — a moment where she uses white audiences’ familiarity with minstrelsy to comment back to them.

Hansberry is one of many American playwrights of color to use minstrel conventions to subvert white audience expectations. Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter’s *Hamilton: An American Musical* makes similar moves. While many heralded the blockbuster musical for providing a radical racial reimaging of the founding of the United States, where marginalized populations come center stage (literally) to discuss America in their own vernacular, and for its successful color-conscious casting, others have focused on its failures. Like Pinkins’ feminist critique of *The New York Times* review, Stacy Wolf, among others, sees *Hamilton* as anti-feminist (all three women characters exist only within their heterosexual relation to Hamilton).⁴ Historian Lyra D. Monteiro disputes the color-conscious casting because it asks actors of color to inhabit racist historical figures who founded a country built on and upheld by white supremacy.⁵ And yet, *Hamilton* is one of the highest grossing musicals of Broadway’s history and was one of a handful of shows to perform well throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶

Considering these critiques of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Hamilton*, I trace a lineage of Broadway hits written by and starring actors of color that make use of minstrelsy to encode different responses from Black and white

3 Jesse Green, “Review: This Time, ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ Really Does Explode” *New York Times*, October 25, 2022.

4 Stacy Wolf, “Hamilton” *The Feminist Spectator*, February 24, 2016; and James McMaster, “Why *Hamilton* is Not the Revolution You Think it is.” *Howlround*, February 23, 2016.

5 Lyra D. Monteiro, “Race-Conscious Casting and The Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*,” *The Public Historian* 38 no.1 (2016): 89-98.

6 Thom Geier, “17 Top-Grossing Broadway Musicals of All Time, From ‘Hamilton’ to ‘The Lion King,’” *The Wrap*, October 15, 2020. It is worth noting that *The Lion King* is the highest grossing musical of all time. The play features Black actors playing animal characters.

audiences. *In Dahomey* (1903), *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) use minstrel conventions such as racial caricatures and dramatic act structure to appeal to white viewers, while stealthily critiquing US racial politics. This results in crossviewing, the idea that white audiences and audiences of color have dramatically different experiences watching the same play.⁷

IN DAHOMEY: MINSTRELSY AND THE EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY REVUE

In Dahomey was the first all-Black musical on Broadway, and it was a blackface minstrel show. The show’s stars, Bert Williams (1874–1922) and George Walker (1872-1911), were a longstanding minstrel circuit duo, with Williams corking up in blackface to play rural Jim Crow characters and Walker playing Zip Coon characters.⁸ Taking this duo to Broadway was a recipe for success; the musical, written by Jesse Shipp, Will Marion Cook, and Paul Laurence Dunbar played for fifty-three performances, transferring theatres and finally moving to London.⁹ Most of the show is a vehicle for vaudeville patter between Williams and Walker, playing their Jim Crow and Zip Coon personas, and the show demonstrates the tight line of appealing to white and Black audiences alike. As Camille Forbes argues in her article “Dancing with ‘Racial Feet,’” white audiences clamored for extant stereotypes while Black audiences “desir[ed] the vindication of the Black subject through ‘niceties’ aimed at overturning those stereotypes.”¹⁰ *In Dahomey* does both, setting a precedent for later Broadway shows about US racial politics.

In Dahomey appealed to white audiences with its recognizable three-act minstrel show structure, a cakewalk number, and perhaps most explicitly, the use of stock characters. Williams played Shylock, as a Jim Crow stock character that depicted Black men as lazy, ignorant, and

7 Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

8 For more on Williams and Walker’s partnership see Camille F. Forbes “Dancing with ‘Racial Feet’: Bert Williams and the Performance of Blackness.” *Theatre Journal*, 56, no. 4 (2004): 604. For more on the Jim Crow and Zip Coon minstrel characters see Eric Lott, “Blackface and Blackness: The Minstrel Show in American Culture.” *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, edited by AnneMarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 10.

9 David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre: 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 67.

10 Forbes, “Dancing with ‘Racial Feet,’”607.

superstitious. Walker played Rareback, the Zip Coon character, a stock character that suggested Black men are untrustworthy grifters. The character of Cicero Lightfoot also depicted a common minstrel character: the former slave who misses being enslaved. White audiences in 1903 would have been familiar with these characters and seen the musical as an extension of the politics of blackface minstrel shows.

At the same time, however, *In Dahomey* challenged some of the minstrel references. For example, when Shylock and Rareback meet, Rareback questions the trope of the ill-fitting Jim Crow costume, asking Shylock why he dresses that way.¹¹ Shylock explains that he is dressed poorly because he doesn't have any money and he can't find a job. These lines expose the ridiculous position Black performers found themselves in during this period, as George Walker noted at the time, wherein they had to, "imitate white performers in their make-up as 'darkies.'" Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself.¹² A similar scene happens in act two when Lightfoot laments the death of his master, and his wife scolds him for praising their former enslaver and for still referring to him as "master."¹³ Mrs. Lightfoot unsettles the minstrel trope of the plantation as the site of Black paradise, disputing an uncritical view of the real impacts of slavery. In both examples, the actors of color engage in reinscription. They are "enter[ing] into the blackface caricature and refashion[ing] it."¹⁴ Both Shylock and Lightfoot are minstrel stereotypes, but the actors and writers adjusted the roles in a way that allowed the performers to "reinscribe their 'authentic' presences over an unauthentic portrayal by whites in blackface."¹⁵ Finally, although the play follows the minstrel structure with a lavish third act filled with singing and dancing, rather than being set on a plantation, it takes place in Africa where according to the song that starts the act, "Evah darkey is a king!"¹⁶ This rousing Broadway

tune allows for crossviewing. Black audience members could enjoy the idea that they had royal roots while their white counterparts did not. White audience members, for their part, could dismiss this as minstrel silliness wherein Black performers act beyond their lowly station.

Reviews of *In Dahomey* demonstrate the paradoxical position the show held between upholding and challenging racist minstrel stereotypes and practices. White producers feared that presenting an all-Black Broadway show would cause a "race war."¹⁷ That it did not is proof that white audiences saw the stereotypes they wished to see in the

“White producers feared that presenting an all-Black Broadway show would cause a ‘race war.’”

play, even while the show critiqued them. For example, *The New York Times* praised Williams in particular for his "serious, depressed turn of countenance — dull, but possessing the deep wisdom of his kind; slow and grotesquely awkward in his movements."¹⁸ Furthermore, *The Times* commented on the color line in the auditorium, stating that the performers, music conductor, "boys who peddled water in the aisles," and audience members in the balcony "were the only persons of color."¹⁹ The reviewer also noted how unsettling the variety of complexions onstage: "The actors were dark, medium, and lights. Some of them were so light that they might have passed as white except that the flare of a nostril, the weights of an eyelid, or the delicate fullness of a lip betrayed them."²⁰ Despite having to point out the performers' position on the other side of the color line, the reviewer was also conscious of the fact that Black audiences appreciated the humor in the play that white audiences did not. Assuredly, however, the reviewer concludes that "all parties were satisfied."²¹

11 Ibid., 69.

12 Walker qtd. in Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre*, 25.

13 Jesse Shipp, Will Marion Cook, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, "In Dahomey." *Black Theatre USA Revised and Expanded Edition, Vol. 1: Plays by African Americans, The Early Period 1847 to 1938*, edited by Ted Shine and James V. Hatch. (New York: Free Press, 1996), 78.

14 Krasner, 26.

15 Ibid.

16 Shipp, Cook and Dunbar, "In Dahomey," 81.

17 "Dahomey on Broadway: Williams and Walker Make an Opening at the New York Theatre and Hold It," *New York Times*, February 19, 1903.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

As David Krasner states, “*In Dahomey* is an ideal context in which to observe African American performers balancing competing inclinations of conscious fun and purposeful agitation.”²² Black audiences could appreciate critiques of minstrelsy while white audiences could enjoy stage “darkies.” The musical’s need to appease diverse audiences set a precedent for future “exigencies of accommodation” for Black American musicals.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN: THE DOMESTIC WELL-MADE PLAY AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle best play of 1959, was nominated for four Tony awards (including best play), and played for five hundred and thirty performances. As Ben Keppel argues, the play is seen as “the quintessential ‘civil rights play’... represent[ing] an appealing and reassuring sense of what integration would entail.”²³ But like *In Dahomey* over a half-century before, *A Raisin in the Sun* presented exigencies of accommodation for adjusting not only to the dichotomies between white and Black audiences, but also between white audiences with differing opinions on civil rights. Also, similar to *In Dahomey*, *A Raisin in the Sun* incited different reactions from diverse audiences about the play’s meaning.

In 1959, many critics argued that the play — which tells the story of the difficulties a Black family faces when they buy a house in a white neighborhood in 1950s Chicago — did not specifically address Black life but rather American life in general. *The New York Times* claimed the play’s success was because “in the first fifteen minutes the audience gets colorblind and they no longer see Negroes on the stage.”²⁴ Cultural historian Robin Bernstein offered a critique of *The Times* 1959 review in 1999:

The claim that the play’s characters are universal ‘people’ without specific ties to African-American culture appears simply racist (“This is a well-written play; white people can relate to it; therefore it cannot be a black play”). Conversely, the assertion that the play is not universal but exclusively specific to African-Americans — that is, that the characters

exist outside the category of ‘human’ — seems equally racist. Upon closer examination, however, it is possible to discern both racist and anti-racist impulses in each claim.²⁵

Indeed, the Broadway debut of the play allowed white audiences to erase the Younger’s Blackness while it also made clear its critique of racist housing policies. Like the artists involved in *In Dahomey*, the play’s use of stereotypes and familiar stage conventions accommodated white audiences’ expectations.

A Raisin in the Sun’s setting provides a sense of normalcy for audiences wary about encountering a play taking on “the inflammatory topic of race relations.”²⁶ Despite being a play about Black characters leaving a Black neighborhood, audiences never see such a move happen; every scene takes place in the tenement apartment. In the original production, the set design by Ralph Alswang made clear that the space is small but lovingly decorated, emphasizing Hansberry’s description in the script that “the furnishings were actually selected with care and love, and even hope — and brought to this apartment and arranged with taste and pride.”²⁷ The original Broadway audience could feel assured that even if the Youngers do not leave, their living situation is still sufficient. Of note, the 2022 Public Theater’s production set and sound design emphasized their unacceptable living conditions, aligning more with Hansberry’s next paragraph of stage directions in the script, which reads, “Weariness has, in fact, won this room. Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often. All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished from the atmosphere of this room.”²⁸ (See Figure I).

The original Broadway production further reassured white audiences by portraying Carl Lindner, the

22 Krasner, 73.

23 Ben Keppel, *The Work of Democracy: Ralph Bunche, Kenneth B. Clarke, Lorraine Hansberry, and Cultural Politics of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 22.

24 Sam Zolotow, “‘A Raisin in the Sun’ Basks in Praise: 7 Critics Welcome Play by Miss Hansberry,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1959.

25 Robin Bernstein, “Inventing a Fishbowl: White Supremacy and the Critical Reception of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*,” *Modern Drama* 42, no. 1 (1999), 17.

26 Brooks Atkinson, “‘Raisin in the Sun’: Vivid Drama about a Poor Negro Family,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1959.

27 Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 23.

28 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 23-24. The set design by Clint Ramos included dirty, falling-down wallpaper, threadbare furniture, and wood floors in terrible condition. The sound design by Elisheba Ittoop included a moment when the audience could hear Walter Lee and Ruth having sex, suggesting that the other members of the family could hear it too as the tenement apartment provides no privacy.



Figure 1: Francois Battiste, Tonya Pinkins, and Mandi Masden in *The Public Theater* revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Photo credit: Joan Marcus.

representation of the white neighborhood association, not as a mustache-twirling villain, but as a “gentle man, thoughtful and somewhat labored in his manner” merely responding to his situation.²⁹ According to Lindner, he and the other white people in his neighborhood “deplore” the harassment that befalls “colored people” who move into white neighborhoods but blame them for their own harassment by suggesting they could avoid it by staying put.³⁰ *The New York Times* reviewer Brooks Atkinson praised Hansberry’s treatment of Lindner saying he has “as much dignity as his humiliating situation affords” and that she had the good sense to resolve “the situation not in terms of social justice but in terms of pride of a family.”³¹ In contrast, the 2022 production showed Lindner as much more sinister, another reason for *The Times* to accuse it of trafficking in the excesses of melodrama.³² Whereas Atkinson said in 1959 that Hansberry didn’t push “the big social and political issues...[but instead] concentrate[d] on the everyday problems of a family,”³³ Greene accused the 2022 production of “furiously underlining its subtleties and

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29 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 115.

30 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 116-18.

31 Atkinson, “‘Raisin in the Sun’: Vivid Drama about a Poor Negro Family.”

32 Greene, “Review: This Time, ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ Really Does Explode.”

33 Atkinson, “‘Raisin in the Sun’: Vivid Drama about a Poor Negro Family.”

downplaying its conventional strengths [...] producing a sometimes stunted result.”³⁴ These responses show that Hansberry left enough room in the script for both subtle and explicit portrayals of the play’s message about the harm of white supremacy.

The play’s treatment of Black stereotypes also eases the moral burden for white audiences. White audiences are comforted by the way that the other characters dismiss Beneatha’s commitment to the Back-to-Africa and Civil Rights movements. Walter teases her that even the “N double A C P takes a holiday sometimes!”³⁵ Walter and Lena grant white audiences permission to not take Beneatha’s social critiques seriously, which worked in 1959; Atkinson referred to Beneatha’s ideas as “belligerent racism.”³⁶ Minstrelsy also dismissed Black women, usually rendering them as ridiculous, overgrown children or mammies focused only on loving white children. Walter’s character also harkens back to minstrel depictions of gendered Black identity. He is the stereotypical volatile Black man, and he projects this image multiple times throughout the play by refusing to obey his mother or help his sister and by screaming at his wife. Furthermore,

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34 Greene, “Review: This Time, ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ Really Does Explode.”

35 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 113.

36 Atkinson, “‘Raisin in the Sun’: Vivid Drama about a Poor Negro Family.”

Walter's decision to lie to his family and invest in the liquor store also portrays him as a Zip-Coon-like schemer. That he loses the money, disappears from work and home for three days, and comes home drunk after having been at a jazz club is also reminiscent of minstrel characters.

While the play accommodates white expectations, it also challenges the status quo by forcing mixed audiences to confront American racism in the North and root for a Black family to move into a white neighborhood. Early in the play, Mama critiques Black Americans working in subservient positions saying, "My husband always said being any kind of servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hands was made to make things, or turn the earth with — not to drive nobody's car for 'em or carry they slop jars."³⁷ Many African Americans living in urban centers above the Mason-Dixon line had such jobs when the play debuted. Several characters give voice to the experience of somewhat more covert Northern racism, something Hansberry was acutely aware of.³⁸ For instance, when Mama asks if Lindner threatened them, Beneatha responds by saying "Oh — Mama — they don't do it like that anymore. He talked Brotherhood," and Ruth says that what the white neighbors fear is not that the family will eat them but "marry 'em."³⁹ Perhaps the best example of the play's request for white audiences to observe their own racism occurs when Walter says explicitly that there is a script between white and Black men that Walter can accommodate; this being the scene that Greene called "outside of the play." Walter declares that he will "put on a show" for Lindner:

Maybe I'll just get down on my black knees "Captain, Mistuh, Bossman — (*Groveling and grinning and wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation of the slow-witted movie stereotype*) A-hee-hee-hee! Oh, yassuh, boss! Yassssuh! Great white — (*voice breaking, he forces himself to go on*) — Father, just gi' ussen de money, fo' God's sake, and we's — we's ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo' white folks neighborhood.⁴⁰

37 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 103.

38 Keppel, *The Work of Democracy*, 179. According to Keppel, Hansberry told the magazine *Liberation*, "I have dealt so much on the racial problem of the South that one might suppose that I did not know that we have all the kindred rigors right here in New York. I assure you that I do know this."

39 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 121.

40 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 144.

These examples highlight the way Hansberry creates opportunities for reinscription. The actors occupy roles that white audiences expect of them but also refashion them from within. For instance, Walter's minstrel act informs his anger and frustration throughout the rest of the play. His refusal to accept Lindner's proposal at the end shows a Black man standing up against white neighborhood covenants-- and this refusal is done in a theatre filled

"...Jefferson serves not only as a reference to the top hat and tails cakewalk performers of the nineteenth century, but also to Zip Coon."

with audience members possibly benefitting from those covenants. In other words, Hansberry shows white audiences recognizable Black characters, but she also reveals the pain behind these performances and provides empathy for their rage. This disjuncture is even more striking considering that the play puts Black audiences in a position to watch white audiences watch Black pain. In this regard, Hansberry was radically unaccommodating of the white gaze. O'Hara's 2022 production went further in making explicit the pain the Youngers feel, which could account for Green's discomfort with many of the production choices.

HAMILTON: A HIP-HOP MUSICAL IN THE "POST-RACIAL" TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Hamilton: An American Musical is one of the most successful musicals in US history, but the play's accommodation of white audiences as a major pillar of its success is rarely discussed. One way the musical accommodates white audience expectations is by following conventional musical structure. It has an Aristotelian, or rising action, plot structure with a clearly defined protagonist (Aaron Burr) and antagonist (Alexander Hamilton), each of whom sings a traditional "I wish" song that tells the audience their goals: "Wait for It" (Burr) and

“My Shot” (Hamilton).⁴¹ Both Burr and Hamilton fall in love over the course of the musical, and the climax occurs when the two face-off in a duel. Likewise, *Hamilton* writers Miranda and McCarter make use of musical themes for characters (the most notable being the Brit Pop music for King George III), reprises, large act openers, and other routine aspects of musical theatre. In this way, *Hamilton* is comfortable to watch because it has the same structure as canonical musicals such as those by Cole Porter, Rogers and Hammerstein, and Andrew Lloyd Weber. Miranda and McCarter’s choice to have Burr serve as the unlikely protagonist (as the person who kills Hamilton) is also not new in popular American theatre; Peter Schaffer’s 1981 play *Amadeus* used the same device since Salieri, Amadeus’s enemy, is the protagonist and narrates the action despite the play’s title referencing the antagonist.

Many critics have pointed to the hip-hop music genre as a major innovation in *Hamilton*, but even this aspect of the musical is not revolutionary. The first musical to shift from the classic musical theatre music genre established in the mid-twentieth century to contemporary musical style was the rock musical *Hair* in 1967, followed by hits such as *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *The Wiz* in the 1970s. Furthermore, in addition to Pharcyde, the 1990s rap group, Miranda lists Jonathan Larson’s 1996 *Rent* as a major influence on his work because it featured contemporary artists who sounded as though they lived in “the now” of “grunge rock” in New York.⁴² *Hamilton* is not Miranda’s first hip-hop musical; his *In the Heights* debuted in 2008. Rock, grunge, and hip-hop musicals aside, musical theatre has, since its inception in the early-twentieth century, been a site of contemporary music. In addition to the handful of original songs in *In Dahomey*, most of the music in the Williams and Walker show was popular Tin Pan Alley songs recirculated into the show just like other musicals in the teens and twenties. From the “I wish” songs to the plot structure, the traditional elements in *Hamilton* ease white audience members, who make up the majority of Broadway musical theatre audiences, and who may have been skeptical about attending a hip-hop musical with people of color playing the founding fathers.⁴³

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41 For more on “I wish” songs see Sarah H. Warren, “Gimme: the I Want Song in Musical Theatre” [HowlRound](#), February 26, 2016.

42 Lin-Manuel Miranda, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, 90.9 WHYY, January 3, 2017.

43 [The Broadway League](#), “Research Reports: The Demographics of the Broadway Audience 2015-2016 Season.” Accessed December 3, 2017.

Another way *Hamilton* accommodates white audiences is through its use of stock characters. Although Hamilton’s character is based on the historical figure profiled in Ron Chernow’s 2004 biography, a man who was undoubtedly from the Caribbean, the choice to cast him as Latino allows for the character to fall into a genealogy of Latino stereotypes.⁴⁴ He is portrayed as a womanizer. In “A Winter’s Ball,” Burr describes Hamilton as a “bastard orphan son of a whore...obnoxious arrogant loudmouth... [who is] reliable with the ladies” to the point where “Martha Washington named her feral tomcat after him!”⁴⁵ The songs “Satisfied,” “The Story of Tonight Reprise,” and “Take a Break” suggest that Hamilton was in love with both Eliza and Angelica Schuyler, and in the second act he has an affair with Mrs. Maria Reynolds. These details compound to characterize Hamilton through the Latin lover stereotype made popular in early Hollywood film. Furthermore, his scheming and rise to power through, in some cases, belligerence (dueling; fighting with Burr, Jefferson, Madison, and Adams) also aligns with the stock “greaser” character who uses violence and smooth-talking to get his way.⁴⁶

Moreover, the musical’s depiction of Thomas Jefferson aligns with earlier Black stereotypes on Broadway stages, namely the dandy character who is more interested in style than in substance. Jefferson first appears at the top of a staircase costumed in a double-breasted, purple velvet, three-piece suit with a lace cravat and cuffs. He carries a cane, and in “What’d I Miss,” fashionably dances in front of a chorus line. In this way, Jefferson serves not only as a reference to the top hat and tails cakewalk performers of the nineteenth century, but also to Zip Coon.

Although the casting of Hamilton and Jefferson as men of color plays into racial stereotypes, the most racially troubling character is Mrs. Reynolds. In the first sit-down production in Chicago (which ran for 1341 performances), she was played by one of the three actresses who play the Schuyler sisters — and the one who happened to have the darkest skin tone.⁴⁷ Hamilton makes clear that Mrs.

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44 Monteiro, 91.

45 Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 70.

46 Allen Woll, “How Hollywood has Portrayed Hispanics,” [New York Times](#), March 1, 1981.

47 In the original Broadway production and in other productions, she has also been Black, however her skin tone was not darker than the actress playing Angelica.

Reynolds seduces him.⁴⁸ The actress that plays Peggy in act one plays Mrs. Reynolds in act two. As Mrs. Reynolds she wears a long fall of black hair, skulking across the stage, and batting her eyelashes; a stark contrast to the actress's act one character.⁴⁹ After the affair is revealed, Hamilton loses not only his wife's trust but also the possibility to be president (echoed many times in the song "The Reynold's Pamphlet"). Therefore, Mrs. Reynolds causes Hamilton's fall, making her a Jezebel character. Again, the production's choice to cast Maria Reynolds as a Black woman leans into a long history of Black women being depicted as insatiable prostitutes. David Pilgrim, curator of the Jim Crow Museum, explains that the idea that "black women were naturally and inevitably sexually promiscuous" was bolstered during slavery and Jim Crow to dehumanize African Americans and suggest that Black women could not be raped.⁵⁰ Placed in the musical, Mrs. Reynolds as a Black woman seducing a light-skinned Latino man creates a familiar storyline, wherein Hamilton is not at fault for his sexual misdeeds but rather the woman of color is.

These stereotyped stock characters get at larger concerns about the way race is treated onstage in *Hamilton*. Historian Lynn Monteiro has pointed out that because the play replaces white figures with actors of color and doesn't show the real, historical figures of color who were present at the country's founding, *Hamilton* eliminates Black and Brown people from this part of US history, and

Actively erases the presence and role of black and brown people in Revolutionary America, as well as before and since. America 'then' did look like the people in this play, if you looked outside of the halls of government. This has never been a white nation. The idea that the actors who are performing on stage represent newcomers to this country in any way is insulting."⁵¹

Monteiro's claim that *Hamilton* erases the history of racially-Othered bodies in American history is further problematized by the long connection between what Harry J. Elam Jr. calls "the race question" in theatre and performance. He argues

48 Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 176.

49 I saw the Chicago production on Tuesday, July 19, 2017.

50 David Pilgrim, "The Jezebel Stereotype," Ferris State University Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia.

51 Monteiro, 93

that "definitions of race...fundamentally depend on the relationship between the seen and the unseen, between the visibly marked and unmarked, between the 'real' and the illusionary."⁵² Elam asserts that the "the meanings of race are conditional, that the illusion of race becomes reality through its application."⁵³

With this representational concern in mind, *Hamilton*

"...by using stock characters, *Hamilton* is not erasing race, but featuring it in a problematic way."

applies race in two opposite directions, both of which tie into a tradition of Black bodies onstage. On the one hand, it obscures the racial Other in American history. Monteiro's critique proposes that in making race exclusive to the contemporary moment ("This is the story of America then, told by America now" with a cast representing what "looks like America looks now"⁵⁴), *Hamilton* does not challenge the racial make-up of the founding fathers. Audiences that are uncomfortable with the idea that Black and Brown people helped build the United States do not need to confront that idea in the musical because the racial casting is played as a device, not reality; the musical does not argue that Washington or Jefferson were men of color. On the other hand, the musical follows a long history of centering race in American staging wherein Blackness is presented as spectacle for white entertainment, a genealogy starting with slave auction blocks moving to minstrelsy and then through to the contemporary American musical.⁵⁵ In this way, and by using stock characters, *Hamilton* is not erasing race, but featuring it in a problematic way.

52 Harry J. Elam Jr. "The Device of Race" in *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

53 Ibid., 5.

54 Monteiro, 93.

55 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 214-15.

All of that said, like the other two plays, *Hamilton* also critiques the racial and political status quo and creates new realities. Namely, many artists of color achieved celebrity status because they were in *Hamilton*. Miranda won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for drama, two Tony awards, and the MacArthur Foundation “genius grant.” Daveed Diggs, Christopher Jackson, Phillipa Soo, Renee Elise Goldsberry, and Leslie Odom Jr. have become household names and have been cast in Disney movies, new Broadway musicals, and Netflix shows. With so few roles available to actors of color on both stage and screen, the success of the *Hamilton* cast is remarkable.

In addition to the actors’ success, and in contradiction to Monteiro’s assessment, the musical does allow for Black and Brown bodies to own parts of American history. Christopher Jackson, who originated the role of George Washington, claims that “by having a multicultural cast, it gives us, as actors of color, the chance to provide an additional context just by our presence onstage, filling these characters up.”⁵⁶ *The New York Times* review for the Broadway debut made a similar argument, remarking that it “feels appropriate that the ultimate dead white men of American history should be portrayed here by men who are not white. The United States was created, exclusively and of necessity, by people who came from other places or their immediate descendants.”⁵⁷ Ben Brantley, *The New York Times* reviewer, went on to say:

Acknowledging no disconnect between its sound and its setting, “Hamilton” bypasses the self-consciousness of anachronism. What’s more, it convinces us that hip-hop and its generic cousins embody the cocky, restless spirit of self-determination that birthed the American independence movement. Like the early gangsta rap stars, the founding fathers forge rhyme, reason and a sovereign identity out of tumultuous lives.⁵⁸

The reviewer’s comment reminds me of Krasner’s idea of reinscription, but instead of reinscribing “authentic” Blackness onto stereotyped blackface characters, *Hamilton* allows for actors of color to reinscribe the white founding

56 Rebecca Mead, “All about the Hamiltons,” *New Yorker*, February 9, 2015.

57 Ben Brantley, “Review: In ‘Hamilton,’ Lin-Manuel Miranda Forges Democracy Through Rap.” *New York Times*, February 17, 2015.

58 Ibid.

fathers. Diggs commented that he “walked out of the show with a sense of ownership over American history. Part of it is seeing brown bodies play these people.”⁵⁹ Jackson and Diggs’ feelings of identifying with the characters demonstrate José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification. Muñoz explains that disidentification is a type of “survival strateg[y] the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normal citizenship”⁶⁰ Diggs is identifying as Jefferson, not as a white man (and slaveowner), but through a process of disidentification that imagines Jefferson as a Black man. Furthermore, Diggs expressed experiencing the self-conscious occupation of a position of subordination by being a Black man onstage performing as a white slave owner. Diggs reinscribed the role to no longer be a version of white supremacy, but a refashioning of Blackness as leader, creator, and founder. This version of reinscription is different from that of Williams and Walker in *In Dahomey* as they were occupying what had been white roles mocking Black people. Jackson as Washington and Diggs as Jefferson, in contrast, occupy white roles meant to uplift whiteness, but in Black bodies. Jackson, Diggs, and all the actors of color occupying white historical figures in *Hamilton* reinscribe towards the possibility of Black equality, futurity, and, possibly, supremacy by showing people of color originating the ideals of the United States.

Furthermore, the script does some signifying. As Krasner explains:

Black writers and performers [have used] ‘reversal’ — the trope of parody and double meaning known as ‘signifying’ in black rhetorical strategies — which undermined the notion of racial authenticity...[These] subversive strategies...call attention to the instability of the status quo by portraying authentication as instances of textual excess rather than ‘truth,’ as slippages within the system of representation rather than mimesis.⁶¹

59 Branden Janese, “‘Hamilton’ Roles Are This Rapper’s Delight,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2015.

60 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

61 Krasner, 29-30.

In other words, signifying shows the seams of the performance of race *as performance* instead of as authentic reality. None of the actors in *Hamilton* are trying to mimic or imitate the historical figures of the play. Instead, they bring their embodied experience as people of color to those characters to show how each may have behaved as a man or woman of color. In this context, having the actors rap, sing, and dance in hip-hop style is revolutionary because the lyrics cite rap and R&B's founding fathers and mothers. Miranda has told various reporters and audiences about these citations since the musical's debut (he footnotes them in the commemorative script), including citing lifesteep dancers in "Aaron Burr, Sir," Mobb Deep in "My Shot" and "Satisfied," Pharoahe Monch and Busta Rhymes in "Right Hand Man," and Beyoncé in "Helpless," to name a few.⁶²

The most significant examples of these rap references happen in the two Cabinet Battles in act two. Miranda states that he wrote these songs early in the creation of the musical since he was excited to apply the rap battle format to a discussion where the stakes were the future of the United States.⁶³ In the two scenes, Washington plays referee while Hamilton and Jefferson hold microphones and debate the merits of a central banking system, the ethics of slavery, and whether to enter into a foreign war.⁶⁴ When Jefferson assumes he's won, he cites Grandmaster Flash in the first half of the phrase: "Sometimes it makes me wonder, how I keep from going under." In Cabinet Battle #2, the lyrics do something similar, citing most of a line from Biggie Smalls' "Juicy" but substituting "Mr. President" at the end of the line whose citation says, "And if you don't know, now you know, n-----."⁶⁵ These songs give audiences familiar with these rap references more access to the scene and in doing so, more access to the history of US politics.

In essence, Miranda and McCarter transcribe formal, late-eighteenth-century English into internally-rhyming, sometimes swearing, late-twentieth and early twenty-first-century street language. In contrast to *In Dahomey* using the minstrel song format to subvert the lyrics, or *A Raisin*

in the Sun using blackface dialect in Walter Lee's mouth to telegraph the pain of the performance, *Hamilton* uses a genre of music created (by and large) by people of color to debate US politics, an arena that has long disenfranchised Black and Brown voters. Furthermore, where many arenas that showcase US political skirmishes — C-SPAN, NPR, *The Wall Street Journal* — cater to predominately older, white Americans, *Hamilton* rewards younger and more diverse audience members who are well-versed in the history of rap, R&B, and hip-hop.

Hamilton, like the other two hit American plays centering race in the twentieth century, does not escape criticism. However, like the others, it also creates and inspires dialogue about what race has meant and continues to mean in the United States. *Hamilton* is still young, though; the original production and first tours are still running (as of the writing of this article in 2023). It will be interesting to see how the play changes when it's inevitably revised in the future. Will future audiences and critics dispute the meaning of the play in ways similar to the disagreement between the actress and the critic in the 2022 production of *A Raisin in the Sun*? Will some audiences see the stereotypes and the formulaic musical structure as damning or as subverting? Only time will tell. ♦

⁶² Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 60, 69, and 94; and Forrest Wickman, "All the Hip-Hop References in Hamilton: A Track-by-Track Guide," *Brow Beat: Slate's Culture Blog*, September 24, 2015.

⁶³ Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 161.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 161-63 and 192-93.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

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