HOMOGENIZED SALSA: LATINA CANADIAN DRAMA

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Imagine, if you will, a busily buzzing theatre on the night of the long awaited premiere of a Canadian play. The house lights dim. The stage curtain – a patchwork quilt consisting of flags from around the world – slowly rises. A spotlight shines centre stage on a box of Crayola crayons. Beyond that is a cardboard row of paper dolls, holding hands in a chain. The spotlight reaches further upstage to illuminate the backdrop, a colourful mosaic depicting the balancing scales of justice. Canada's official stance on multiculturalism, diversity and equality could surely give rise to a set such as this. Or, at least Canadians would like to think so.

Equality, cultural identity and personal struggles are common themes in Canadian drama, and indeed are common themes in the literature of a post-colonial world. Another common theme in contemporary writing pertains to women's issues: equality, sexism, gender roles, exploitation and the like frequently figure in modern drama and literature. These themes result in something of a kaleidoscopic head-on collision when one considers Latino Canadian drama through a feminist lens. The struggles and challenges immigrants face have been well documented by many contemporary authors; however, the field of Latino Canadian drama is relatively new, relatively young, and has not yet garnered the attention that other minority groups - say South Asian Canadian or Italian Canadian - have.

The *Alameda Theatre Company* in Toronto is probably as good an embarkation point as any in a study of Latino Canadian Theatre in general, and of women in Latino Canadian drama in particular. It was founded in 2006 by artistic director/actor/playwright Marilo Nunez, who was nominated in 2008 as one of the "Ten Most Influential Hispanic Canadians". A creative trail-blazer, Marilo recognized a gap in local culture. The idea for the Alameda Theatre Company stemmed from her awareness of the lack of high quality, professional Latino Canadian theatre in Toronto. Thus, a new theatre company was formed.

According to the company's website, part of Alameda's mandate is "providing opportunities for Latin Canadian theatre artists and playwrights, and building audiences for their work." Embedded within their mandate is the vision that "Latin American arts and artists are embraced by a broad Canadian community that is aware of, understands and respects the Latin-American Canadian experience." Furthermore, in an au courant nod to political correctness, the Alameda Theatre Company – echoing just

about every other organization that aspires to have an unblemished corporate conscience – states that their values include “equality, respect, solidarity, responsibility and integrity.” In support of their goal to reach out to Canadian audiences, and in support of their goal to create opportunities for Latino Canadian artists and playwrights, in April, Alameda hosts the *De Colores Festival of New Works* by Latino Canadian playwrights, now planning their third year.

In tandem with all that Alameda has done to bring Latino Canadian drama to the centre stage, Alameda has also done much to advance women in Latino Canadian theatre. Of the four new plays showcased and workshopped at the 2009 festival, three happened to be written by women: Coyote by Emma Ari Beltran and Catherine Hernandez; The Intruder by Amaranta Leyva; and My Secret Romeo by Michelle Amaya-Torres. Thus by accident or design, Alameda has become a boon to women in Latino Canadian drama

In addition to the nascent success of the De Colores Festival, in September 2009, Alameda brought to the stage the world premiere of The Refugee Hotel by Carmen Aguirre. One of the bigger and better known names associated with Alameda, Carmen Aguirre is an accomplished actor, and is the author or co-author of more than a dozen plays, some of which have been directed by Marilo Nunez. Aguirre’s long-awaited The Refugee Hotel, produced by Marilo Nunez, is arguably one of Alameda’s biggest and most significant productions in 2009.

When one knows the story behind the script, it is easy to see why The Refugee Hotel is such a strongly personal play for Aguirre. The play is autobiographical and it details the experiences of her Chilean family’s arrival in Canada in 1974. Aguirre’s parents were both university professors and were both active in the revolutionary movement. Like the characters in the play, her family hid in safe houses during the Pinochet years, until they were able to escape to Canada. Arriving in Canada did not immediately free them from risk back home in Chile. Aguirre’s mother was black-listed, and trips back to Chile meant using a fake passport. In the years following their emigration, Carmen and her mother continued to be actively involved in Chilean political reform, each working at or running safe houses in Bolivia, Peru and Argentina (Posner).

There was a time that it seemed as though The Refugee Hotel would never have its opening night. In the Fall of 2003, a production of Refugee was in the works. The script and its staged reading had garnered enough attention and created enough of a buzz that director Ken Gass and Toronto's Factory Theatre had slated it to be performed in the Spring of 2004. Aguirre called a halt to casting and auditions when the creative differences between herself and director Gass led to her publicly accusing Gass of racism (at worst) or of cultural insensitivity (at – nominally – best). Carmen Aguirre's concern stemmed from the selection of actors present at the auditions: there was only one actor of colour present, and the play features eight Chilean characters. Apparently, a later casting call included more visible minority actors, many of whom – though olive skinned – were not of Hispanic descent. The drama behind the drama proved to be irreconcilable and – after a minor imbroglio in the local press – Aguirre dimmed the lights on the planned production. The media imbroglio may have been relatively minor, but the issue of ethnicity in Latino Canadian theatre (as well as in other minority dramas) is anything but. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins note in Post-Colonial Drama:

> As visual markers of 'identity', race and gender are particularly significant in theatrical contexts even if their connotations are sometimes highly unstable. It is crucial to remember, however, that such markers are inscribed on the body through discourse ... rather than simply being unmediated or objectively given. ... Moreover... race and gender are distinct ... factors which cannot be collapsed under the conceptual umbrellas of marginalization (205).

It can be clearly seen why the issue of ethnicity and casting was of such import to Aguirre.

However, creative differences and imbroglios aside, five years later, The Refugee Hotel finally made it to the stage, running for eighteen days at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille.

The fact that Refugee has finally been given life on stage should not eclipse or dismiss the conflict that erupted in 2003, for the real-life drama is emblematic of the many recurring themes in Latino Canadian drama. Ethnicity, racism, stereotypes, isolation, homogenization, cultural identity, marginalization and so on all figure prominently in Latino Canadian drama. To Aguirre, maintaining the

authenticity of the characters was more than simply sticking to an artistic vision. Her point had more to do with staying true to Hispanic culture and heritage and acknowledging the common bonds among Latino immigrants to Canada. It may also have been her way of saying *"enough!"* to the broadly sweeping brush of homogenization among immigrant groups in Canada. Ethnicity plays a key role in the migration and settlement experience, and is therefore a significant part of the story, whether in the news or on the stage. Indeed, casting choices in Refugee and other Latino Canadian plays go right to the heart of the discussion on ethnicity and equality, especially given the broad strokes of uniformity with which Latinos are painted in other aspects of their lives in their adopted Canadian home.

Homogenization occurs on three levels and each of the three is shown in Latino Canadian theatre. Homogenization is the social process by which migrants from various parts of South and Central America, as well as Mexico, the Caribbean, and perhaps even the Iberian Peninsula, are branded as one when they set foot on their new land. The first manifestation of homogenization is that Latino immigrants must cope with the challenges of assimilation, discrimination and integration. Next, in their adopted home, Latino immigrants are marginalized and displaced by the dominant class by having their distinct cultures and nationalities melted into a monoculture under an umbrella that considers them solely from an assumed linguistic baseline. This linguistic leap of logic leads to the assumption that all Spanish speakers share similar tastes in food, music, dance and other cultural emblems. Third, an oddly 'positive' outcome of homogenization is that it gives rise to a sense of community and fraternity among Latinos, despite their discrete backgrounds, and despite occasions of regionalism and discrimination amongst transplanted Latinos.

The homogenization process has its seeds in ethnicity, for what's better than skin colour and physical features as a way to define a collection of individuals? This is not to say that WASPs or Caucasians or - more broadly - those at the centre are the only groups to be held culpable in terms of corporeal categorization. Racial homogenization occurs both within and outside of the Latino Canadian community. However, outside of the Latino community, the descent along the slippery slope from ignorant but innocent homogenized assumptions to outright racism runs the risk of rapidly and rabidly

becoming rampant. Within the Latino community, homogenization is not without some benefits, despite the fact that by definition it blurs cultural lines. At best, homogenization from within creates something of a bond or affinity that can provide a sense of belonging or security, and perhaps even a sense of identity, albeit a confused one.

The Refugee Hotel tells the stories of the first Chilean refugees to arrive in Canada following the military coup in Chile in 1973. The family of Fat Jorge and Flaca arrives first They are soon followed by others, each of whom has harrowing stories of torture and despair back home in their nation - a nation with more than 6,000 kilometres of coastline, spanning 38 degrees in latitude, with climatic variations giving rise to both deserts and alpine tundra. Its cultural diversity includes several native tongues, a mix of religions and a population comprised of indigenous peoples and European settlers. Of course, none of these displaced characters in Refugee had known each other back home, but the Canadian social worker assigned to work with the Chilean refugees assumes they're all old friends. However, once lumped together on foreign soil, and despite socio-cultural and geographic differences among them, the guests of the Refugee Hotel become an ad-hoc family. This solidarity is not unusual among immigrants groups, as Janice Kulyk Keefer points out in "The Sacredness of Bridges":

> One of the salient features of multiculturalism has to do with what I would call the fraught continuum of immigrant experience. This continuum insists that while there cannot help but be a world of difference between the experiences of, say a Birmingham mechanic, a Trinidadian university student, a Bosnian refugee, all of whom immigrated to Canada at some point in the last 50 years, their common experience of displacement as opposed to specific instances of that experience – instances particularized by common factors of race, class gender, education – places them together on this continuum (99).

This kind of bonding is not limited to those who hail from the same nation within Latin America. The hands of friendship extend to others from various parts of the same continent or same geographic area. In another of Carmen Aguirre's plays, Que Pasa with la Raza, eh?, ethnicity is enough of a common

denominator to germinate the seeds of friendship between a pair of young, new Canadians who meet at a party:

> Julio: So, are you from... are you from Guatemala?
> Skin: I'm from Chile.
> Julio: Oh! It's so good to be with Latinos again (90).

More than just thousands of miles separate the Tikal Temple of Mayan Guatemala from the Easter Island Giants of Chile, but this is of little consequence to the sense of belonging Julio harvests from his Latino brethren. The same can be said of Julio's skin-based kinship with the aptly named Skin. At the end of the party, Julio waxes nostalgic and says "It's been a long time since I've been with my compatriots" (92-93) and, yet, the guests at the party include Mexicans, Chileans, Guatemalans and Canadians.

Ethnic bonds are not invincible, and too easily the generalizations that emerge from the broad swath of Hispanics as a single group can have a darker side that manifests itself as cultural rejection or denial. Coyote by Emma Ari Beltran and Catherine Hernandez, is a short but powerfully gripping play about a handful of Mexicans trying to sneak across the Mexico-USA border. The play takes its name from the term used by 'migration brokers' or 'frontera guides' - euphemistic terms for the shady dealers in human lives who take a disproportionately large fee (sans guarantee of results) in order to help illegals sneak to safety on the other side of the border. Racism is one of the many ugly hurdles that await these de facto refugees if and when they eventually cross the Rio Grande. In a scene with the Border Police, racist remarks and pejorative stereotypes are spewed – not without irony – by American police of Hispanic descent, a collection of civil servants who have allowed nationalism to trump heritage. The group of Border Police simultaneously shouts epithets at the illegals they know lurk on the other side, awaiting the right moment to make a mad dash:

> Juan Carlos: Coming to get you, you dirty stains on our red, white and blue.
> Osvaldo: Eating the edges of our steak and potatoes.
> Alex: Accompanying it with your tacos and salsa.
> Sigrid: We can smell you on our children.
> ...
> Osvaldo: Good Mexicans come in two varieties: dead in the desert or sweating in the fields (23-24).

It is brutally ironic that the American guards – all played by Latinos and all with Latino names – divorce themselves entirely from their shared ethnic heritage, bolstering their belief that cultural identity is solely a function of geo-political lines.

Racism exists whether the play's setting is present day or past, and whether the adopted nation is Canada or the USA. Marilo Nunez illustrates the roots of racism, alienation, and marginalization in her play Three Fingered Jack and The Legend of Joaquin Marieta. The play is set in the early-to-mid 1850s, a couple of years after the Mexican American war, which saw Mexico's loss of the territory comprising what is now the American Southwest. The Mexican American border, a division with military and political roots rather than ethnicity or common cultural denominators, is a frequent though figurative point of reference in Three Fingered Jack. As with the border guards in Coyote, Three Fingered Jack shows how Latinos can be alienated on erstwhile familiar lands:

> Rosita Feliz: Others say he [Joaquin Murieta] was oppressed and persecuted by Americans because he was considered a foreigner in his own land. Stories will talk of disillusionment with the American people, of whom he once had such admiration for. He was fighting for conquered California. ... They say he stole from and killed Americans in the name of justice (12).

Given the recentness of the post-war geographic parcelling out of land, it stands to reason that many of the Americans who held Murieta in contempt would have also been of Hispanic descent and could easily have been Mexican citizens themselves, if the war had resulted in a border a few miles further north. Further along, on pages 25-26, Three Fingered Jack gives the audience more background on Murieta and his wife:

> Murieta and his beautiful wife Rosita had bought a farm out in Mariposa County some time back. He was working the gold claims, while she worked the land. ... It turns out some of the locals didn't like foreigners staking a claim on their gold. ... A group of Americans decided to let Murieta know just how much they didn't like it.

The Americans' resentment of avaricious Mexican interlopers is to be expected from the point of view of the incipient hegemony of Manifest Destiny, yet who is really the foreigner? Who is the trespasser? And whose land has all the gold that will soon line the streets? Nationalism as a function of geopolitics seems to have taken root firmly and quickly post the Mexican American War.

There is a great deal of irony in the character of Lola Montez, one of the lead roles in Three Fingered Jack. Lola Montez, a showgirl and dancer who pretends to be of Hispanic descent, happens to be American, and as such displays the contemporary and latterly ingrained bigotry directed towards Mexicans in the middle of the Nineteenth Century. She showcases the chasm between ethnicity (in her case, assumed ethnicity) and culture. At the beginning of Act Two, Scene Three, she is preparing to do her dance show. The author's notes in setting the scene mention that Lola is armed with a set of Spanish Castanuelas and while sounding them, she does a "messy" Zapateo (24). The irony here is that, while using 'ethnicity' as a marketing tool to get people to see her exotic dance hall show, she unveils her ignorance by reducing cultural affectations and apparatus to whatever is associated with ethnicity; to wit, the dance she performs and the percussion instrument she uses are Spanish from Spain and not indigenous to Mexico, which is just down the road. She's none the wiser, though, and neither is her audience.

Lola scoffs and scorns at the myth that was the man Murieta. She does her best to whip up a frenzy of animosity towards Murieta among her audience. She panders to American patriotism (no doubt bloated in its post-war victory) and deconstructs the hagiography of Murieta, proclaiming he was a "heartless monster who enjoyed watching Americans being tortured and killed" (24). Lola even manages to play the victim while further buttressing ethnic stereotypes when she refers to Murieta as a "Latin Lover" and imbues her comments with hints of swarthy manipulation. If racism doesn't get them on her side, then portraying herself as an innocent who was coerced by the charms of a dishonourable, exploitative, macho Mexican will.

At times the examples of racism in Three Fingered Jack are much more blatant. Harry Love, Lola's boss and lover, is on a quest to get the treasure map secretly held by Joaquin Murieta. Not only does Love want the riches associated with the map, but there is also a reward for anyone who can prove he has killed Murieta. In Love, the bounty hunter meets the impresario when he turns this whole escapade into a macabre side-show by having Murieta's bloody skull on display for anyone willing to pay the price of admission:

Lola Montez: That's awful! People don't want to see a severed head Love!

> Harry Love: `Course they do. This is the United States of America! People will pay to see other people's sufferin'. Especially if it's the sufferin' of a Mexican (14).

One can almost hear the carnival barker shouting "step right up folks, don't be shy, tickets on sale now to see the lifeless flesh and bone of something less than human." Impresario Harry Love addresses the audience and takes advantage of the opportunity to advance his xenophobic beliefs, his pronouncements from the centre simultaneously echoing and contradicting the earlier words of Three Fingered Jack. On pages 26-27 Harry Love says of Joaquin Murieta:

> We got the snake gentlemen! A foreigner who we welcomed with open arms into our country betrayed everything sanctified about the United States of America. ... I feel proud to be an American tonight. ... From Sonora to Shasta, the hordes of desperate villains hid. They hid and waited. They devoured our women. They raped our land and scoured the entire countryside, leaving nothing but shame and destruction. Like the plague, they devoured and destroyed. ... We treat Mexicans with nothing but respect. Mexicans own land! They hold positions of power in some countries. Murieta just wanted you to believe otherwise. ...

Ah, yes, it's good form to be gracious in victory, and to the victor go the spoils. *These Mexicans are here under suffrage, but we'll give them a chance to reveal their true selves, and thus legitimize our racist actions towards them. Let's welcome them, as long as they appreciate it and know their place. We'll even give them a hand up.*

The (upper) hand of noblesse oblige is a cold one, and Love's glove of erstwhile altruism is stained by his unfulfilled expectation of obsequious gratitude. *Sure, nothing but respect, except for their cadavers; power in some countries, but not this one; Mexicans own land could be better written with the apostrophe possessive: Mexicans' own land...* Imagine if the ghost of Shakespeare's Shylock were reincarnated as the ghost of Joaquin Murieta, and suddenly appeared on stage - the soliloquy of 'Shylock Sanchez' would probably go something like this:

> I am a Mexican. Hath not the severed head of a Mexican eyes? Hath not a Mexican hands to clean your homes? Hath not a Mexican organs, dimensions, passions? Fed with the food you grudgingly give us, food grown on the lands you stole from us, food picked by our own gnarled fingers. Hurt with the same weapons you used to kill thousands of our compadres. Warmed by the same desert sun that singes your skin but you think is

> harmless to us as we plough your fields? Cooled by the same water you won't drink when you come to Cancun for Spring Break. If you prick us, do we bleed salsa? If you poison our cultural identity, do we not die inside? And if you wrong us, do we not stay silent out of fear of deportation? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

It is but a short step from racism to cultural conflict and identity conflict – themes that resound in Latino Canadian drama. Cultural conflict is tackled by Amaranta Leyva in her play The Intruder. The title itself is indicative of the dynamics of migration, but microcosmically it refers to the family life of Catalina, the play's ten year old narrator. The Latino family – a single mother with a daughter and an infant son – have repatriated, although it's not specified from where to where. The mother has recently developed a romantic relationship with a man Catalina refers to as the Intruder. He intrudes on their lives in much the same was as displacement intrudes on the lives of migrants, or in the way that immigrants intrude on the lives of citizens of their adopted land.

It is a safe guess that ten-year-old Catalina captures the amnesiac sense of self common to the many who have been displaced as a result of migration. On page three she says, "that's how my life has been these days: drawn and erased every day, and no one remembers. ... I don't know anyone here, and no one knows who I am. Even I can doubt who I am." While Catalina is referring only to her juvenile world, the loaded line can aptly describe the whole starting-over process and identity conflict faced by migrants when settling in a new country. Catalina resents change, in this case moving to a new house; alas, change is the undercurrent of the immigration process. In her little-girl world, Catalina encapsulates the bigger picture of change involved in repatriation. She says: "We had a normal life there. We shouldn't be here. Why did we have to come here? To be foreigners just the way you are? " (3) Talk about the outside looking in, and an inside-out look from within! Her sense of belonging belies her concept of otherness.

Catalina's immaturity allows the playwright to assign the character to double duty. Ostensibly Catalina is representative of displaced people, but her lack of experience and awareness enable her to

innocently represent the negative aspects of the residents in the receiving community. Catalina's juvenile naiveté describes what many migrants no doubt wish they could say to those who greet them with hostility in their new home: "Even though he is different... it doesn't mean he's a bad person, right? ... Well, after all, I guess it's not so bad that he comes from another country, right?" (13). *From the mouths of babes*... . Although she tries to be open-armed and open-minded, Catalina places herself at the centre when she exhibits a degree of inchoate xenophobic suspicion towards outsiders. When she sees the Intruder's passport, she wonders accusatorily: "Where do you really come from, Argentina, China...? or (*she reads*) San Salvador?" (16) Although a Latina herself, she does not see Latino heritage as a common bond: "All foreigners sound like him [the Intruder]. Argentineans. I recognize their accent" (17). Though a timid ten year old, her indignation at the insidious way in which the Intruder has wormed his way into her life is enough to prompt her to gently confront him:

> Catalina: Even though they're from there [Argentina]? ... `Cos they're from your country, right? I can tell from their accent.
> Intruder: And when did you hear their accent?
> Catalina:... I wasn't listening... I just heard them a little when they left. And they sounded just like you, kind of... I mean I know other people sound like that. My mom told me. Like people from Uruguay. Chile. San Salvador.
> Intruder: Well. In San Salvador, the accent is really different. ... You see, when a person goes to another country, they try to find a way to stay in touch with their own country. My way was to meet these people." (22).

While Catalina hasn't yet come to see the 'otherness' of herself, the characters in Aguirre's <u>La Raza</u> are painfully aware of their need to negotiate dual nationalities. Unlike <u>Refugee</u> which focused on Chilean characters, <u>La Raza</u> includes characters with pan-American backgrounds. The Mexican Canadian character Zap examines his experience with cultural homogenization and identity conflict as its by-product:

> I just came from another date. .. This time it was Becky. ... She was really nice, but all she wanted the whole night was for me to speak in Spanish, or at least, you know, do my best Spanish accent in English. ... You know, all she wanted was to talk about Che Guevara and the revolution (94).

Becky, no doubt enraptured by *Harlequin Romance* notions of a swarthy Latin Lover, has no clue that Che Guevara had ties to Argentina, Cuba, Bolivia, and even Congo, but none to Mexico, except as an occasional "base of operations."

Like other characters in Latino Canadian drama, Mexican Canadian Zap must wrestle an uneasy truce with his dual identity. As Anne Nothof says in "The Construction and Deconstruction of Border Zones in Fronteras Americanas by Guillermo Verdecchia and Amigo's Blue Guitar by Joan Macleod", "the imposition of borders is an attempt to demarcate a secure and identifiable place for the validation and nurturing of a sense of self in terms of the shared values of a cohesive community" (1). Being able to identify one's self in terms of nationality is of great import, but leads to confusion and a state of flux. Hyphenated labels, meant to be inclusive, can actually contribute to cultural confusion, and dig a deeper rut in the gutter of marginalization. In "The Ethnic Gasp/the Disenchanted Eye Unstoried," Aritha Van Herk puts it succinctly:

> There is an intensification that precedes the definitions and distortions of identification, a designation that now insists on accompanying every narrative, so that hyphen becomes a mode of reading: Ondaatje – Sri Lankan; ... Kogawa – Japanese... until the narrative of origin reinscribes the mime of geography, whether that geographic map is completely tangential or not. And if geography is too far-fetched, there is still the closure of blood, family, kin, as if inheritance were fluid enough to survive its own implosion (78).

Thus maplines and bloodlines have more to do with identity than they ought to, and when individuality extends beyond the prescribed perimeters, cultural identity is marooned.

Carmen Aguirre has some fun with cultural binaries and fluidity in Que Pasa with La Raza, eh? Dandelion and her boyfriend are two of the best examples of identity conflict. The boyfriend, Josh McDougall, is described as "that guy with the blond dreadlocks, Peruvian sweater, Guatemalan pants and Tibetan beads..." who plays both the bagpipes and a pan-pipe (73). Another character, Skin – a feisty Latina who has renounced her Canadian citizenship – acidly comments on the frivolity of McDougall's inconsistent but internationally inclusive affectations. Skin says, "he could at least decide which culture

he's gonna appropriate from, or if he's that desperate for a cultural identity, why doesn't he try his own roots?" (73). The irony of her statement is blatant as each of the main characters in La Raza is him or herself struggling with dual identities, colliding cultures, and an ongoing search for roots. Skin vociferously expresses her views on ethnicity and identity during a rant as she prepares a speech for a student rally:

> You can sure as hell bet they're thinking, "Spic go home." ... Everywhere I look, I'm portrayed as a fuckin' drug dealer `cause I'm a Latino. ... We're all of colour here, but we're all of different colours... Shades that are threatening to them. ... Back in my country, I am not considered a person of colour ... (76).

Skin's friend Dandelion is another Latina who dances a cultural two-step; she was born in Argentina, but grew up in Canada. Dandelion contradicts expectations at every turn. For one thing Dandelion (real name: Rocio Bernstein) is neither Catholic as her Latino colouring might indicate, nor Jewish as her surname might indicate, but is Buddhist. A young woman, Dandelion is interested in dating, but has difficulty meeting a man who has a background similar to hers. She considers using a dating service, which happens to be owned by her aunt. She discusses her dating "wish list" with her aunt Monica and specifies her desired criteria:

> Dandelion: You could have at least ... found me a guy, you know, Latino, but that has been here as long as me... so he's kinda half and half, you know? ...
> Monica: What's wrong with José?
> Dandelion: He was too Latino, man! He was fucking fresh off the boat!
> Monica: Don't swear at your aunt.... You can never be too Latino. Latino is in the soul.
> Dandelion: He was too macho, okay? ...
> Monica: Fresh off the boat? Oh, Rocio. Don't be racist. ...
> Dandelion: He was too Latino. I wanted someone not so Latino, you know, like me, I'm not so Latina, but, you know-
> Monica: That's your problem! You're not Latina enough (84).

When dating agency proprietor Monica Sonora Dinamita is first introduced, she is on the phone admonishing Charlie ("please call me Carlos") for pretending to be Latino in order to be set up on dates with Latina women (81). It's ironic that Monica chastises Charlie for opportunistically buying into cultural stereotypes on the dating scene when she herself has built a business that profits from the lovelorn among displaced Latinos. Monica says, "I knew there was a market for Latinos that cannot find

Latinos like them in Canada" (96). Unasked, of course is the question: what does 'like them' mean? Defining the sense of self is something to which there just may not be an answer.

Dandelion is not the only one walking the tightrope between cultures; Zap also wonders on which side of the cultural divide he'll find true love. Monica tries to instill confidence in Zap when he comes to her as a dating agency client and she says, "Oh, yes. Trust me. I've been matchmaking displaced Latinos for ten years" (97). It's clear from this line that Aguirre is having fun poking at the clichés of immigration. If displacement were all it took, then Cupid's bow could be aimed at any number of visible minorities or immigrant groups. Like Dandelion, Canadian raised, Mexican descended Zap wrestles with cultural binaries in his social and romantic life. He tries to express his cultural identity conflict to the people he meets at a party, a group of people more certain of their roots and heritage than Zap is of his own:

> Yeah, but every time I'm with a chick all I can do is compare her to a Latina or a white girl. It's making me crazy. You guys don't get it `cause you're only with Latinas. ... I'm so confused in myself-Maybe I should go to some cross-cultural support group or something (80).

Maybe cross-cultural support groups aren't such a bad idea ... There is an interesting dynamic among Latino migrants in Canada. On one hand, there is patriotic pride in one's homeland, but there is also pride in being Latino. The result of this is a contradictory pole-vault between identifying as , say, a Chilean or a Mexican and trotting out nationalistic pride; then in the next instant discarding the patriotic distinctions of a moment ago, and joining hands in pan-Latino brotherhood. Perhaps this explains why there is no "Latino" neighbourhood in Toronto, to name but one popular city for newcomers to call home. Solidarity is fluid, and as such, there is less of a toehold in fostering physical identities vis a vis geographic space here as has been done by other groups: College Street and St. Clair Avenue each tout themselves as Little Italy, Spadina Avenue is synonymous with Chinatown, Roncesvalles is Polish, the Danforth is known as Greektown. Where is Colonia Colombia or The Cuban Quarter? Why isn't there a Venezuelaville or a Chileville, or even a Margaritaville?

Luisa Veronis tackles these questions in her article "Strategic spatial essentialism: Latin Americans' real and imagined geographies of belonging in Toronto". Veronis succinctly sums up the problems of cohesiveness among Latino immigrants when she refers to them as an "orphan community" (455). As well, her research echoes the themes that frequently permeate Latino Canadian drama, such as "Latin Americans' sense of placelessness and material disenfranchisement, political marginalization: as a diasporic ethnic community, they struggle to belong" (455-456). Like Aguirre and other writers, Veronis examines the theme of homogenization imposed upon Latino immigrants by the dominant groups in Canada: " In the eyes of the Canadian state, Latin Americans form a single, homogenous community as suggested by the categories 'Latin American' and 'Spanish speaking' used in the Canadian Census (Statistics Canada)" (461).

Despite the prevalence of homogenization, there is in fact a great deal of ignored diversity and distinction among Latinos. As Veronis points out: "Latin Americans are a relatively recent group of immigrants in Canada and they are very diverse – encompassing over twenty nationalities from north, central, and south America,"(456). In addition to cultural and national differences among them, their stories are also diverse:

> This heterogeneity results from Latin Americans' complex history of immigration to Canada with five different waves of arrivals since the late 1950s. The most significant of these have been two waves of political refugees from South America in the mid-1970s and from Central America in the 1980s, and a new wave consisting of professionals, family reunification and refugee claimants from throughout Latin America since the mid-1990s. Differences in time, motivations and circumstances of migration are at the source of the national, ethnic/racial, cultural, socioeconomic and political diversity of the group (Veronis, 460).

The conflict between homogenization and diversity comes from within the Latino Canadian community as well as from the centre. At times, nationalism and classism hangovers from back home are

imported to Canada. As Jorge Ginieniewicz claims in “Citizenship learning and political participation: the case of Latin American-Canadians”, “participants identified the presence of discrimination in two different dimensions: external (from older generations of immigrants against Latin Americans) and internal (within the Latin American Canadian community and caused by ethnic, social or regional differences” (81). One interviewee elaborated on the discrimination within the Latino community in the world of work:

> I clearly see discriminatory behaviours within our community. For example, you see a Salvadoran driving a delivery truck but he does not do the hard work. he hires a Costa Rican to load and unload the heavy stuff. And who is the manager who hired the Salvadoran? He/she is an Argentine or Uruguayan ... Something similar occurs with Argentine workers in the construction sector. You see Argentines, who ‘just got off the plane’, hired by older Argentine immigrants. You always see the same situation: older immigrants compelling newer immigrants to work in very bad conditions. And you see the exploitation of immigrants, within our community, going on and on according to the ‘status’, which is usually given by length of residence (76).

The bonds of ethnicity stretch and shrink in response to settings and situations. Among themselves, the characters in La Raza make distinctions about nationality while simultaneously celebrating brotherhood. In a scene quite the opposite of the previously mentioned scene involving racism among the border guards in Coyote, in Aguirre’s La Raza, a Latino driver picks up Rata, who has been walking along the highway after having sneaked across the USA border. The driver, a Chicano, says to Rata: “Hey! Hermano! Compadre! ... Come on compadrito. We all look out for each other here” (63). So, at times ethnicity creates a bond, but the bond is malleable. It is ironic later on when Rata makes distinctions about another Latino’s cultural identity:

> Rata. You’re Canadian. ... You were raised here. ... Simple. You’re Canadian.
> Zap. I still look at myself in the mirror every morning wondering who the hell I am. Am I Mexican? Am I Canadian? Am I just plain Latino? Am I Mexican-Canadian? Am I Latino-Canadian? (80).

His confusion harkens back to Van Herk's observations about geography and the closure of blood. With all the identity hats Zap tries on, one can see the metaphoric dilution of himself as the brim of his cultural sombrero grows exponentially from nation to nation, to hyphen, to continent, finally pausing on an amorphous, racially based identity.

In an echo of characters and scenes in Carmen Aguirre's The Refugee Hotel , Wendy - a gringa caricature in Beltran's and Hernandez's Coyote - makes assumptions about Hispanic people, foisting a cultural identity upon them, based on the belief that all Latinos have salsa coursing through their veins... the dance that is, not the sauce:

> Wendy (in a whispered aside to Gabby): Listen: This is Mexico you idiot. This is what they do here. They dance. This chick-EE-tah is probably going to a club right after this and if we make nice she can point us in the right direction, or even have us tag along. It's the only way you get to know a place, Gabby. By getting to know the natives (29).

Wendy's willingness to befriend Latinos in order to appropriate their culture for the duration of her vacation is fleeting, as is indicated by her earlier wariness of them:

> Everyone knows that things are way more dangerous here. This isn't Buffalo. I mean, you can't imagine that a bunch of poor Mexican street kids aren't going to nab your massive handbag if you don't have the smarts to carry a money belt. ... And if you can't see the difference here in Mexico, then you're just plain stupid (27).

Speaking of stupid, it is an all too common occurrence that linguistic ability (or a lack thereof) is used as an indicator of mental acuity. 'Stupid' is what's often assumed of Latinos (and other non-English speaking immigrants) who have not yet mastered English as a second language. Language is one of the first and most obvious links to culture and identity, and this theme is common in Latino Canadian drama. As and Tompkins note in Post-Colonial Drama:

> Migration commonly involves linguistic displacements as well as physical and cultural dislocations. By presenting dialogue and/or narration in languages that are foreign to the dominant society, playwrights such as... Canada's Guillermo Verdecchia express the 'double vision' which typically characterizes migrant experience (173).

Latino immigrants encounter linguistic 'double vision' from two directions: first they must learn English, and second they have to cope with the ignorance and arrogance with which non-Spanish speakers attempt

to meet Latinos on their own linguistic turf. In addition to ‘double vision’, post-colonial drama also uses a process of what Gilbert and Tompkins refer to as ‘double hearing’:

> In order to represent ‘foreign’ languages to a predominantly monolingual audience, some plays rely on the viewer’s participation in a paradoxical process of ‘double hearing’ which distinguishes between two planes of utterance (175).

Aguirre relies on this in Refugee. The characters are all supposed to be Spanish speakers, and the audience accepts that English dialogue is actually another language.

The hurdles involved in developing the ability to communicate in a second language are obvious to displaced migrants, but obvious becomes oblivious when – well-intentioned or ignorant – members of the centre attempt to cross linguistic bridges via the shaky slats of stereotypes. As Anne Nothof says, “stereotyping is one way of demeaning through parody and ridicule, reducing complex social or cultural differences to a simplistic caricature” (3). At least in Latino Canadian drama, the playwrights have some fun with caricatures in reverse by making the “gringos” and “WASPs” at the centre the objects of ridicule. In Carmen Aguirre’s The Refugee Hotel, the receptionist, the social worker, and Bill are each guilty of two linguistic faux pas. First, they raise the volume of their voices in the expectation that loudness will magically render the listener bilingual; second, they make ignorant assumptions about Latin based languages. They attribute the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation of one branch of the Latin-based language tree (French) to another linguistic branch (Spanish), and end up speaking an incomprehensible *Spanglish-Frenglish* hybrid:

> Social Worker. Ici! Uh... le hotel! Tu stay ici until moi can place tu in a casa! Comprendez? (7).

As she shows them to their rooms, the social worker continues with her primitive gibberish:

> Social Worker. Okay. Perfecto. A grande bed and dos chicos. Ici is where tu will sleep, uh siesta. Zzzzz. You have a kitchenette, comida, and there’s a Mercado just up the calle for to do your groceries. (*Handing flaca some cash*). Ici tu go. This should be enough for the next few dias. (*Handing flaca her card*) Ici is my card. If you have any pourquois, por favour call moi. Mi nombre es Pat. Pat Keleman (10).

Pat's inability to navigate the communication chasm is coupled by exaggerated miming and hand gestures. In addition to her embarrassing attempt to speak in a way the refugees will understand, she takes all the dignity out of their exchange by reducing communication to a game of charades.

Pat Keleman is not the only character guilty of communicating this way. Bill O'Neill – a milky suburbanite poseur who fancies himself a radical social activist - does as well. He talks to the refugees in an incomprehensible pidgin comprised of baby talk and Frankenstein speak. He is well-intentioned and has done what he can to help the family find jobs and housing, but no matter how benevolent his objectives, he still subscribes to a manner of speech that is insulting to all present:

> Bill. Okay-Oh, God me. You speak. ... Okay. We find job at Fat Jorge....Job at you, Flaca, fish cannery, work all day. We find you home. Projects in Strathcona. That Chinatown. ...You move tomorrow. ... Interfaith Church donate furniture, bed, table, and chairs, things more. ... Cakehead [Cristina]. Work all night on a bakery. Bake bread (88-89).

These sad linguistic parodies exist in a number of Latino Canadian plays. Playwright Marilo Nunez uses Lola Montez to drive home points about language and culture in the old days. Lola the showgirl greets the audience with a chorus of "Si! Olé!" and "How many of you caballeros are here to have a good time?" (24) It seems there was no overlapping linguistic grace period after the Mexican American war, and that perhaps the war was the birthplace of *Spanglish,* or so it appears when Lola is at centre stage. It is interesting that these playwrights have used linguistic differences to their advantage, as such is not always the case. As Gilbert and Tompkins contend in Post-Colonial Drama:

> In some cases words... may be glossed in ways which seem to make them accessible to non-speakers but which still refuse to provide all levels of meaning.... Similarly, humour frequently functions in precisely this manner since it is the cultural codes of language as much as its specific semantic content that allow some listeners, and not others, to access irony, double entendres, certain nuances, and other potentially ludic meanings (172).

A brief but illustrative case in point is Lola's use of 'olé' and 'caballero'. The former specifically means 'bravo' and of course is out of context as she has used it; the latter means a knight, a nobleman or a

cowboy, as well as a few other colloquial uses, none of which would necessarily fit with her application of it to the men in the audience at a dance hall in the Southern California of the mid-1800s.

Beltran and Hernandez also make a scathingly sharp but comical point about linguistic imperialism via the dialogue of Wendy, the 'gringa' on holiday in Mexico. On page 28, Wendy unveils her mask of nescience:

> Wendy (to Jenny the waitress): Dose Sair-VES-Ahs pour fah-vor. ... It's important to speak their language. Otherwise you're like any other dumb American who comes here. It was the same in Rio. Jeez, were they ever amazed when I began speaking Spanish. They thought I was clueless.
> Gabby: I thought they speak Portuguese there.
> Wendy: Whatever (28).

With very little effort, Wendy paints the myriad socio-cultural groups of Latin America with the same linguistic brush, and proves just how clueless she really is. The playwrights are clearly having fun here, not only in showcasing the gringa's ignorance and general naiveté about people and places, but especially about language. Obliviously superior and superiorly oblivious, it is clear that poor Wendy has never heard of the Treaty of Tordesillas.

From pidgin to pigeon-holing: The marginalized status conferred upon immigrants, coupled with linguistic challenges, predictably results in the typecasting of Latino immigrants into low-end, dead-end, *manuel* labour in their adopted home. In "'The Sacredness of Bridges': Writing Immigrant Experience," Janice Kulyk Keefer comments on the relationship between work, marginalization and goals:

> The reality for the immigrant... is that distance is always double, if not multiple. One's distance from the country and culture of origin is always measured in terms of losses as well as the gains one makes – that "better life" you promise your children, sacrificing your own happiness for theirs. And as a newcomer, a foreigner, you keep or are forced to keep your distance from the centre of things in the adopted country – "centre" being the place where those with power and agency ... hold sway (102).

Distance from the centre is shown in Latino Canadian plays in an obvious yet telling manner: the occupations of the various characters are generally low level service jobs, despite whatever experiences or

credentials the characters may have. In Refugee, former accountant Fat Jorge gets a job in a mill, someone else gets a job in a cannery, another becomes a gardener, one gets a job as a baker, and - in a writing decision requiring the audience to stretch their ability to suspend disbelief - a Hispanic woman gets hired as a cleaning lady!

Racism can be felt in any number of ways, but perhaps the area in which racism can have its biggest impact is in the world of work. In "Citizenship learning and political participation: the case of Latin American Canadians" Jorge Ginieniewicz interviewed 200 adult Latino immigrants to Canada (specifically to Toronto and Montreal). The anecdotal information contained in their interviews solidifies the argument that art imitates life. Among the comments respondents made about work and discrimination were:

> In Canada, I felt discriminated against... In my country, I was an engineer ... But in Canada, I realized that working as an engineer was not going to be that simple. ... I started to think that the laws were against immigrants, or at least they were made to complicate our progress.
>
> ...
>
> My father was a meteorologist in Chile and in Canada he had to work in a factory...
>
> ...
>
> Sometimes when you fill out an application for a job ... and they are just rejected because you speak the language with an accent (75-76).

It is into this subaltern, marginalized milieu that immigrants try to assimilate, a process that - not surprisingly – results in compromises that place an immigrant's curriculum vitae and education as undervalued collateral against their potential. As Tamara Palmer Seiler puts it in "Multi-Vocality and National Literature: Towards a Post-Colonial and Multicultural Aesthetic", "contemporary fictions ... portray a profoundly stratified world, in so doing, illuminate the barriers, illusions and topsy-turvy values associated with the immigrant journey in Canada" (58). The stratified reality that awaits immigrants in their new home is a common element in Latino Canadian plays, where the present is ransomed for the

sake of the future. In Coyote, as the Mexicans trudge slowly and thirstily along the desert, the play lapses into flashbacks of the lives they envisioned as they made their plans to escape to the other side. However, hope is more than lightly discoloured with reluctant recognition of the challenges they will encounter. For example, on page 34 of Coyote, Isidro's wife gives him a reality check during an argument before he goes away: "What? You think something magical will happen and you'll graduate from janitor to professor. Wake up Isidro!"

In La Raza, in an acerbic effort to preserve clichés at all costs, Mexican Canadian Zap, works at – where else? - an 'authentic' Mexican restaurant. He explains to a would-be patron the differences among Latin American cuisine:

> Zap. Hello and Buenos noches. This is Ayayay Mexican restaurant at your service. ... Authentic Mexican cuisine with authentic Mexican service. No, sir. Tamales are Salvadorean. We serve Mexican food. That's right. Of course we have burritos (77).

Of course, there is nothing in the play to indicate Zap's having a passion or a talent for restaurant work, but employing a real, live Mexican can only add cachet to Ayayay's reputation. The exploitative marketing gimmickry of Zap's Mexican-ness is not nearly as degrading as that of Juan's new job in Refugee Hotel. In this case, assumed cultural aptitude rather than ethnicity is used as the lure to attract customers into yet another restaurant. Juan dons a bright yellow feathery chicken costume and dances a cumbia outside a fried chicken place, getting paltry pay to plug poultry products, in a comically clichéd example of fowl most foul.

Like other Latino Canadian playwrights, Beltran and Hernandez also comment in Coyote on the dead end, low paying, menial jobs available to Latino migrants. In the previously mentioned scene with the border patrol, the guards derisively predict what future awaits those 'lucky enough' to safely make it to the 'land of opportunity'. Those who survive the taxing trek across a blistering desert and eventually triumph over the risks inherent in being a 'wetback' (albeit a thirsty one) will soon reap their rewards:

> Osvaldo: Good Mexicans come in two varieties: dead in the desert or sweating in the fields.
> Alex: And in our homes.
> Juan Carlos: And if they can run fast enough
> Sigrid: through the heat

> Alex: Our ring of fire stretched out over thousands of miles of desert sand
> All: Then they sure can clean (23-24).

Even when employment is ostensibly less demeaning, it is still bound to be poorly remunerated. In Coyote whatever degree of pride or independence Jenny may have had in her job as a waitress, it is shot down by the belittling remarks made by Antonio:

> Antonio: Look at you. I bet you're perfectly fine with Ines doing all the work.
> Jenny: No! I work at La Palapa.
> Antonio: And how much do you earn serving drinks in this ghost town?
> Jenny: Enough.
> Antonio: Enough to treat your mom's diabetes? You're bikini isn't even yours. What's yours Jenny? What have you earned? (11).

As unkind as his words may have been, there is a ring of truth to them. Despite gainful employment, Jenny's is still a subsistent, hand-me-down, hand-to-mouth existence.

Roles for immigrants are essentially predefined by circumstances and expectations from those at the centre, but there is one prescribed role that may be independent (or not) of the migration and settlement process. Sexism and gender roles are recurring themes in Latino Canadian drama. It would be easy here to slip into hot-blooded, Latino stereotypes. It would be easy to claim that machismo has a basis in fact. Preconceived notions of the man as the bread winner, the boss, the head of the household abound, while the little woman stays home mending clothes and making tamales. Representations such as these permeate Latino folklore, literature and possibly even culture. Consider that, to some extent, even the Spanish language is sexist. Generally speaking, masculine words end in "o", and feminine words end in "a", but collective words take on the masculine suffix. Thus, the plays examined herein have been referred to as *Latino* Canadian drama, despite the focus on women. Jorge Ginieniewicz's study again offers anecdotal descriptions of gender roles in Latin America. An Ecuadorian woman stated in her interview that:

> My mother is a very conservative person and represents the stereotype of the typical Latin American woman. Her principles are a white wedding... 'you must obey your husband', and things like that. ... The type of education we receive in our countries has disastrous consequences for Latin American women: for instance, 'women must obey

> men'; women must be submissive'. This situation has its origin not only in the kind of education that is taught but also embedded in the culture ... we have to obey our father, brothers and husbands. Religion plays a significant role in this issue too: there is a kind of indoctrination with regards to gender roles (78).

There are indeed gendered expectations, but contemporary *Latina* playwrights are beginning to whack holes in the piñata of male-female stereotypes. The automatic assumption of the 'man of the house' and the 'husband as jefe' are given their due early on. In Coyote the following exchange says all that need to be said about assumptions within a household:

> Dolores: And why should I trust you?
> Isidro: Because I'm your husband.
> Dolores: Husbands leave all the time. Some of them die in the desert. Others die in another woman's arms.
> ...
> Isidro: I could disappear one day. And here you'll be at our sink, washing dishes. Waiting. Thinking I'll be home by supper (33).

Isidro clearly needs to work on his rhetorical strategies since "because I'm your husband" does little to inspire confidence or to justify his choices. Dolores can do little to challenge him, though; her hands are raw from constant immersion in turbid dishwater, while her tired feet can do little more than prop her up by the sink.

Automatically assumed gender roles apply across the spectrum, not simply within the confines of marriage, as can be seen in the following exchange between Harry Love and his paramour in Three Fingered Jack:

> Harry Love (to Lola Montez): Don't you start in on me. I didn't come here to get lectured. I got a wife for that (14).

Though set in a very different time and place, sexism and gendered expectations are front and centre in Three Fingered Jack. As with other Latino Canadian plays, there is so much packed into a given scene or given line of dialogue, that very little stands in isolation; to wit, the sexism and gender role dynamics that exist between Lola Montez and Harry Love also serve as an opportunity to showcase racism:

> Harry Love: You get thirty percent. And a reduction in the interest you owe me.

> Lola Montez: I don't know Love. I'm gonna have to dance for Mexicans and Chinese, you know how I hate that! They're grabby and-
> ...
> Harry Love (grabbing her arm tightly): You don't and I'll make sure Lola Montez never works in this town again (15).

So, in a brutal burst of magnanimity, Harry is willing to allow Lola to do all the work - not just the dancing, but also the show and the sales pitch - for which she gets less than a third of the revenue, and all this for a role she vociferously does not wish to play at all, reductions in usurious interest rates notwithstanding.

That women are subjugated to sexism is almost a given, but the way that violence - a too frequent by-product of sexism - has affected the lives of many Latinas on stage is beyond disturbing. The storyline of <u>Three Fingered Jack</u> is precipitated by the rape of Rosita Feliz (not doubt not very *feliz*) before the time in which the play takes place. Joaquin Murieta - Rosita's husband - makes avenging her violation his mission, but he is killed in the process. Rosita, in turn, seeks to avenge her husband's death by disguising herself as Three Fingered Jack, supposedly a member of Murieta's posse. In a showdown between Rosita and Harry Love, he unveils her disguise. When Love realizes this *bandito* is actually a woman, he attempts to sexually assault her. It need not be pointed out how ironic Harry Love's name is.

Meanwhile, Lola Montez – never one to be mistaken for a pillar of virtue or a bastion of integrity – is witness to the confrontation between Love and Rosita. In a split second decision, the bonds of sisterhood plus her hastily discarded loyalty to Love prompt Lola to come to the rescue of Rosita, although self-serving instinct coupled with opportunistic, resentment-fuelled revenge may have been part of Lola's motivation. Whatever the catalyst, Lola grabs the gun, fires it, and kills Love. In the end, Rosita - the woman who has lost everything: a husband, a brother, and others to the violence of the time and place - somehow emerges as the victor, whose spirit survives despite so many casualties. Ironically, Lola - the woman who seemed to have opportunities and who was born on the privileged side of the border - ends up either doing the wrong thing for the right reasons, or the right thing for the wrong reasons. Whatever the case, the death of Harry Love effected Lola's emancipation while coming to Rosita's rescue.

While Rosita, posing as Three Fingered Jack, narrowly escaped a sexual assault at the hands of Harry Love, the autobiographical character Carmen in Aguirre's play The Trigger was not so lucky. Ostensibly, the play is about violence and the violation of the main character, but in many ways this is a representation of the bigger picture, or as Gilbert and Tompkins contend, "theatrical images of sexual violence can have more than merely illustrative functions; in some instances they also challenge the voyeuristic gaze of the white spectator, inviting him/her to admit complicity in that violence" (214). The story is about survival and individual strength, and the physical nightmare is symbolic of the migrant's experiences in both the native land and the adopted home. There is a metaphoric element of rape among many immigrants: rape of their identities and of their dreams. What they are willing to give is often at odds with what is taken from them: pride, dignity, and respect. Carmen's father directs his impotent rage at their new country while simultaneously blaming his daughter for being raped by saying: "What were you thinking? What were you thinking? ... I hate this fucking country I hate this fucking country I hate this fucking country ... Look at my girl, oh, God, look at my girl..." (38).

Carmen does not wrap herself in a blanket of bitterness, though, and, unlike her father, she manages to shelve her anger. A fighting spirit was ingrained in Carmen during her youth in South America. She is no stranger to conflict and violence; she alludes to having been exposed to it in her native country as a youngster: "I had heard many bullets in my life thus far, but they were always outside" (32). Carmen the young girl fantasizes about a lover with whom she would liberate and unite all of Latin America. In the fantasy, she would be "declared President of the Revolutionary Nations of Latin America and [her lover/husband would be] Minister of Defense" (28). It is ironic that in her dream-world she attains what is essentially the highest office of the region, but that her mate and partner is still deemed Minister of *Defense*. The foreshadowing is none too subtle, as later on it becomes clear that there was no one to protect and defend her when the rapist attacked her in the forest near her school.

The Trigger opens with a reference to Carmen's birth, at which time her mother said, "This girl will make her own choices" (21). The expression of this feminist wish, unfortunately, has little to stand on, and the hopes her mother embedded in this prognostication are soon violently crushed. Rape is the

most invasive and most violent experience Carmen encounters – and at such a young age – but it is only one example within Latino Canadian drama in which circumstances and situations negate free will and autonomy. Carmen claims on page 27 that she was "raised to be a revolutionary" and instead is forced into a situation that physically makes her a victim. No matter the degree of one's individual strength, shame and blame aid and abet the ascendancy of victimhood. In The Trigger, Carmen wonders: "Maybe if I hadn't shaved my legs, I wouldn't have gotten raped. I mean, maybe trying to be sexy draws rape to you" (37). Carmen carries the stigma further, by comparing herself to others when she says "their daughters are not dirty. Like me" (51). Although she is talking about the rape, the words can just as easily be applied to immigrants who are wont to compare themselves with others, and who conclude or are told that they are 'dirty,' like the Mexican migrants in Coyote.

The assault – too embarrassingly unseemly to contemplate - is never discussed. As stated in an edict from Carmen's father: "We will never talk about this. And you will not mention it to anybody. If you tell people, they will point. They will shame you. They'll say terrible things about you, daughter" (9). Carmen echoes her father's position, and at the same time indicates the degree to which propaganda about the Latin American cause has permeated her outlook, to such an extent that she buries the rape, and folds it into the context of Latino politics.... all at the tender age of thirteen: "We will never talk about this. Which is good. It's good because now I don't have to tell my mother, who is living in Bolivia, where she hides Chilean revolutionaries in her house. This [the rape] is nothing. Hiding revolutionaries in your house, that's something. This is nothing" (40). Shame is but a short step away from self-pity, a trait loathed among her cultural peers: "The day of the rape is over and it is never spoken of again. Because speaking of it would mean you feel sorry for yourself, and in a Chilean family living in exile, that is strictly forbidden. One feels sorry for the executed. For the tortured. For the disappeared. One gives one's life for the cause. But one never gives one's life for oneself. That would be considered bourgeois" (45-46). Instead of becoming steeped in self-pity, the teenaged girl forces herself to focus on her future. She continues with her studies, steers clear of the usual teenaged temptations and applies to both medical school and law school.

Carmen is not the only female character to endure physical suffering, only to triumph over it and emerge as a stronger, more determined and resilient woman. In Refugee, Flaca survives cruel torture. A political agitator and Marxist university professor, Flaca was a threat to the Chilean power structures, who eventually put her in jail. During the many months of her imprisonment, she was interrogated, assaulted, and eventually had her nipples cut off by her captors. Nonetheless, like Carmen in The Trigger, Flaca does not give up or give in, nor does she allow violence to define who she is. Flaca stayed committed to the revolution and never succumbed to the interrogation, unlike her husband Fat Jorge, who told all when he was questioned by the authorities. Furthermore, Flaca slowly and eventually rebuilds her life and eventually becomes a university professor in Vancouver. Fat Jorge, on the other hand, eventually drinks himself to death.

It should be pointed out that the themes discussed herein are prominent in many forms of Latino Canadian literature, not just in theatre; furthermore, these themes have been noticeable since the first waves of immigrants arrived. In "Chilean Poetry in Canada: Avant-garde, Nostalgia and Commitment," (presented in 1988, published in 1990) Jorge Etcheverry commented on the marginalization expressed in the poetry of Chilean émigrés. He notes that these poets have a "sense of isolation in the Canadian environment" (299). Etcheverry refers to Alfredo Laverge's poem "The Multinational" (1985) to illustrate the sense of confusion and hardship immigrants endure:

> In this place
> insecurity is earthly
> without monastic complications
>
> In this place
> the chaos is general
> even if some are in control
>
> In this place
> depression is routine
> huddled up in the temples ... (qtd. in Etcheverry, 302).

Insecurity and chaos do indeed infiltrate into the lives of migrants and depression can easily become a by-product of displacement. As in the case of Latino Canadian drama, Etcheverry notes that poetry

negotiates the imbalance between countries and finding a place to call home. The poem "Santiago" by Claudio Duran illustrates both the need for belonging and the permanency of roots:

> How much, my ex and post-city
> almost mine now in this part of yourself
> ...
> City, tell me that
> you still have ground for me
> that my cells are still lying in my forefathers' grounds
> ...
> I carry your monuments on my skin
> nevertheless, the old corners are gone
> ...
> Where are you hiding, Santiago?
> ...
> are you hiding from me? (qtd. in Etcheverry, 303)

Displacement is not the only recurring theme in Latino Canadian literature. Like the ever-present conflict between two spaces and two identities, the theme of racism is also common in Latino Canadian poetry. In Erik Martinez's poem "A Man's Apparent Calm Before Going to a Party", the final lines of the poem shatter the delicate veneer of calm the man had tried to hold on to:

> During the party I ask a woman to dance.
> She scratches my face.
> Take your hands off me, you ass! she screams (qtd. in Etcheverry, 307).

Compare the above with the party scene in La Raza where the Latino guests are welcomed, but perhaps only due to the cachet associated with their exoticness.

Finally, Jorge Etcheverry makes a prediction at the end of "Chilean Poetry in Canada" that "the Chilean community is small and cannot constitute an ethnoculturally and linguistically differentiated market, and that ... Chilean literature in Canada will not consolidate its characteristics long enough to be considered an ethno-cultural literature in Canada" (309). The folks attached to the Alameda Theatre Company would disagree with this prediction, although they may be more inclined to claim that Latino Canadian writing as a whole is much greater than its constituents.

The various hardships faced by Latino immigrants are well-documented in many Latino Canadian plays. Veronis outlines several of the challenges they face, summarizing it thus: "Like many new

immigrants, Latin Americans are socially, economically and politically marginalized when compared to 'traditional' immigrants (from Europe several generations ago) and from Canadians in general. Their achievement is lower..." (462). Whether as a subtle leitmotif or a dominant theme, Latino Canadian drama encompasses or comments on the many socio-economic-political hurdles that Latino immigrants must overcome in real life. Additionally, in an examination of plays by Carmen Aguirre, Marilo Nunez, Emma Ari Beltran and Catherine Hernandez, and Amaranta Leyva, one begins to see not only the emerging prevalence of themes such as sexism and gender roles, but in these works, one has an opportunity to examine them in bas-relief and alto-relief against all the issues attendant to migration, cultural identity, racism and displacement. In these plays, one can witness the introduction of strong, vibrant Latina women and strong Latino voices on Canadian stages. Verisimilitude has a starring role in Latino Canadian drama, a branch of theatre which may comfortably be described as the margins taking centre stage.

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