

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Salsa Epistemology:

On The Present, Utopia, and the Caribbean Intervention in Critical Theory

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Comparative Literature

by

Kristie Soares

Committee in charge:

Professor Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, Chair

Professor Chela Sandoval

Professor Ellie Hernández

June 2015

The dissertation of Kristie Soares is approved.

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May 2015

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by

Kristie Soares

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation comes from what my parents already knew and taught me. I learned some fancy words along the way, but most of the knowledge belongs to them and to my community of dancing/*cafetera*-wielding/laughing/DJ-Laz-listening/*perreando* Cubans and Brazilians in Miami. I am so grateful to these communities and to my parents—Ronnie and Maria Soares—for living their lives in a way that not only inspires me, but also shows critical theory a thing or two.

I am lucky enough to be married to the smartest person I have ever known. My wife, Emily Scheines, has the singular ability to plan a political campaign while checking my logic on Anzaldúan theory and putting the finishing touches on butternut squash lasagna. Without you, my love, I would have starved and misquoted. I would have never discovered burrata and never read *Kindred*. Thank you for being everything.

I am fortunate enough to have best friends as silly as they are successful: Miguel Nolla, MaryAnn Holland, Laura Rodriguez, and Loren Beer have acted in my Kendale Elementary and Arvida Middle stage productions, proofread my college papers, visited me when I moved to the mountains, picked up the check when I couldn't, reached out to my parents when I was living far away, reminded me to meditate, listened to my job talks, sent me articles for my research, bought me a computer, made me ride a mechanical bull... Stop it you guys. You rock.

Then there's Katrina Ruiz, who kept me writing creatively and performing when all I wanted to do was wear elbow patches. Guapa, as Cristina says, "Pa'lante, pa'lante, pa'tras ni pa' coger impulso." James Molina, for always volunteering to drive since we were sixteen years old so that I could sit in the passenger seat while we talk philosophy. Irina Popescu

and Javier Cikota: you have healed me with your futon and your Turkish coffee and your hiking and your wine. Thank you for being family. My LA-based dissertation writing group: writing is a solitary process and I'm so grateful to have found you. Melissa Netto: Dude. Getting a PhD has got nothing on being a super mom. You inspire me. Katia Netto who gave me my first copy of *This Bridge Called My Back*. If people like you and Fredda Rubin hadn't fought the good fight, dissertations like this one simply couldn't exist. Vóvó Jandyra, for helping me understand that humor and wisdom are often synonymous. Tia Sonia, for being the first nerd I ever met and the first meditator—you are me of the future. Tia Isa, you are the most resilient and the most joyful person I know. You taught me that those two things could go together. Desi: you're a German Shepherd and you can't read this, but you should know that your little face keeps me going day after day.

I'm a person that collects mentors, and I'm fortunate to have the following brilliant people to thank for guiding me along this path: First my chair, Carl Gutiérrez-Jones. Carl, you've been incredibly giving of your time, your emotional energy, and your patience throughout this multi-year process. I can't tell you how grateful I am to have had someone as grounded, brilliant, and compassionate as you as my guide into academia. Ellie Hernández and Chela Sandoval—thank you for introducing me to decolonial Chicana theorists! I have you to thank for the Latina/o studies scholar that I have become. Stephanie Batiste: you taught me that being a scholar-performer was something that people did, and encouraged me to do it myself. You made academia fun again. Juan Pablo Lupi: the day you introduced me to Lezama changed my life! Cristina Venegas: I never knew I wanted to be a media scholar until I met you and you encouraged me to write about Pitbull. Robert Buffington: Rob, eight years later I can still see the traces of our conversations in my work.

Radhule Weininger: compassion meditation is the most important thing I've learned in the past decade, and I'm grateful to you for being my teacher.

And last but not least, my DAWGs (Dope-Ass-Writing-Group...there I said it). Shannon Brennan, Jessica Lopez Lyman, and Alison Reed, thank you most of all. You are alchemists—you turn germs of ideas into polished prose! Thank you for your time, your compassion, your brilliance. May the future of academia look just like the three of you.

And one last thing: I am grateful to Pitbull, who reps the “305” and whose music makes me feel at home anywhere I go. Pitbull has more wisdom than we give him credit for. He is right when he says that when there is nothing left to try, you just gotta *¡Dale!*

And now, as Fulanito would say, *que comience la fiesta...*

VITA OF KRISTIE SOARES  
May 2015

**Education**

---

**University of California, Santa Barbara**

Ph.D., Comparative Literature, expected June 2015

Dissertation: "Salsa Epistemology: The Present, Utopia, and the Caribbean Intervention in Critical Theory"

Committee: Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, Chela Sandoval, Ellie Hernández

Graduate of International Language Schools of Canada French Program, July 2012  
Montreal, Canada

Graduate of Northwestern University Black Feminist Performance Institute, June 2011  
Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University

**University of Colorado, Boulder**

M.A., Comparative Literature, May 2009

Graduate Certificate in Women & Gender Studies

Thesis: "Traveling Queer Subjects: Homosexuality in the Cuban Diaspora"

**University of Florida**

B.A., English and Women's Studies, June 2006

Graduated *cum laude*

Graduate of Global Institute for Leadership and Civic Development, Havana, Cuba  
Semester Abroad in Havana, Cuba, Summer 2004

**Research Interests**

---

- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Caribbean Literature and Popular Culture
- U.S. Latina/o Literature and Media
- Queer of Color Critique
- Chicana Feminist Philosophy
- Hemispheric American Studies
- Performance Cultures of the Americas
- 20<sup>th</sup> Century Political Theory

**Publications**

---

**Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles**

"*Garzona* Nationalism: The Confluence of Gender, Sexuality and Citizenship in the Cuban Republic." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 35.3 (2014).

"Traveling Queer Subjects: Homosexuality in the Cuban Diaspora." *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 45.3 (2011).

"From Canary Birds to Suffrage: Lavinia's Feminist Role in *Who Would Have Thought It?*" *Letras Femeninas* 35.2 (2009): 211-229.

### **Peer-Reviewed Chapters in Edited Books**

“The Political Implications of Playing Hopefully: A Negotiation of the Present and the Utopic in Queer Theory.” *The Un/Making of Latina/o Citizenship: Culture, Politics and Aesthetics*. Ed. Ellie D. Hernández and Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

“Who Do I Have to Forgive to Move On From This Place?: Meditations from a Third World Feminist Lesbian.” *Queer Girls in the Class: Lesbian Teachers and Students Tell Their Classroom Stories*. Ed. Lori Horvitz. New York: Peter Lang, 2011.

### **Introductions**

Introduction. “Latin America: A Special Issue.” Spec. issue of *Counterpoise Magazine* 9.1 (2005).

### **Creative Publications and Performances**

“Arroz Con Mango.” Original play co-written with Katrina Ruiz. Staged reading at University of California, Santa Barbara, May 8, 2014.

“Saturday Night Salsa.” *Askew: A Poetry Journal* 14 (Spring/Summer 2013).

Featured Poet. The 2012 Whitman-Stein Poetry Fest. Santa Barbara City College. April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012

“Las Reinas del Sazón.” Invited alongside Katrina Ruiz to perform an original piece at the Ultimate Latina Theatre Festival at the Nuyorican Poets Café, October 2009.

“Cuban, Brazilian, Bisexual Me.” *Consciousness-Raising: A Primer for Multicultural Counseling*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Ed. Woodrow M. Parker, Mary A. Fukuyama. Springfield: Thomas Books, 2007.

### **Book Reviews**

Timothy A. Wise, Hilda Salazar, and Laura Carlsen, eds., *Confronting Globalization: Economic Integration and Popular Resistance in Mexico*. Reviewed for *Counterpoise Magazine* 8.1/2 (2004).

Carol Queen. *The Leather Daddy and the Femme*. Reviewed for *Counterpoise Magazine* 8.1/2 (2004).

### **Guest Editorships**

“Latin America: A Special Issue.” Ed. Kristie Soares. Spec. issue of *Counterpoise Magazine* 9.1 (2005). [*Counterpoise Magazine* is an academic book review journal dedicated to the independent press. I proposed and edited this special edition.]



## **Academic Appointments**

---

### **University of California, Santa Barbara, Comparative Literature Program**

#### **Instructor on Record / Teaching Associate**

CL 100, Introduction to Comparative Literature, Spring 2015

CL 34, Performance Literature of the Americas, Summer 2013

CL 34, Wild Tongues: Contemporary Latina Literature and Cultural Production, Summer 2012

#### **Teaching Assistant**

CL 34, Pan-Caribbean Literary Culture, Fall 2011

### **University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of English**

#### **Teaching Assistant**

ENGL 104A, American Literature 1900-Present, Winter 2015

ENGL 10, Introduction to Literary Study, Fall 2014

#### **Research Assistant**

Hemispheric South/s Research Initiative, Fall 2010-Spring 2012

### **University of California, Santa Barbara, Black Studies Department**

#### **Reader**

BL ST 130B, Francophone Novel, Spring 2014

### **University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Theatre & Dance**

#### **Co-Instructor / Writing Mentor**

THTR 43, The People's Voice, Summer 2012 and 2013

### **University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Chicana/o Studies**

#### **Research Assistant**

Editorial Research Assistant, Fall 2012-Spring 2013

### **University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Feminist Studies**

#### **Teaching Assistant**

FEM ST 60, Women of Color, Winter 2011 and 2012

FEM ST 80, Introduction to LGBTQ Studies, Fall 2010 and 2012

### **University of Colorado, Boulder, Department of Spanish & Portuguese**

#### **Instructor on Record**

PORT 1010, Introduction to Portuguese Language, Fall 2008

PORT 1020, Introduction to Portuguese Language Part II, Spring 2009

SPAN 1010, Introduction to Spanish Language, Fall 2007

SPAN 1020, Introduction to Spanish Language Part II, Spring & Summer 2008

### **University of Colorado, Boulder, Department of History**

#### **Reader**

Colonial Mexican History, Summer 2008

### **Trilogy High School, Gainesville Florida**

#### **Instructor on Record**

Spanish II, 2005-2006

## **Fellowships and Awards**

---

- Academic Senate Travel Grant**, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2014.
- Regents Special Fellowship**, Graduate Division, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2013-14 & 2009-10.
- Dissertation Block Grant**, Comparative Literature Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, Winter and Spring 2013 [teaching relief].
- Block Grant for French Language Study in Montreal, Canada**, Comparative Literature Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, Summer 2012.
- Comparative Literature Program Graduate Teaching Award**, Comparative Literature Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring 2012
- Feminist Studies Distinguished Graduate Teaching Award (Nominated)**, Department of Feminist Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring 2012.
- GSA Excellence in Teaching Award (Nominated)**, Graduate Student Association, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring 2012.
- Block Research Grant**, Comparative Literature Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring 2012 [teaching relief].
- IHC Graduate Collaborative Research Grant**, Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 2012 [To support conference organizing]
- Scholarship to Northwestern University Black Feminist Performance Institute**, Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, June 2011.
- UC Mexus Research Grant**, University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States, July 2011 [supported my project “The Ethics of Relation: A Healing Performance Community Activism Project”].
- Travel Sponsorship**, Center for Global Culture and Communication and Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, May 2011 [Grant to attend Black Feminist Performance Institute].
- Central Fellowship**, Comparative Literature Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring 2011 [to relieve me from teaching duties for one academic quarter].
- Travel Grant**, University of California, Santa Barbara and University of Colorado, Boulder 2008, 2009, 2010.
- Scholar’s Award**, Consortium for Literature, Theory and Culture, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2009.
- Comparative Literature Merit Award**, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2008.
- Comparative Literature Fellowship**, Department of Comparative Literature, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2007.
- CLAS Four-Year Scholar Award**, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, University of Florida, 2006.
- O. Ruth McQuown Award**, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, University of Florida, 2005. [Awarded to a female student for academic achievements and demonstrated commitment to social issues]
- Hispanic Scholarship Fund Scholar**, Hispanic Scholarship Fund, 2003 & 2002.
- National Hispanic Scholar**, College Board, 2002.

## Conference Participation

---

- “Zones of Possibility: Queer Forms of Lezamian and Anzaldúan Consciousness,” at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial Latina/o Literary Theory and Criticism Conference, “Latina/o Utopias, Futures, Forms and the Will of Literature,” John Jay College of Criminal Justice, April 2015.
- Masculinity, Nationalism, and the Insistence of Utopia. [Moderator] at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Biennial Latina/o Literary Theory and Criticism Conference, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, April 2015.
- “‘For All We Know We Might Not Get Tomorrow’: Women’s Bodies and Anti-Capitalist Models of Success in Pitbull’s Music” at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November 2014.
- Reinventing Fashionistas: Women of Color Fashion Modification, Community, and Small Businesses [Moderator] at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference, San Juan, Puerto Rico, November 2014.
- “Performance as Pedagogy: Embodying Critical Intersectionalities in the Classroom” [Organizer and Panelist], National Association for Ethnic Studies Annual Conference, April 2014.
- “Salsa Epistemology: Negotiating the Present and the Utopic in the Work of Erika Lopez” [Organizer and Panelist], Thinking Gender Conference, University of California, Los Angeles, February 2013.
- “Flow/s: A Critical Theory Performance Piece” at Bodies in Space: A Guerilla-Style Performance Conference and Theory Bake-Off, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 2012.
- “Confronting Utopia: The Politics of Perfection in Cuban Sexuality Studies” at the Critical Sexualities Research Symposia, University of California, Santa Barbara, March 2012.
- “Is Looseness the Caribbean Way: Analyzing Popular Culture in the 1970s Caribbean Diaspora” at Caribbean Crossroads Conference, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 2012.
- “The Political Implications of Playing Hopefully: A Negotiation of the Present and Utopic in Queer Theory,” a roundtable discussion with Siobhan Somerville, at The Past Present and Future of Feminist Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 2012.
- Northwestern University Black Feminist Performance Institute (bringing together a small group of top graduate performance scholars from around the U.S.), Sponsored by Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University, June 2011.
- “Move/Touch/Breathe: A Critical Theory Performance Piece” at Bodies in Space: A Guerilla-Style Performance Conference and Theory Bake-Off, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 2011.
- “From ‘Mr. 305’ to ‘Mr. Worldwide’: Pitbull and the Globalization of Miami” at the Lusophone and Hispanic Graduate Student Conference, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 2011.
- “Queering El Padre: José Lezama Lima as Queer Theorist” declined participation at the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual Kentucky Foreign language Conference, University of Kentucky, Lexington, 2011.

- “Cuban Feminist and (Anti-) Lesbian Politics: Mariblanca Sabas Alomá” at the 63<sup>rd</sup> Annual Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, University of Kentucky, Lexington, 2010.
- “Mariblanca Sabas Alomá: A Foundational Lesbian Mother for the Cuban Nation” at the Women’s Center Graduate Student Symposium, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010.
- “Mariblanca Sabas Alomá: A Foundational Lesbian Mother for the Cuban Nation” at the Consortium for Literature, Theory and Culture Winter Colloquium, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010.
- “Traveling Queer Subjects: Homosexuality in the Cuban Diaspora” at the American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting: Harvard University, 2009.
- “From Canary Birds to Suffrage: Lavinia’s Feminist Role in *Who Would Have Thought It?*” at the XIV Annual Mexican Conference: University of California, Irvine, 2008.

### **Invited Lectures and Workshops**

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- “Writing the Body Politic.” Invited to facilitate an art/activism workshop at Scripps College. April 2015.
- “The Odyssey Project.” Invited to lead a group of youth from a juvenile detention facility, as well as several undergraduates, in personal writing exercises for an eventual re-writing and staging of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. June 2012 and June 2013.
- WriteGirl*. Monthly creative writing workshops, which introduce girls ages 13-18 in the Los Angeles area to creative writing under the mentorship of a professional woman writer. September 2012-May 2013.
- “Teaching Racism and Sexism in a Racialized and Sexualized World.” Invited alongside Marzia Milazzo to design and present this pedagogical workshop to instructors in Comparative Literature, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Feminist Studies, and Film & Media Studies. Also compiled and distributed 200-page resource guide including information on issues such as immigration, reproductive justice, prison reform, etc.
- “Amigas Positivas Youth Summit.” Invited to present a performance poetry and meditation workshop for Latina youth in Santa Barbara Unified School District.
- “‘Chongalicious’: On Controlling Images of Latina Women” Invited lecture in Women of Color Course, University of California, Santa Barbara, March 2012.
- “Slam!: A Poetry Workshop” Invited with Marzia Milazzo to facilitate performance poetry workshop for youth on juvenile probation in Los Prietos Boys’ Camp, Santa Barbara, CA, May 2011.
- “Introduction to LGBTQ Terminology.” Invited lecture in Women of Color course, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 2011.
- “Discovering Yourself Through Poetry.” Invited with Marzia Milazzo to facilitate a performance poetry workshop for at-risk Latino students at San Marcos High School, Goleta, CA, February 2011.
- “Using Poetry to Go From the Barrio to Academia.” Invited with Marzia Milazzo to facilitate a performance poetry workshop for high school students during the “From the Barrio to Academia Outreach Program Conference,” University of California, Santa Barbara, January 2011.
- “Homosexuality in the Cuban and Cuban-American Communities.” Invited lecture in Intro to LGBTQ Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, November 2010.

## **Events and Conferences Organized**

---

- Organizer for 2013 Comparative Literature PhD Candidate Job Market Workshop and Digital Humanities Lecture by Professor Lisa Swanstrom.
- Conference Co-Creator and Co-Organizer for “Bodies in Space III: A Guerilla-Style Graduate Conference,” April 2013, University of California, Santa Barbara. I co-created this yearly inter-departmental conference, which assembles a small group of graduate scholars working through embodied methods such as poetry and dance to investigate the body's relationship to environment, sustainability, and justice.
- Conference Co-Creator and Co-Organizer for “Flow/s: A Guerilla-Style Performance Conference and Theory Bake Off,” May 2012, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Graduate Assistant for “Gender, Creative Dissidence, and the Discourses of African Diaspora,” May 2012, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Graduate Organizer for lecture by Professor Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, April 2012, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Graduate Organizer for “Comparative Transnationalisms: Studying Race from a Hemispheric Lens,” October 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Graduate Organizer for lecture by Professor Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, “It's Always 9/11: Existential Crises, and Caribbean Responses,” September 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Conference Co-Creator and Organizer for “Bodies in Space: A Guerilla-Style Performance Conference and Theory Bake-Off,” May 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Graduate Organizer for “Black Performance Theory 2011 :: Hemispheres & Souths” May 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara. Under the direction of Dr. Stephanie Batiste, I was responsible for organizing all aspects of this bi-annual conference, held at UCSB in 2011, which brings together senior performance scholars working on the Black diaspora.
- Co-Organizer for lecture by National Book Circle Critics Award winner Juan Felipe Herrera, “‘The Other Show’: The Experimental Vaudeville of Others and Non-Others,” April 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara
- Graduate Organizer for “Reimagining the Hemispheric South Conference,” January 2011, University of California, Santa Barbara. Under the direction of Dr. Carl Gutierrez-Jones, I was responsible for helping to organize this conference, which examined articulations of the Americas as part of the “Global South,” with a keynote by Dr. Ileana Rodriguez.

## **Academic Service**

---

- Comparative Literature Advisory Board, Graduate Representative, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2012-2013.
- Member of the Comparative Literature Program Lecture Committee, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010-2011.
- Advisory Board Member for Counterpoise Magazine, 2009-2011.

## **Professional Memberships/Trainings**

---

National Association for Ethnic Studies

National Women's Studies Association

American Studies Association

American Comparative Literature Association

Asociación Internacional de Literatura y Cultura Femenina Hispánica

Modern Language Association

Certified Mediator in the State of California, June 2013

Certified by Asian Pacific American Dispute Resolution Center, Los Angeles

U.C. Intercampus Exchange, Spring 2011

University of California, Los Angeles

Studied under Dr. Elizabeth Marchant, Chair, Department of Women's Studies

## **Languages**

---

English

Native Language

Spanish

Second Native Language

Portuguese

Third Native Language

French

Advanced Knowledge

## ABSTRACT

Salsa Epistemology:

On The Present, Utopia, and the Caribbean Intervention in Critical Theory

by

Kristie Soares

This dissertation engages with salsa, a Spanish Caribbean music and dance tradition of embodied playfulness, to show how joy figures as an integral part of social justice work. It argues that the Cuba, Puerto Rico, and their diasporic communities have generated a particular mode of consciousness that—while often fetishized and dismissed as carefree and erotic island living—actually dismantles hegemonic forms of gender, sexualization, and racialization. I term this consciousness “salsa epistemology,” and define it as an embodied and playful way of knowing produced through Spanish Caribbean cultural practices. Salsa epistemology allows Spanish Caribbean people to navigate hardship by existing *simultaneously* in the everyday material circumstances of their lives *and* in the utopian spaces crafted in their media, literature, and philosophy. Both literally and metaphorically, it is the ability to think while one dances, or to dance while one thinks.

This dissertation constructs a genealogy of queer cultural production in the Spanish Caribbean during the last 60 years. It privileges queer texts because the convergence of queerness and Caribbeanness produces a generative space for understanding the role of critical utopian ways of knowing, such as salsa epistemology. Indeed it argues that salsa epistemology helps us rethink the social justice lens of both Latina/o Studies and Queer Theory by refusing to engage in the dichotomous assumption that we must attain some level of socio-political justice in order to entertain the possibility of utopia. It pushes scholars to

rethink playfully how temporality has been understood in critical theory by acknowledging the back and forth that always exists between the present moment and utopia. By suggesting that embodied joy in the present is a powerful force in creating a more equitable future, this dissertation rethinks the future-oriented framework of most social justice movements to argue that justice can be reconceived as something joyful, and that the joyful can be reconceived as something just.

This dissertation unfolds in five chapters, each of which elaborates a tactic of salsa epistemology at work in Spanish Caribbean written, visual, or aural culture. Chapter one, “Playing Hopefully: The Present and the Utopic in Queer Theory and Puerto Rican Literature,” posits “play” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. Chapter two, “Zones of Possibility and Other Forms of Lezarian Consciousness,” examines “possibility” as a temporal framework and a tactic of salsa epistemology. Chapter three, “Penetrating Utopia: Sex as Politics in Queer Cuban Exile Literature,” posits “sex” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. Chapter four, “Choteo as a Tactic of Resilience in *¿Qué Pasa U.S.A.?*” posits “choteo,” a Cuban form of humor loosely translated as “kidding,” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. The final chapter, “Capitalism *con salsa*: Money and Popular Culture in the Cuban Diaspora” suggests a non-teleological engagement with capitalism as a tactic of salsa epistemology. Finally, the conclusion, “An Epistemology of Resilience,” meditates on my own personal journey to salsa epistemology and on the larger implications of the work as a whole for the survival of the United States’ largest growing ethnic group: Latina/os.



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## Introduction

### **“Dancing with Death: What Celia Cruz’s Funeral Means for Caribbean Survival”**

#### **Para Celia (For Celia)**

The Queen of Salsa, Cuban singer Celia Cruz, passed away on July 16, 2003. On July 18, 2003 her body was flown from New Jersey to Miami for one of two funerals that would be held in her honor. At the funeral held on July 19<sup>th</sup> in Miami, Cruz’s dead body lay covered in an extravagant sequined white gown and wearing her signature platinum blond wig—a fitting end to the life of a Cuban American icon whose public image was built on a queer aesthetic of over-the-top femininity. Over 100,000 people waited to kiss the Cuban-flag covered coffin that day, many dancing as the artist’s music played over the loud speaker. Alongside the mourning priests and choirboys were drag queens dressed up as Cruz and altars stacked with cigars. The juxtaposition of the sacred and profane, the normative and non-normative, echoed Cruz’s own intentional blurring of these lines through her drag-like portrayal of womanhood.

Throughout her career Cruz was known as much for her music as for the extravagance of her dress and for the ebullience of her spirit. In a 1997 interview with Marvette Pérez, curator of Latino History and Culture at the Smithsonian, Cruz said of her style of dress: “I love glitter and shiny colors, too. There are those who say that bright colors make you look youthful. I don’t do it for that; I do it because I like it. Even when I’m 90 years old, if I’m still singing I’m still going to wear bright colors” (M. Pérez).<sup>1</sup> Cruz’s passion for glitter and bright colors continued until her death at the age of 77. This zest for

life was also echoed in her lyrics, perhaps best exemplified in her 1998 hit, “La Vida es un Carnaval”:

“Todo aquel que piense que la vida es desigual,	[To everyone who thinks that life is unfair]
tiene que saber que no es asi,	[You have to know that it’s not that way]
que la vida es una hermosura, hay que vivirla.	[That life is so beautiful you have to live it]
Todo aquel que piense que está solo y que está mal,	[To all who think they are alone and hurt]
tiene que saber que no es asi,	[You have to know it’s not that way]
que en la vida no hay nadie solo, siempre hay alguien.	[That no one is alone in life, there is always someone]

Ay, no hay que llorar, que la vida es un carnaval,	[Ay, you don’t have to cry, life is a carnival]
es mas bello vivir cantando.	[It’s more beautiful to live singing]
Oh, oh, oh, Ay, no hay que llorar,	[Oh, oh, oh, ay, you don’t have to cry]
que la vida es un carnaval	[Life is a carnival]
y las penas se van cantando.”	[And your sorrows will disappear while singing]

Cruz directs the song to “todo aquel que piense que la vida es desigual” [to everyone that thinks life is unfair], offering the suggestion “que en la vida no hay nadie solo, siempre hay alguien” [That no one is alone in life, there is always someone]. Cruz goes on to suggest that rather than live ones life crying, it is wiser to realize that “las penas se van cantando” [your sorrows will disappear while singing]. This advice, to gain distance from one’s problems by entering into song, is representative of the philosophy that Cruz embodied in her music and public life. For Cruz, at least as the public knew her, life really was a carnival to be enjoyed.

It is no surprise, then, that Cruz’s fans mourned her passing with the same performative displays of joy that she exhibited during her life. Among these fans were members of Miami’s right wing, Cuban exile community—many waving Cuban flags as they

danced. For them Celia represented a sense of exilic nationalism, banned as she was from returning to her home nation by Fidel Castro's government. Jose Quiroga has described the response of exiles at Celia's funeral as a form of melancholy in *Cuban Palimpsests*. For Quiroga, Cruz's inability to die in Cuba, as she had wished, represented the greatest form of loss for the exile community; Not only were they unable to return, but so was the beloved Queen of Salsa. There were others, however, that waved their Cuban flags for entirely different reasons. Drag queens, gender benders, and members of the LGBTQ community came out in droves to celebrate Cruz's life. For them, Cruz had become the honorary queen of the queer Cuban community. Her use of drag-aesthetics had somehow queered her 40 years of marriage to her husband, Pedro Knight. Her message of unabashed joy in the face of hardship had somehow become a mantra for the queer community that adored her and the dozens of drag queens that adopted her persona every night in nightclubs across Miami and Cuba.<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation begins with Cruz's death because the joyful dancing we saw on stage at her concerts, among listeners when her music was played, and indeed among mourners at her funeral, is indicative of a larger phenomenon in the Spanish Caribbean. The joy of life we attribute to Cruz is less a personal attribute of hers than a way of understanding the world particular to Cuba and Puerto Rico, as well as their diasporic populations in the United States. Cruz's lyrics and persona are less about Celia, then, and more about a way of knowing that Spanish Caribbean people have developed to navigate the world in times of hardship.

The mode of knowing I am referring to is what I term “salsa epistemology.” I define salsa epistemology as an embodied and playful way of knowing produced through Cuban and Puerto Rican cultural practices. Like the salsa music Cruz produced, and the salsa dance she and her fans engaged in, salsa epistemology is a way of navigating the world through a joyful inhabitation of one’s body. It is this embodied playfulness that Cruz exhibited so frequently in her lifetime, and indeed this same embodied playfulness that the mourners at her funeral accessed when they chose to dance as though “la vida” were truly a “carnaval.”

### **Salsa Epistemology**

This dissertation engages with salsa, a Spanish Caribbean music and dance tradition of embodied playfulness, to show how joy figures as an integral part of social justice work. It argues that these Spanish Caribbean islands and their diasporic communities have generated a particular mode of consciousness that—while often fetishized and dismissed as carefree and erotic island living—actually destabilizes hegemonic forms of gender, sexualization, and racialization. Salsa epistemology allows Spanish Caribbean people to navigate hardship by existing simultaneously in the everyday material circumstances of their lives and in the utopian spaces crafted in their music, literature, and philosophy. Both literally and metaphorically, it is the embodied knowledge that allows one to think while one dances, or to dance while one thinks.

The practice that I call salsa epistemology has been integral to Caribbean resilience historically. It has emerged from the political and cultural upheaval that results from having been one of the world’s most influential trading centers—itsself the outcome of a horrific historical past made up of Spanish colonization, genocide of Native peoples, African slavery,

U.S. imperialism, and dictatorship. The embodied playfulness of Spanish Caribbean people emerges from an epistemological response to the brutality of the region's history. What outsiders perceive as lightheartedness is in fact a form of resilience against 500 years of hardship.

Theorists like Antonio Benítez-Rojo have postulated that the characteristics we observe in Caribbean people today developed first in response to the slave plantation economy. In *The Repeating Island* Benítez-Rojo argues that the “certain kind of way” that Caribbean people act—that is, the very essence of their Caribbeanness—is the result of performance, improvisation, and polyrhythm developed on the plantation (20). For Benítez-Rojo, even the simple act of walking can display the rhythm and performance that is at the heart of Caribbeanness. What the theorist begins to observe here is what he perceives to be the link between the musicality of Caribbean people and their easygoing nature. Although Benítez-Rojo does not close the circle to explain how these two are related, the hypothesis that he puts forth is that a Caribbean history of hardship—here represented by the plantation economy—has produced both rhythm and a carefree nature. *Salsa Epistemology* argues that the relationship between these traits and hardship is the result of an epistemological framework that understands the world through embodied playfulness, thereby linking these two characteristics—rhythm and carefreeness. As such these two characteristics are not co-existing, they are co-constituted by a mode of knowing that is at once embodied and playful.

Salsa epistemology, like the “certain kind of way” Caribbean people have about them, exists not only in salsa music and dance, but also in the literary, visual, aural, and embodied texts of the Spanish Caribbean. In all of its cultural forms, it elicits a disruption of damaging cultural norms such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. These hegemonic systems are

unsettled by the playfulness of salsa epistemology in the face of oppression. Like the drag queens dancing at Celia Cruz's funeral, those who enact salsa epistemology are able to do so precisely when confronted by difficulty, and in doing so are able to queer spaces that might otherwise not be queer at all.

The subversive potential of salsa epistemology provides a new vantage point for thinking about the social and political futures not just of queers and Spanish Caribbean people, but also of the United States' fastest growing ethnic group, Latina/os. This form of knowing is particularly crucial to Latina/o survival in the increasingly hostile political environment of the 21st century, because it uses positive affective expressions that go unpoliced and therefore uncriminalized, while transmuting negative affective experiences. Where joy is dismissed as harmless by the same hegemonic power structures that incarcerate youth of color in astounding numbers, the playful nature of salsa epistemology can produce forms of protest that are often not understood as such. It is precisely the unintelligibility of playfulness as protest that makes it such a powerful force.

### **The Utopian Nature of Salsa**

Through salsa epistemology Cubans and Puerto Ricans can be present in the everyday hardships of their lives—like having one's home foreclosed upon or being pulled over because of one's race—and at the same time access the utopian dimensions of their art and literature by laughing at a good joke or even dancing a salsa. For example, one can be sitting at the kitchen table with a pile of unpaid bills and still get up to dance a Celia Cruz salsa song when it comes on the radio, returning to the present with a new worldview provided by that utopian moment. In moments like these, Caribbean culture asks why we must wait for

utopia—why utopia must be deferred, even in the instance of hardship. This refusal to separate utopia and the present into two separate temporal frames disentangles the dichotomy between the now and the not yet, between the bad present and the good future. Utopia, in the Caribbean sense, is a way of understanding and experiencing the world regardless of outside circumstance—as is the case when one gets up to dance even though there are unpaid bills. On a societal level, salsa epistemology refuses to engage in dichotomous thinking that imagines we must attain some level of socio-political justice in order to entertain the possibility of utopia. It also refuses the corresponding assumption that upon attaining utopia we are immediately able to access the socio-political justice toward which we aspire. In the Caribbean, utopia is not a prerequisite for justice, nor is justice a prerequisite for utopia. When paired, however, we find that justice is reconceived as something joyful, and that the joyful is reconceived as something just.

I rely on the language of utopia to signify how salsa epistemology emerges from a utopian genealogy of Caribbean thought, which we will discuss at length, while at the same time coming from a profoundly pragmatic lineage. It is utopian inasmuch as it allows participants to be someplace else—the “no place” or “good place” as utopia is traditionally defined—while still remaining in the body. Accessing utopia in moments of hardship can also be quite pragmatic, however, particularly for people who lack the resources to immediately resolve the problems they face. In cases of institutional inequity and oppression, playfulness can be a useful antidote to despair.

This has certainly been the case in my own life, and my own experiences with the way of knowing I term “salsa epistemology” are what led me to this work. I was born to a Cuban mother and Brazilian father, both of whom immigrated to the U.S. for economic and



political reasons in the 1970s. I was raised in Miami, where I grew up in a household where someone was always singing or dancing, regardless of—and I now realize, because of—the bills that went unpaid. When I came out as a lesbian, I learned to navigate being a queer woman of color by dancing my way through the world—figuratively, but also literally. Now as a performance artist, I have learned the radical potential of dance and playfulness to create the liberatory performances spaces that Jill Dolan refers to as the “utopian performative.” Dolan’s idea that performance spaces allow us to temporarily transcend the socio-political power structures that limit us is, for me, not academic theory—it is lived experience. In the moments when I have embodied a character on stage or bared witness to a dance performance, I have been shaped in ways that profoundly impact my social activism. Salsa epistemology accesses the same utopian spaces that performance does, but in everyday life. Through embodied playfulness, Spanish Caribbean people are able to navigate their lives in a delicate dance between utopia and a real world present.

I first understood that there was something particular about the way that my parents and communities taught me to understand the world one night some years ago. There were 11 of us sitting in a circle in my parents’ living room that night. The occasion was a blessing for our new home. That is, the home that we had signed a new mortgage for, which was in fact our old home, the home in which I grew up, the home that we had almost lost to foreclosure. For four years leading up to this date my parents had struggled to renegotiate their mortgage as they also struggled to make the payments. Like so many others in Miami, including 5 out of the 8 friends present, they had lost their jobs, their cars, and in some cases their homes after the economic crash of 2008. South Florida was hit particularly hard after the real estate bubble burst, and particularly vulnerable were those who worked in construction or home

renovation, as my parents had. On this evening, however, we were celebrating a true miracle. After four years and more than twenty failed attempts to renegotiate their mortgage, my parents had succeeded in saving their house just a few weeks before it was to be sold on the foreclosure block. We had all gathered on this evening, then, to give thanks to a higher power for making this possible, to cry out the pains of the past, and to dance forward toward a brighter future. It is this scene, and the many others in the years leading up to it, which pushed me to write this dissertation. The dancing that took place that night wasn't just celebratory; it fortified us. There was something unusual about people that danced as they cried, I thought that night, and this dissertation is the result of that intuition.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Caribbean as the Birthplace of Salsa Epistemology**

“Havana. ‘The loveliest land that human eyes have ever seen.’ An enticing trip of fascinating interest to a gay and scintillating foreign capital. All the bubbling zest of Latin life in a matchless Southern climate.”

--Text from Ward Cruiseline Cuba Vacation Advertisement; 1928

“#Cuba We are all survivors... of the utopia.”

--Yoani Sanchez, @yoanifromcuba, June 17, 2013

The Caribbean is perceived as a carefree place, in large part, because of a history of other nations consuming it for fun and leisure. As the first epigraph above notes, for non-Caribbean people one of the main draws of the Caribbean is the “bubbling zest of Latin life” that I argue is actually salsa epistemology at work. Since the Spanish American war of 1898,

which made Puerto Rico a commonwealth of the U.S. and gave the U.S. temporary control of Cuba, U.S. citizens have traveled to the Spanish Caribbean for sun, sex, gambling, and relaxation.<sup>4</sup> The actual numbers of people from the U.S. traveling to the Spanish Caribbean have fluctuated with the rise and fall of various political regimes—for instance, there was almost no travel to Castro-led Cuba from 1959-2015, when President Obama lifted restrictions. The notion of the Spanish Caribbean as an exotic and decidedly un-serious paradise has remained constant, however. This is one reason that U.S.-based tourists, and even sometimes academics, have trouble understanding the region as a place of struggle and resistance. As Mimi Sheller argues in *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies*, the history of Western consumption of the Caribbean is so great—from enslavement, to tourism, to the sugarcane monoculture—that many remain blissfully (and perhaps purposefully) unaware of the questionable ethics behind such consumption.

In many ways the Spanish Caribbean has historically represented utopia in the Western imaginary. Travelers and businesspeople alike have seen the region as an escape from the seriousness of their own lives into a carnival of sorts—a place of bright costumes, loud music, and no rules. This dissertation argues that understanding the Caribbean *only* as carnival is a misreading, however. In many ways it is indeed a carnival, but only inasmuch as it is also carnivalesque. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously argued in *Rabelais and His World*, during carnival institutions and hierarchies are inverted in a joyful reordering of social norms. The carnival, then, is a useful social space in which new power formalizations are tried out without punishment. In this sense, the Caribbean is a year-round carnival, as the social reordering takes place not in a particular one-week period, but rather anywhere and anytime that salsa epistemology is present. In the carnivalesque sense, the embodied

playfulness of salsa epistemology is both leisure and a form of resilience against oppressive power structures.

The strain of utopian philosophy from which salsa epistemology emerges has existed in the Caribbean, at least in writing, for over a century. Cuban father of independence José Martí may be the most well known example of this, with his calls for a unified vision of the Americas not dependent on the United States in his 1891 *Nuestra América*. Other examples include Ramón Emeterio Betances and Eugenio María de Hostos, Puerto Rican intellectuals and advocates of independence, both of whom supported an Antillean Confederation made up of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, which would confront Spanish colonialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> What each of these founding fathers has in common is the unabashed utopianism of their calls for social and political action—some even going so far as to incorporate the word “utopia” into their writings. Although their ideas are rife with problematic gendered and racial implications, as is indicative of the time periods in which they wrote, the utopianism of their visions laid the foundations for a present-day salsa epistemology that accesses utopia as a way to deal with the hardship of the present.

In more recent times, this utopian genealogy has given rise to utopian political movements, such as the 1959 Cuban revolution. This utopianism has not been without its problems, to be sure, as world famous dissident Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez calls attention to in the second epigraph at the top of this section. Sánchez writes, in a 2013 tweet: “#Cuba We are all survivors... of the utopia.” The utopia Sánchez has “survived” is socialism, with the well documented curtailing of civil liberties that accompanied the expansion of social services in Cuba. While judging the success of the Cuban revolution is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the utopianism that underlay it is present equally among staunch-socialists

as it is among the opposition. What makes this region unique is that utopian thought is such a part of the fabric of Caribbean culture that movements on every side of the political spectrum engage with it.<sup>6</sup>

Of course this utopianism extends outside of the Spanish Caribbean, and although the embodied playfulness of salsa epistemology emerges specifically out of this cultural and geographic contexts, there are similar formulations elsewhere. For this reason it is useful to understand the Caribbean as a “meta-archipelago”—to quote Benítez-Rojo’s term to describe the Caribbean’s expanding reach beyond just the boundaries of the Caribbean sea. In Cuba and Puerto Rico it is salsa—and her sisters reggaeton, bomba, rumba, etc.—that exemplify embodied playfulness as a music and dance form. It is also true, however, that despite different histories, colonizing powers, and/or national languages, Caribbean nations share certain characteristics that make it so that a salsa epistemology in Puerto Rico may well be a “merengue” epistemology in the Dominican Republic, a “soca” epistemology in Trinidad, a “dance hall” epistemology in Jamaica, or a “calypso” epistemology in Martinique. Likewise, salsa epistemology’s genesis as an Afro-Caribbean way of knowing shares similarities with other Afro-diasporic epistemologies, such as Clyde Woods’ “blues epistemology” in *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s theorization of the African American signifying in *The Signifying Monkey*, E. Patrick Johnson’s reconciliation of religion and dance in Black Southern gay communities in “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark,” or Patricia Hill Collins’ black feminist epistemology in *Black Feminist Thought*. The similarities between these ways of knowing—among other things their emergence out of postcolonial societies, their emphasis on improvisation as a way of pushing back against colonial structures and institutions, etc.—demonstrate the

seriousness of leisure activities for social and political critique in the postcolonial African diaspora. Salsa epistemology's development in the Spanish Caribbean, then, is one example of strategies of playful resilience in the Caribbean meta-archipelago, but by no means the only one.

### **Salsa as a Musical Form**

Dominican-born Johnny Pacheco—the musician and businessman behind one of the most famous salsa ensembles in history, The Fania Allstars—coined the term “salsa music” in the early 1970s. The Fania Allstars ensemble, themselves a product of the mass-marketing Fania Records, are most often credited with being the originators of the salsa music sound.<sup>7</sup> This origin story is contentious, as it is widely understood that salsa music emerged as the fusion of various Puerto Rican and Cuban musical genres played together in the New York diaspora of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>8</sup> Pacheco did indeed coin the term “salsa” as a way to market the music produced under his Fania Records, though the salsa sound more accurately emerged at the intersection of various Caribbean musical genres and diasporic marketing schemes.<sup>9</sup>

Pacheco's story is significant to the emergence of both salsa music and epistemology, because Pacheco himself is one of the few Dominican musicians credited with the founding of the salsa movement. To this day salsa is still associated more with Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians than with Dominicans, and as such this dissertation focuses on only two of the three Spanish Caribbean islands: Cuba and Puerto Rico. To be sure, salsa music does emerge from Cuban and Puerto Rican rhythms, which is one reason why these two nations have claimed ownership of the genre, and why I focus on them in this project. However I do

want to acknowledge that salsa's emergence in the diaspora occurred in the midst of inter-Caribbean communities that included Dominicans.<sup>10</sup> As music scholar Pacini Hernández explains, many of the eventual Dominican immigrants to New York City would become part of salsa bands because of the similarities between salsa and Dominican merengue, such as the “overall sonic textures created by the layering of brass instruments and polyrhythmic Afro-Caribbean percussion” (87). Although Dominican merengue is not musically a derivative of salsa, the cultural similarities between the Spanish Caribbean islands and the interplay between Spanish Caribbean groups in the diaspora make it so that there are important resonances in both their music and their epistemological frameworks. Throughout this dissertation I use the term “Spanish Caribbean” to refer to the Cuban and Puerto Rican cultural practices that I explore, but also to gesture toward the Dominican contributions to both salsa music and salsa epistemology.

The fact of the matter is that the Latina/o communities where salsa is popular have become increasingly intermixed, particularly in urban spaces such as New York and Miami. The reality of cultural mixing in the Caribbean, but especially in diasporic cities, is that Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans are engaged in a process that Raquel Z. Rivera refers to as “reimagining their national and/or ethnic musical traditions by challenging Latino and Latin American Eurocentrism and narrow-minded nationalisms and stressing their connections to the wider African diaspora” (192). This move from a preoccupation with national belonging toward a stressing of Afro-centric and Pan-Caribbean links is echoed not only in the music, but also in the larger cultural phenomena. Ways of knowing rooted in salsa are a product of the historical specificity of the Spanish Caribbean and are traceable in Spanish Caribbean cultural texts, but have also found their home in intermixed, pan-Latina/o

and pan-Caribbean communities. These include, as Carol Boyce Davies argues, the reaches of the Caribbean that extend as far as England and Brazil. Salsa epistemology, like salsa music, follows the transnational flows that put people and products in contact with one another.

Dominican Johnny Pacheco's role as creator of the salsa brand and co-originator of the salsa sound is therefore significant, as it highlights the links between cultures that exist musically and—as this project argues—epistemologically, which are sometimes obscured in favor of nationalist politics. As Lise Waxer notes in her collection *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meaning in Latin Popular Music*, salsa has its roots in the Caribbean and its diaspora, but it is now a transnational genre, created and enjoyed by people from all parts of the globe. Marisol Berríos-Miranda's essay in this collection reminds us that there is a lot at stake when defining salsa's musical traits and origin story. For many, salsa is a badge of national pride and an important identity marker, hence the tension we find in many scholarly articles that debate whether Cuba or Puerto Rico is the real home of salsa, or whether the music belongs to the pan-Latina/o diaspora. The same is true of a salsa epistemology that emerges from, but cannot be contained to, specific Spanish Caribbean populations. In this project, I consciously eschew the use of salsa as an identity marker because, although it may co-exist with salsa as an epistemology, the two can also exist independently of one another. That is, one does not have to be invested in a nationalist salsa identity in order to access a salsa epistemology, and it is quite possible that holding onto staunch nationalism is antithetical to accessing salsa epistemology's utopian possibilities.

The fact of the matter is that the definition of salsa changes depending on the group being consulted. As Frances Aparicio and Cándida F. Jáquez outline in their introduction to



*Musical Migrations*, there are many intermediaries that made possible salsa's emergence in the United States. These include the Mexico City music scene of the 1940s and 50s that spawned mambo sensations Benny Moré and Pérez Prado, or the Jewish-owned record labels and performance venues in New York City that promoted some of the earliest Spanish Caribbean music in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> There is also a temporal dimension to defining salsa. Although salsa was a huge commercial success in the U.S. Caribbean diaspora of the 1970s, its success was less immediate in the Spanish Caribbean itself. The music form, like its predecessor rumba, was associated with the Black working class, and therefore initially rejected by some. As Berta Jottar tells us, Cuban rumba represented the Africanist politics of the Cuban state, and was therefore adopted by other Latina/os as a type of Black solidarity. Groups outside of the Caribbean began listening to salsa as markers for their pro-African politics. This was accompanied as well by the creation of an origin story that neatly placed the music form on a continuum of Afro-Caribbean rhythms and peoples. Documentaries about salsa music made since the so-called "Latin Boom" of the 1990s are filled with endless clips of musicians counting out the clave beat (one, two / one, two, three) as they extol salsa music's unifying power. One by one musicians trace the clave's evolution from salsa to other Spanish Caribbean music forms, pointing out that while there are subtle variations, the clave sound remains the backbone of the Afro-Caribbean people. Such totalizing accounts make me uneasy, but there is indeed a reason that salsa holds such a privileged place in the Spanish Caribbean cultural imaginary. The epistemological framework that underlies the Caribbean is so thoroughly reflected in this form of cultural production—the playfulness of improvisational trumpet riffs echoing the playful improvisation of Caribbean humor, for instance—that salsa music itself sometimes stands in for a Spanish Caribbean way of

knowing. Arguments over who gets to claim salsa music are therefore really arguments about preserving access to a form of knowledge that many hold dear.

In that vein, we can best read changes in the form of salsa music as changes in the practice of salsa epistemology that result from changes in the economic, social, and political landscape of the Spanish Caribbean and its diaspora. There is, for instance, the transition into the sappier “salsa romantica” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the pop-infused salsa of the so-called “Latin Boom” of the 1990s. The sudden popularity of Latin American music known as the “Latin Boom” was facilitated, in part, by the easing of restrictions on the importation of cultural good from Cuba to the U.S. in the early 1990s, which prompted an influx of Cuban music into the American mainstream. As Deborah Pacini Hernández outlines, prior to this moment Spanish Caribbean music has not enjoyed the same popularity that many other Latin American musical forms had. The 1990s signaled a reintroduction of salsa music into American popular culture, however, including the publication of Oscar Hijuelos Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* in 1989, the novel’s adaptation into a film in 1992, release of the *Buena Vista Social Club* Grammy Award-winning album in 1997, and the release of the corresponding Academy Award-nominated documentary in 1999. Also in the 1990s, artists such as Gloria Estefan crossed musical genres and traditions as they tapped into the “crossover” market, and were followed by other Spanish Caribbean artists that dabbled in various musical genres such as Ricky Martin (Puerto Rico), Marc Anthony (Puerto Rico), and Juan Luis Guerra (Dominican Republic). This gave way to the evolution of other musical forms derived from salsa such as timba and reggaeton, which became huge commercial successes in the so-called “Hispanic market.” As reggaeton artist Nicky Jam says in the 2008 documentary *Reggaeton*, which

explores the Spanish hip hop genre in relation to its salsa predecessor: “Los reggaetoneros, los raperos, somos salseros del nuevo milenio [The reggaeton artists, the rappers, are the salseros of the new millennium].”

The fascination of U.S. markets with salsa and other Spanish Caribbean musical genres during the early 1990s, and the sustained interest in Latin American music in general throughout the 2000s, paved the way for projects such as this one that understand salsa not just as a musical genre but also as a mode on consciousness inserted into U.S. culture. The spread of salsa epistemology outside of the Spanish Caribbean is in part a result of the exportation of salsa music. The widespread commercial success of salsa music was also, however, responsible for rifts that began to occur between salsa music and salsa epistemology. Where salsa epistemology is defined as a mode of knowing rooted in an embodied playfulness that destabilizes hegemonic power structures, there are certain articulations of salsa music that do not, in fact, embody all of these characteristics. For instance, some salsa musicians and aficionados maintain that salsa and other clave-based rhythms hold a singular ability to unite the people themselves, “el pueblo,” regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or class level. This idea that salsa music moves beyond prejudice, both in production and in reception, leaves out the very real racial and gendered biases of salsa songs and salsa music culture. Cindy Garcia details the racial and classed hierarchies of salsa dance culture in her book *Salsa Crossings*, which we will discuss in detail in the next section. The prejudices that Garcia and others have observed in salsa dance culture—from beauty norms that privilege lighter skinned dancers to patriarchal club cultures where women dancers are traded as currency—are not limited to the dance floor, however. We find many of these social hierarchies replicated in salsa lyrics themselves, both historically and in the

present day.<sup>12</sup> It is not that salsa is any more or less racist, sexist, or homophobic than any other style of music, however. It is that the rhetoric used to disguise these prejudices and instead frame salsa as a “music of the people” ignores the epistemological roots of a genre rooted in a playfulness that can subvert class/race/gender hierarchies. To use salsa music to reinforce these hierarchies is therefore to go against the spirit of salsa epistemology.

### **Salsa as a Dance Form**

“lady in yellow  
we gotta dance to keep from cryin

lady in brown  
we gotta dance to keep from dyin”

-Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (15)

“Perhaps more so than any other Boricua expressive art, salsa *is* this community in motion and metaphor [...]”

-Lisa Sanchez-Gonzalez, *Boricua Literature* (168).

Salsa music, though an auditory form, is also an incredibly embodied form. Like salsa epistemology, it relies upon the processing of sensory experience through the body. This experience is often translated into motion through salsa dance. In this way salsa dance is the outward expression of an already embodied salsa music. It is not the only form of

embodiment extending out of a salsa epistemology—as this dissertation shows, written texts can also be quite embodied—but it is the form most intelligible to those new to thinking about the body as a site for knowledge production. When we see salsa danced in a grandparent’s living room in San Juan or at a gay nightclub in New York, for instance what we are witnessing is a form of knowledge translated into motion.

As with its musical counterpart, salsa dance represents a living and constantly evolving form of knowledge, and its many variations are proof of this history. The dance form evolved mostly out of Cuban mambo, itself a derivative of Cuban son.<sup>13</sup> Mambo became quite famous in the United States in the 1950s when Cuban musicians such as Pérez Prado popularized it. The mambo boom also extended into Europe and Africa, both in ballroom dance competitions and in popular dance. In the 1970s, salsa evolved following the same general foot pattern (quick, quick, slow) as mambo and son in the New York City diaspora, while also being influenced by traditional Puerto Rican dance forms such as bomba and plena.<sup>14</sup> Later variants include a style of salsa that is now popular in Cuba, called casino.

Contemporary studies of salsa dancing illuminate how the dance form’s syncretic past is echoed in its transnational present. Simply put, salsa dance—like its epistemological form—emerged at the intersection of various cultures and trade patterns. As with salsa music, this syncretism has laid the foundation for the so-called “salsa wars” that pit Puerto Rican salsa (danced “on the two,” a reference to the fact that movement begins on the second beat) against Cuban casino-style salsa (danced instead “on the one”) and LA-style salsa (also danced “on the one”) more often danced by Mexicans and Central Americans in Los Angeles. Arguments over which style of salsa is “best” or most “authentic” draw the focus

away from salsa's queer potential as a dance form embedded in playfulness, and look instead toward damaging nationalist (and often racially-loaded) politics.

The fact that the “salsa wars” are being fought as far away from the Caribbean as Los Angeles does hint at the far reaches of salsa epistemology outside of just the Caribbean, however. The inter-Latino dialogues that salsa dancing facilitates are potential sites for swapping epistemological frameworks as well. This represents an important aperture in the field of Latina/o Studies, which has struggled for so long to reckon with how the category of “Latina/o” can represent more than just a monolithic grouping of peoples that are really quite different. Salsa dancing is one site where we can see “Latina/o” instead as a non-verbal conversation being had between different groups of people. These embodied conversations are steeped in epistemological and ontological assumptions, communicated through movement, which are at the very heart of arguments about who or what gets counted as “Latino.” In other words, by looking at the various articulations of salsa dancing as expressions of (clashing/complementary/co-constituted) epistemologies, we can begin to work out why pan-Latina/o conversations are so difficult to engage in. This dissertation makes a gesture toward that goal by engaging heavily in scholarship by Chicana feminist theorists, as a way to explore and complicate Caribbean epistemologies. In doing so it works to name and address the dangerous disciplinary divide in Latina/o Studies between Mexican-American/Chicano/Central American studies—assumed to exist only in the West/SouthWest and deal primarily with questions of trauma, healing, land rights—and Caribbean Studies—thought to exist only in the East and deal primarily with questions of joy, dance, and laughter. The transnationalism of salsa suggests that there are in fact invaluable links between the resilience that people are displaying in these various communities. As José

David Saldívar gestures toward in *Trans-Americanicity*, the most useful way to study Latina/o groups at this historical juncture is through the lens of a transnational American studies that understands culture as systems of transnational flows. Epistemological frameworks can and should be understood in much the same way.

Transnational scholarship must be accompanied by a particular attention to converging and sometimes clashing racial paradigms, however. Cindy Garcia argues that when groups choose to privilege one form of salsa dance over the other, it is sometimes also a matter of obscuring salsa's African influence. As Garcia highlights, this takes the form of an elevation of Puerto Rican salsa over Cuban salsa. In the international salsa community, Cuban salsa tends to be less regarded because it is danced closer to the ground—a trait true of many Africanist dances.<sup>15</sup> Cuba itself is generally associated with having a larger Black population than Puerto Rico. The war between salsa “on the one” and “on the two” is therefore about more than stylistic preference. It also represents a larger trend toward the erasure of Blackness in the dance community. This erasure is particularly troubling given both salsa dance and salsa epistemology's foundation in African diasporic thought and practices, as Ntozake Shange highlights in this section's epigraph. In *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* the author consistently draws links between the African-American and Afro-Latina/o experiences. This particular epigraph highlights dance as a survival mechanism throughout the African diaspora, with its ability to “keep [one] from cryin'” and “keep [one] from dyin'” (15). Shange gives voice to the use of dance as a form of resilience in the African diaspora, which is obscured when Blackness is erased from salsa through a racialized editing process.

Beyond salsa's racial dynamics, there is also the issue of its gender dynamics. Discussion of salsa's gender roles often revolves around the question of who has the power in salsa dancing. Many have argued that the man, who is traditionally the leader, maintains control of what movements are danced, but others would say that the woman, traditionally the follower, has the power because the dance centers around making the follower look graceful. To add to his confusion, there are certain styles, such as Cuban casino, which includes a breakdown where both partners dance independently while maintaining fixed eye contact. Non-heterosexual couples are usually not considered in this line of questioning, mostly because salsa's partnered structure makes it so that same sex dance partners are noticed on the dance floor and, in many cases, made to feel uncomfortable. There is a radical potential in salsa dance that is often overlooked, however. As Fiona Buckland says of nightclub dance culture, "Improvisation on the dance floor may thus be seen as a conversation, not only with the other participants, but also with the past" (35).<sup>16</sup> Salsa, like other nightclub dances, is indeed a conversation with the damaging racial, gender, and class norms of the Caribbean past and present. As it is practiced by queers and other groups that reject the oppressive cultural logic, salsa dance is able to queer the very rules that limit it. In this vein, the fact that salsa continues to be racialized, classed, and gendered does not negate its queer potential. As with all forms of cultural expression, we have to understand the dance form as "embodied social practice" to quote Jane C. Desmond—as a living, mutable object that is co-constituted by participants in particular moments of enactment.<sup>17</sup> Because it is a "practice," each performance of salsa is a new chance to recode what its embodiment means socially. In other words, salsa can be literally queered with every step.



In this section's epigraph—"salsa *is* this community in motion and metaphor" (168)—Lisa Sánchez-González points toward the fact that salsa represents the survival of a Caribbean way of knowing translated into movement. Salsa is indeed a celebration of Caribbean survival against colonial and imperial occupation, economic degradation resulting from neoliberal trade and the resulting migration patterns, and the very same oppressive norms of race, gender, and sexuality that are at times replicated on the dance floor. As José Esteban Muñoz says of voguing in queer nightlife, salsa represents "the strong trace of black and queer racialized survival, the way in which children need to imagine becoming Other in the face of conspiring cultural logics of white supremacy and heteronormativity" (*Everynight Life* 440). Salsa dance occupies a similar space, albeit hidden beneath a conservative façade.

### **Queer Theory with a Side of Salsa**

As a final gesture, this section calls attention to salsa epistemology's place within contemporary queer theory. It is no coincidence that queer theory's recent turn toward utopianism has been driven, at least in part, by theorists that are also Caribbeanists, such as José Esteban Muñoz, Juana María Rodríguez, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, Lázaro Lima, Ramon Rivera-Servera, etc. Although there are many queer theorists that do not work on the Caribbean—Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, Karen Tongson, David Eng, etc.—the number of queer theorists that are turning to the Caribbean as their object of study is indicative of the points of connection between queer utopianism and Caribbean utopianism. Bluntly put, queer non-Caribbeans and non-queer Caribbeans have a whole lot in common. There are the obvious links—the hyper-performativity of practices such as drag and carnival, the centrality

of music to queer nightlife and Caribbean everyday life, the similarities between poignant forms of humor such as reading and choteo, the shared histories of subjugation, etc. There are also more subtle points of convergence, however—namely, the genealogies of utopian thought that have existed alongside one another far before the invention of the field that would eventually bring them together—queer of color critique. In the queer cultures of the U.S., this genealogy stretches from Walt Whitman to James Baldwin to RuPaul. In the Spanish Caribbean, it spans from Eugenio María Hostos to Lydia Cabrera to Walter Mercado. Utopianism has been part of the discursive construction of both queerness and Caribbeanness for centuries.

This dissertation privileges queer Spanish Caribbean texts because the convergence of queerness and Caribbeanness produces a generative space for understanding the role of critical utopian ways of knowing, such as salsa epistemology. Queer Caribbean texts find themselves at the nexus of Ethnic Studies and queer theory—precisely the domain of queer of color critique—and as such are able to put into dialogue two bodies of literature that can and should inform one another. Additionally, Spanish Caribbean literary studies so often privilege heteropatriarchy that a turn toward queerness is not only useful, but sorely needed.<sup>18</sup>

Queerness in this dissertation is defined not just as gay and lesbian—as the early example of Celia Cruz, whose sexuality is heterosexual but whose aesthetic is queer, might suggest. It is defined instead, as Cathy Cohen puts forth in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” by a relationship to power. Cohen suggests that the “process of movement-building be rooted not in our shared history or identity, but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power which normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (89-90). For Cohen, and for

this dissertation, queerness is less about asserting a gay identity than it is about unpacking the way that sexuality is constructed alongside other marginal identities, to where a Black straight woman may be viewed as queer-ly by society as a gay, White man. Although many of the texts explored in the following chapters are indeed gay and lesbian, this expansive definition of queer allows for an intersectional understanding of how salsa epistemology works as a form of embodied resilience in the Spanish Caribbean for all marginalized people, and may even be adopted by marginalized people outside of the Spanish Caribbean.

The queer writers, artists, performers we will explore have been particularly effective in making the connection between joy and politics, between playfulness and the serious business of survival. This marks both a point of convergence and a point of departure from contemporary queer theory. Theorists like José Esteban Muñoz have put forth a theorization of “critical utopianism” that takes the possibility of a better future as an important part of queer endurance. For Muñoz and others, hope for a better future is an integral part of the radical potential of queerness today. In the Spanish Caribbean, however, utopianism takes on a different dimension when it is paired with a rootedness in the present moment. Spanish Caribbean culture, as chapter six argues, is a pragmatic and presentist culture. It is less concerned with what will happen tomorrow than it is with what is happening right now. Utopianism in the Spanish Caribbean, then, must remain anchored in the material, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the present moment even as it posits a better future. Salsa epistemology’s ability to navigate the critical utopianism of queer theory and the present-ness of the Spanish Caribbean is examined in chapter one.

## Chapter Breakdown

The five chapters that make up this dissertation each focus on a different “tactic” of salsa epistemology—that is, a way salsa epistemology is enacted or practiced in the world in which we live. The word “tactic” here is a reference to Michel De Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategies in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. For DeCerteau strategies are the domain of corporations and institutions that hold power. Tactics, on the other hand, are enacted by individuals in response to these institutions of power. The embodied playfulness of salsa epistemology is evident in several tactics that we find consistently in Spanish Caribbean cultural production.

Chapter one, “Playing Hopefully: The Present and the Utopic in Queer Theory and Puerto Rican Literature, posits “play” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. It explores play as an optic through which we can facilitate a dialogue between activism and utopian queer thought, which has been missing in recent Queer Theory scholarship. In it I mobilize Chicana decolonial theorist Chela Sandoval’s concept of “oppositional consciousness” to theorize a notion of time that accesses the present and utopia dialectically. Such a notion of time bridges two camps of queer and feminist theory, which I term “present-based resistance” and “utopic creation,” represented by U.S. Third World Feminist theorist María Lugones and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz respectively. I then argue that Puerto Rican-American writer/performer/graphic novelist Erika Lopez demonstrates this dialectical engagement with time through her playful engagement with issues of queerness in the Caribbean community. I define “play” as an engagement with “things as they are” through the lens of “things as they could be.” The chapter concludes with an affirmation of the use of play for doing the difficult work of cultural critique.

Chapter two, “Zones of Possibility and Other Forms of Lezamian Consciousness,” examines “possibility” as a temporal framework and a tactic of salsa epistemology. It offers the first discussion of gay Cuban author José Lezama Lima’s own Queer Theory. While some have analyzed gay themes in this canonical writer’s fiction, no study has yet been completed of how Lezama Lima’s theoretical texts help us reshape notions of queer temporality. This chapter redefines his famed term *era imaginaria* as “zones of possibility,” arguing that the author’s “imaginary era” is actually a form of salsa epistemology accessible through literary experience. Reading Lezama Lima’s writing in *La expresión americana* against Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *conocimiento*, I argue that for both scholars the “zone of possibility” exists in a third space outside of geography and temporality. In reading these two forms of consciousness alongside one another, I posit the importance of a comparative Latino approach when studying epistemologies that are local and diasporic at once.

Chapter three, “Penetrating Utopia: Sex as Embodied Politics in Queer Cuban Exile Literature,” posits “sex” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. It analyzes how queer Cuban exile writers employ the trope of sex as a site of political possibility in response to the Cuban government’s persecution of gays in the 1960s, and the stigmas that still remain in its aftermath. Calvert Casey and Sonia Rivera-Valdés use sex not only as a literary aesthetic of representation, but also as politics in action. I show how their use of sex brings together anti-essentialist identity expression, non-linear notions of time, and engagement with social issues. Through their writing, we can experience the body itself as having the ability to transcend boundaries through sex acts, as it simultaneously exists in both the present moment and the potential time of utopia. By reworking normative ideas of sex and sexuality, queer

Cuban exile authors unravel the temporality upon which founding narratives rely, thereby rejecting the national histories that are largely a negation of their existence.

Chapter four, “Choteo as a Tactic of Resilience in *¿Qué Pasa U.S.A.?*,” examines a Cuban form of humor known as “choteo” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. The chapter argues that choteo (loosely translated as “kidding”) is used to playfully critique class and racial norms in the 1970s television sitcom *¿Qué Pasa U.S.A.?* The bilingual show, which aired on P.B.S. from 1977-1980, chronicled the hilarious but often very painful process of a Cuban exile family adapting to life in Miami. By examining how choteo is used in the script, mise-en-scène, and camera work to juxtapose suffering and laughter, I posit that the show’s signature comedic style has a queering effect on the class, gender, and racial norms widely held by its viewers.

Chapter five, “Capitalism *con Salsa*: Money and Popular Culture in the Cuban Diaspora,” posits “capitalism *con salsa*” as a tactic of salsa epistemology. I define capitalism *con salsa* as a non-teleological relationship with capitalism that allows one to participate in the capitalist system while still remaining rooted in the present moment. Capitalism *con salsa* rejects the futurity of capitalist progress narratives that consistently posit the future as the site of consumer fulfillment. Instead it exhibits a Spanish Caribbean dedication to the radical present that interrupts these narratives. The result is a space not completely colonized by neoliberal capitalist thought, even as Caribbean immigrants do participate in the capitalist system. I argue that the Cuban American rapper Pitbull accesses capitalism *con salsa* through his popular catch phrase “dale”—a Spanish language version of *carpe diem*. I perform a reading of Pitbull’s philosophy of “dale” throughout many of his popular songs to suggest that the artist playfully reorders the timeline of capitalism in his music and videos, in turn

destabilizing progress narratives that damage Latina/o subjects by displacing happiness in a distant, richer future.

Finally, a brief conclusion: “An Epistemology of Resilience,” meditates on my own personal journey to salsa epistemology and on the larger implications of the work as a whole for the survival of the United States’ largest growing ethnic group: Latina/os.

## Chapter One

### “Playing Hopefully:

### **The Present and the Utopic in Queer Theory and Puerto Rican Literature”<sup>19</sup>**

“You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen.”

--Vida Boheme, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*

Vida Boheme, the elegant Southern Belle drag queen played by Patrick Swayze in 1995’s cult classic film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, whispers these words to amateur drag queen Miss Chi-Chi Rodriguez, played by John Leguizamo. In this scene, set in the tiny Midwestern town where they are stuck after their car has broken down, Vida tries to impart some wisdom on the younger, less refined Chi-Chi. Chi-Chi has fallen in love with a local town boy that believes her to be a woman and, overwhelmed by the prospect of being rejected by both him and the elder drag queens she wants so badly to impress, she is feeling hopeless. Vida’s advice, though seemingly uncomplicated, represents a fundamental truth of oppressed peoples. When there is nowhere left to turn, one *does* just imagine good things happening and then make them happen. This chapter uses salsa epistemology to draw out the complicated relationship between the various parts of Vida’s advice—between imagining and doing. I define salsa epistemology as a way of knowing rooted in Spanish Caribbean salsa—where “salsa” refers to the music and dance genre as well as a way of knowing rooted in Spanish Caribbean culture—that allows Spanish Caribbean people to exist simultaneously in the everyday material circumstances of their lives and in the utopian spaces crafted in their music, literature, and philosophy. This chapter examines how queer Caribbean culture has created a new vantage point for thinking about



decolonization through the lens of hopeful action. This requires that participants do something seemingly impossible—posit a mode of being in the present even as they exist simultaneously in the non-time of utopia. The ability to maintain a utopian vision of the future and take concrete steps in the present to enact it is intrinsic to the form of queer Caribbean survival and social activism that I term salsa epistemology

I approach this question of negotiating the present and utopia first through queer theory, primarily because queer theory as a discipline has been at the forefront of theorizations of utopia in the past ten years. Put simply, queer theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam have given serious thought to how utopic creations—such as theatre, art, or even children’s animated films—can promote significant social change. What this queer theory has done less successfully, however, is articulate the relationship between utopia and the vast majority of queer and feminist scholarship, which looks at social activism as a matter of resisting oppression by taking concrete action in the present. I am referring here, for example, to the U.S. Third World Feminist scholarship to which many queer theorists of color, myself included, are openly indebted. This includes the work of scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks. Articulating this link—between the present and utopia—is neither a simple nor a trivial matter, nor is it sufficient to just assume it exists. Furthermore, the actions associated with these states—*resisting* the oppression of the present and *creating* a utopia—inflect one another in ways that have not been completely explored.

This chapter argues that theorizing utopia without also theorizing the present is not only fruitless, it is dangerous. It is this last clause—the notion of danger—that I am most interested in. Many theorizations of queer activism that have been made from within queer theory in the past quarter century have been nothing short of dangerous to the queer cause, a

point emphasized in recent Spanish Caribbean writings. Such works suggest that thinkers who look at only one half of the equation—either only at the present or only at utopia—are putting queer activism in a precarious place: a non-place. By this I am referring to the erasure of queerness that occurs in modern society and politics, and that is reinforced in the theoretical world, when scholars choose to look at queerness only in opposition to present-day conditions, or to set queerness apart from these conditions in an imaginary future or past. The danger, to be clear, is the following: imaging is precariously close to pretending, and opposition can sometimes lead to hopelessness.

This conflict plays out in two schools of queer theory (existing also in feminist theory) that I label “present-based resistance” and “utopic creation,” represented by Third World Feminist scholar María Lugones and queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz, respectively. I then offer a critical rereading of scholar Chela Sandoval’s concept of “oppositional consciousness.” Using it as a starting point, I propose a version of queer theory in which utopic creation becomes the mechanism that guides all present-based resistance, thereby providing a roadmap for how one can *just imagine good things happening and make them happen*.

The latter half of this chapter takes up the thesis that some of the most effective interventions in queer theory today are being made in the realm of queer Caribbean literature. If the dialectical movement between utopia and the present has been posited in theory, then it is being enacted in queer Caribbean literary production in the form of a “salsa epistemology.” It analyzes the existence of salsa epistemology in the work of Puerto Rican-American writer/performer/graphic novelist Erika Lopez. Lopez’s work uses one tactic of salsa epistemology, “play,” to deal with issues of queerness in the Latina/o community. Play is

defined here as an engagement with things as they are through the lens of what they could be. The chapter concludes with an affirmation of the use of play for doing difficult work of cultural critique.

### **“The Present” in the Work of María Lugones**

Feminist political philosopher María Lugones states in her 2010 article “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” that in order to intervene in the modern gender system, decolonial feminists must “figure out how to think about intimate, everyday resistant interactions to the colonial difference” (743). Throughout her career, Lugones has consistently positioned herself a “theorist of resistance” (“Towards a Decolonial Feminism” 746), in part because her major project is fighting *against* an oppressive gender system, which she eventually terms the “coloniality of gender.” In order to do this, Lugones links this resistance to an everyday praxis, as the prior quote’s emphasis on “everyday resistant interactions” suggests. Lugones’ focus on the “intimate” and “everyday” also alludes to an investment in the present as the domain of social change. In fact, most of the author’s oeuvre, from her influential early work “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” to her more recent scholarship on the colonial gender system, centers on the importance of coalition to the resistance movements of women of color. For Lugones, the key to resisting oppression has always been in the pilgrimage—as the title of her signature book suggests—that is, the act of moving from one social space into another. This movement, for her, must take place in the lived worlds of oppressed peoples. At its most basic, it is a re-thinking of social relationships as a form of political resistance, through lenses such as love and friendship.

In “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception” Lugones introduces her notion of “world”-traveling, which argues that visiting the “worlds” of those different from you is a form of decolonization. That is, that one must leave the comfort of home to experience the simultaneous lived experiences of those around us, in an effort to break down the categorical divisions imposed by colonialism. In her definition of the term “world,” Lugones states:

I can offer some characteristics that serve to distinguish between a “world,” a utopia, a possible “world” in the philosophical sense, and a “world” view. By a “world” I do not mean a utopia at all. A utopia does not count as a “world,” in my sense. [...] For something to be a “world” in my sense, it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. (“Playfulness” 87)

Lugones makes clear, in this excerpt, that the type of resistance she is interested in is firmly tied to the “present” and “flesh and blood people.” It is decidedly not utopian, inasmuch as Lugones’ is concerned with everyday acts of resistance, not imaginary futures.

This is a theme she takes up in several of her works, including “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” where she writes:

What I am proposing in working toward a decolonial feminism is to learn about each other as resisters to the colonality of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of meaning from which resistance to the colonality arises. (753)

We can read this project of knowing each other as “resisters to the colonality of gender” as a form of world-traveling with the express purpose of using coalition as a meeting place to

swap and share tools of resistance. The “worlds of meaning” that Lugones is interested in here are those rooted specifically in “resistance to the colonality.” Again, we see a pairing between resistance and a material present. While Lugones does not push for insider status in other worlds, she does suggest that feminists must be present in the worlds of others in others for coalition to occur.

It is not that Lugones’ relationship with resistance is uncomplicated, however. The author herself states in “Toward a Decolonial Feminism” that she does this work “not because I think of resistance as the end or goal of political struggle, but rather as its beginning, its possibility” (746). We see here a Lugones aware of the fact that resistance is not the sole project of a feminist movement, but also intimately aware that resistance must predate other forms as their “beginning.” This temporal alignment, which places resistance as the site of possibility that can later give way to other formulations, brings us back to our central problematic. It is not that utopian thought has no place in Lugones’ decolonial feminist movement, but rather that utopia comes *after* the execution of everyday resistance.

In her definition of “worlds” from “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” which we have already examined, Lugones also makes some room for utopian ideas. Even though she carefully states that she is not interested in utopian worlds, and instead interested in “flesh and blood people” (87), Lugones goes on to say: “It may also be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants in this ‘world’ met in some other “world” and now have this ‘world’ in imagination” (87). By including imagination in her definition, Lugones opens herself to the possibility that the worlds may also be inhabited people that are not there in the flesh and blood. These people, however, serve a secondary function. While they may “also” be there as representatives of a utopian imagination, they

must be preceded by the flesh and blood inhabitants of the world. Once again, it is not that Lugones leaves no room for utopia, but rather than this utopia is secondary to the present.

In “Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models” Lugones elaborates on this by theorizing the process of world-traveling through the lens of love:

Friendship is a kind of practical love that commits one to perceptual changes in the knowledge of other persons. The commitment is there because understanding the other is central to the possibility of loving the other person practically. Practical love is an emotion that involves a commitment to make decisions or act in ways that take the well-being of the other person into account. (141)

Lugones’ discussion of love, which is central to her larger oeuvre, is notable because it takes a utopian idea and discusses it in very concrete terms. While the idea of a feminist praxis based on love might seem fanciful or unrealistic, Lugones challenges this assumption by emphasizing the “practical” aspects of love. Her repeated usage of the term—three times in this short excerpt—is noteworthy, as it reinforces Lugones’ aversion to abstract notions of love, instead favoring a model of love that takes into account the everyday business of “decisions or act[s].”

Lugones’ relationship to utopia is also complicated somewhat further by her writing on creativity. In several of her essays she occasionally refers to resistance as “creative.” The creative here occasionally serves as a bridge between present-based resistance and utopic creation. Lugones writes the following of decolonial feminism:

From the fractured locus, the movement succeeds in retaining creative ways of thinking, behaving, and relating that are antithetical to the logic of capital.

Subject, relations, ground, and possibilities are continually transformed, incarnating a weave from the fractured locus that constitutes a creative, peopled re-creation. (“Decolonial Feminism” 754)

Lugones’ investment in creativity here is clear. For her, resistance is defined, at least in part, by “creative ways of thinking, behaving, and relating.” It is this creativity that allows for a “peopled re-creation,” or what can be otherwise termed as a re-making of the gender system by resistant actors. In thinking through resistance as a creative process, Lugones alludes to how creation might be used as a powerful tool in the present. While she does not outline this further, and while she still advocates for creativity that is “peopled”—that is, existing in a material present—she nonetheless begins to open up her theorizations of resistance, even if inadvertently, to utopian interventions.

### **“Utopia” in the Work of José Esteban Muñoz**

In contrast to Lugones’ insistence on dealing with the lived realities of oppression through literal and figurative traveling, we find José Esteban Muñoz’s ideas in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. In this work, Muñoz argues for a version of queer politics that looks toward the future rather than the present. Muñoz believes that utopic versions of queer politics are more productive than present-based formulations, such as those that prioritize the legalization of gay marriage or the inclusion of gays in the military. The author pushes for a “rejection of the here and now and an insistence of potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (1). Muñoz’s understanding of “world” is different than Lugones’. Although both theories suggest moving out of one’s comfort zone toward another space, Lugones’ movement is a horizontal push, whereas Muñoz argues for a

forward push. In other words, Lugones maintains that one should travel to “actual” worlds that exist concurrent to our own. Muñoz, on the other hand, wants queers to envision a forward jump, to a world that does not yet exist.

Muñoz’s scholarship on utopia advances queer of color critique in important ways. Building from Jill Dolan’s notion of the “utopian performative” as the element of theatrical performance that inspires hope both within and beyond the space of the theatre, Muñoz elaborates utopian hope as a methodology for escaping or surpassing the oppressive realities of queers of color.<sup>20</sup> This is a stark and necessary departure from the so-called “anti-relational” turn in queer theory, in which scholars like Leo Bersani in and Lee Edelman took a decidedly more pessimistic view by rejecting forward-looking models of queerness and critiquing them as heteronormatively reproduction-based. For Edelman and Bersani, queerness had to exist in the present, not in a far-off future.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, this formulation was also paired with a healthy dose of individualism that stood in opposition to the relational and community-based models of queerness being articulated by queer of color theorists, such as Muñoz himself. Muñoz’s work, then, represents a recuperation of the queer body as always in relation to other queer bodies, many of them brown and many of them hopeful.

What concerns me about Muñoz’s school of thought, however, is the difficulty of applying these findings to political and social action. Where hope is an integral part of the lives of oppressed peoples, hope itself does not a politics make. In response to this Muñoz would argue, “turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations” (*Cruising Utopia* 1). I nonetheless contend that academics that research oppressed populations need to carefully think through the relationship between utopia and the everyday business of survival. Doing



this not only avoids charges of frivolous scholarship, but also reckons with the history of colonization and decolonization, which is itself fraught with utopian political and social movements that can no longer handle the business of feeding their own people.

The question of “map[ping] future social relations,” as Muñoz articulates it, brings us back to Lugones, who is herself using decolonial feminism toward similar ends. The nexus of queer aesthetics and decolonial feminism, though all too infrequently discussed in this way, finds its home in the work of renowned Chicana activist and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa. Both Muñoz and Lugones take up Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization of “*conocimiento*” in noteworthy ways, for example. In “Now Let Us Shift” Anzaldúa understands *conocimiento* as a seven step process for enacting “inner reflection and vision” and linking it to “social, political action, and lived experiences in order to generate subversive knowledges (542). It is what she calls a form of “spiritual activism” that uses inner work to fuel social change. Although Anzaldúa does not address the role of utopian hope and imagination overtly, her understanding of “time” is a good place to start. Implicit in the process of *conocimiento* is an escape from linear time, into a realm of non-time where healing occurs.

The first step of *conocimiento* is what Anzaldúa calls an “*arrebato*” (earthquake):

[Arrebato] jerks you from the familiar and safe terrain and catapults you into *nepantla*, the second stage. In this liminal transitional space, suspended between shifts, you’re two people, split between before and after. *Nepantla*, where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality, is a zone of possibility. (544)

For Anzaldúa, *nepantla* represents this non-time, in which the self is able to exist in both the “before and after,” both the past and the future. Muñoz echoes this in his idea of “ecstatic

time” (2009, 32), although he does not cite Anzaldúa’s prior understanding of this phenomenon. He writes:

To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one’s past, present or future. (*Cruising Utopia* 32)

For Muñoz “ecstatic time” is the experience of removing oneself from linear time and instead being able to move backward and forward on the time continuum.<sup>22</sup> This is necessary, he maintains, in order to access utopia, which is, by nature, displaced temporally. For both theorists, what is at stake is a timelessness or state of in between, which Anzaldúa sees as the moment one is “split between before and after” (“Now Let Us Shift” 544), and Muñoz sees as “looking a back at a scene from one’s past, present or future” (*Cruising Utopia* 32).

Where ecstatic time distinguishes itself from *nepantla* is in the catalyst. Muñoz believes that it is ecstasy “perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure” that pushes one into timelessness. Anzaldúa, on the other hand, sees it as an “*arrebato*,” which she explains only in terms of negative life events: “a violent attack, rift with a loved one, illness, death in the family, betrayal, systematic racism and marginalization” (“Now Let Us Shift” 546). The difference here—between orgasm and death—is stark. What is at stake, however, is the link to social action. Muñoz does not articulate how exactly a grunt of pleasure, beyond helping one escape from straight time, results in a new queer activism. For Anzaldúa the link between the *arrebato* and social action is clearer. *Conocimiento* takes us through a process of

healing and transformation, in which the seventh stage is activism. Where both are invested in inhabiting a liminal space Anzaldua calls a “zone of possibility” (544) and Muñoz calls a “horizon” (32), the difference is in what happens after this liminality.

Let us look now at Lugones’ treatment of Anzaldúa’s same concept. For Lugones, world-traveling does require an escape from one’s own time, inasmuch as it acknowledges that concurrent to the temporal world one inhabits, are other simultaneous worlds. In “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” Lugones encourages “us” to visit other worlds in an effort to “explore the logic of resistance in its multifarious concreteness” (29). That is, for Lugones, resisting oppression does not require a jump to timelessness, but rather an understanding of the present. Just as Anzaldúa writes “conocimiento is about relatedness—to self, others, world,” Lugones’ project argues for relating to others by visiting their worlds (570). Unlike Anzaldúa, however, Lugones maintains that she is “against utopianism” (5) because her interest is in visiting worlds that are “possible” (27). In this way Lugones rejects the idea of an “*arrebato*” that propels one into the non-time, or “zone of possibility,” that is *nepantla* (“Now Let Us Shift” 544). Rather, her interest is in preserving the present moment, even at the expense of the inner work that can be accomplished through *nepantla* or utopia. We see this in “On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interpretive Essay,” where Lugones responds to Anzaldúa’s pivotal text *Borderlands*, in part critiquing her for focusing more on the inner work of *nepantla* than on the resistance movements that it spurs. She writes, “maybe because the Coatlicue state and the state of intimate terrorism are described as states of the inner life of the self, because Anzaldúa is describing states in the *psychology* of oppression and liberation, she does not reveal the sociality of resistance” (36). Although Lugones is interested in how *nepantla* functions to disrupt linear time, her project

is focused on crafting a “sociality of resistance” that relies heavily on the idea of oppression in the present.

One must wonder why Muñoz and Lugones, both of whom have similar projects to resist oppression, take two strikingly different approaches to the act of exiting one’s world. In many ways, this difference relates to the hermeneutic that each theorist espouses. Muñoz believes that the act of imagining utopia must be linked to a hermeneutic of hope. He says we must look at hope as both “affect and methodology” (*Cruising Utopia* 4). Muñoz pushes for an understanding of hope as something that one both experiences, and does. For him, in order to access utopia, one must be willing to engage in the act of hoping, as a way to escape the oppression of the present.

On the other hand, we can look at the hermeneutic that Lugones proposes in relation to world-traveling. For Lugones, any form of world-traveling must be accompanied by “playfulness.” By playfulness, Lugones is referring to an attitude that is not antagonistic, and that allows one to adapt easily to different worlds. Like Muñoz’s understanding of hope as necessary to remove oneself from one’s temporal reality, Lugones sees playfulness as necessary in order for one to travel outside of one’s spatial world. The difference between the two, then, is that while playfulness is a way of dealing with conditions as they currently exist, hope is a way of dealing with conditions as you one day wish they will be.

In many ways Muñoz’s theorization of hope picks up where Lugones’ theorization of playfulness leaves off. Lugones is able to successfully outline a method for dealing with present-day oppression through world-traveling, a form that opposes the dominant logic that discourages coalition between oppressed groups. However, her hermeneutic of playfulness only allows for the negotiation of what already exists. It stops short of playfully imagining a

future, which we might call utopic. This is where Muñoz's hope is useful. Although it does not provide a method for dealing with or healing current oppression, Muñoz's hope does provide a way out of this oppression through a vision of a better future.

### **A Rereading of Chela Sandoval's "Oppositional Consciousness"**

A useful place to start when bridging the gap between these two methods for negotiating oppression is with feminist philosopher Chela Sandoval, whose work in *Methodology of the Oppressed* positions her as a theorist of both resistance and creation.

Sandoval writes in the introduction to this text:

It is also imperative not to lose sight of the methods of the oppressed that were developed under previous modes of colonization, conquest, enslavement, and domination, for these are the guides necessary for establishing effective forms of resistance under contemporary global conditions: they are key to the imagination of "postcoloniality" in its most utopian sense. (9)

In this excerpt, as in many throughout her works, Sandoval calls attention to colonized knowledge as a starting point for globalized resistance in the modern world, in this case under the rubric of "postcoloniality." More than that, however, Sandoval reminds us that this form of globalized resistance exists in a utopia of sorts, inasmuch as it must be *imagined* by the colonized or subjugated subject. This coupling of "imagination" with "resistance" brings up several key points. Oppressed people must inhabit both nouns at once. What she demands of us is, in a rational, Western sense, impossible. Sandoval wants us to be in two places at once. We must do more than simply *imagine* while in place of resistance, or vice-versa. We

must *be* in imagination and in resistance simultaneously. It is, in effect, a layering of the consciousness to exist in two places at once—the present and the utopic.

Sandoval lays out a theory of oppositional consciousness, which outlines the five modes of resistance used by oppressed groups in political struggle. The first four of these tropes—the equal-rights form, the revolutionary form, the supremacist form, and the separatist form—represent modes of resistance that can and must be inhabited in the fight for political representation. What sets these tropes apart from the fifth, however, is that, regardless of how often they are employed, oppressed subjects do not reside in them. Rather, these subjects have access to the fifth mode, differential consciousness, which “enables movement ‘between and among’ ideological positionings [...] in order to disclose the distinctions among them” (Sandoval 58). The differential consciousness therefore refers to a trope that has the ability to navigate between the others, as Sandoval’s now famous analogy explains: “the differential mode of consciousness functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power” (58).

I want to put forth a new reading of Sandoval’s theorization of oppositional consciousness, which will be useful for examining salsa epistemology’s ability to navigate the present and utopia in the next section. This reading posits that the first four tropes of oppositional consciousness represent a commitment to present-based resistance, whereas the fifth trope represents a move into the utopic. Specifically, I view the first four tropes as representative of the various ways that subjects, and in this case queer subjects, are able to negotiate the oppression around them. Through a strategy of assimilation (equal-rights form), radical politics (revolutionary form), perceived dominance over the ruling class (supremacy),

and removing themselves from society (separatist form), queers are able to resist the many forms of subjugation that are imparted upon them. It is through accessing the fifth form, understood as a mode of differential social movement, that queers are able to move past the phase of resistance as Lugones theorizes it, and into the realm of potentiality as Muñoz sees it. Through the differential consciousness queers envision utopic spaces where resistance is no longer necessary. Hence Sandoval writes, “Differential consciousness is described as the zero degree of meaning counternarrative, utopia/no-place, the abyss, *amor en Aztlan*, soul” (147). It is through tapping into this soul—which Anzaldúa has theorized as *mestiza* consciousness, Lorde has theorized as the erotic, and Muñoz has previously theorized as disidentification—that the possibility for radical, utopic change can be accessed.<sup>23</sup>

We must note, however, that in Sandoval’s schemata the differential consciousness does not exist alongside the other modes of oppositional consciousness, but rather hovers above them. It is the differential that witnesses the accessing of the other tropes, and that makes their use possible. If differential is how subjects are able to “‘move between and among’ ideological positionings,” then it follows that the utopic is how queers are able to move between and among present-based formulations of resistance. The utopic, then, becomes a guiding light for all present-based opposition. It becomes the vision that guides concrete actions. Rather than being hierarchical, the relation between the utopic and the present, between creation and resistance, between hope and playfulness, is dialectical. Both work together to create something greater than the sum of their parts.

What Sandoval gives us is a vocabulary for discussing the act of being in two places at once. She describes a system of oppositional consciousness in which one can inhabit one of the first four forms of consciousness, even simultaneously as one inhabits the fifth,

differential, form. This formulation is quite a bit more complicated than my choice of the word “inhabit” indicates, however. In the part of *Methodology of the Oppressed* where she introduces the five forms of oppositional consciousness, we see Sandoval engaging in a slippage of terms akin to the slippage between the utopic and the present that I want to posit. Sandoval begins by calling her theory of oppositional consciousness a “five-location topography of consciousness” (55). Of note here are the spatial descriptors—“location” and “topography”—which exist alongside the term “consciousness” to posit that, somehow, she is able to create a visual and geographic representation of the non-material.

Sandoval goes on to say that in addition to the first four well-known forms of oppositional consciousness: “the addition of a fifth and differential mode of oppositional consciousness to these has a *mobile, retroactive, and transformative* effect on the previous four, setting them all into diverse processual relationships” [emphasis added] (55). I want to draw attention here to the adjectives that Sandoval uses to describe the effect of differential consciousness on the other four forms. “Mobile”—a spatial adjective which suggests a physical shift in location. “Retroactive”—a temporal adjective, which suggests a movement through time. “Transformative”—a qualitative adjective, which suggests a spiritual or metaphysical shift. The conflation of these three adjectives into one sentence is an indication of a tension that Sandoval is trying to navigate, but never fully articulates. The five forms of oppositional consciousness are both material and non-material at once.

We can view Sandoval’s oppositional consciousness as an explanation for how one can be in multiple spaces at once—geographically, temporally, and spiritually. Each of the five modes she describes is simultaneously an ideology, a set of actions, and a form of consciousness (with the exception of the fifth, which Sandoval argues is free from



ideological underpinnings). To put it in concrete terms, let's take the example of a protestor outside of a government building in downtown Los Angeles, demanding same-sex partner insurance benefits. Geographically the protestor is outside of this government building in Los Angeles. He is also, however, geographically in Aztlán.<sup>24</sup> Where Los Angeles exists in the present, Aztlán (which is not a recognized geopolitical state) exists geographically in the protestor's utopic (read: creative) understanding of the geography of the region. The same goes for his temporal state—which may be simultaneously “1pm” in the present, but also part of an ongoing utopian understanding of colonized resistance. The example of the protestor, then, exists as much in the “equal-rights” mode/ideological form/state-of-consciousness Sandoval describes, as he does in the “differential” mode/ideological form/state-of-consciousness. He is both present and utopic at once.

Sandoval's unwillingness to separate time from space, and space from place, is indicative of the necessary fusion between the present and the utopic that occurs in social movements. When we are able to tap into the present and the utopic dialectically, we are able to bridge divides between the physical, the temporal and the spiritual—the so-called mind/body divide of Western rationalism—to ends that are both counter-hegemonic and, as we will see in the work of Erika Lopez, playful.

### **Queer Puerto Rican Literature at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

It comes as no surprise to readers of queer Puerto Rican literature that this body of work often crosses the lines of physicality, temporality, and spirituality. Less studied, however, are the methods that queer Puerto Rican writers use to do this difficult work of navigating the present and utopic. This is not so much an oversight as a sticking point in the

study of Latina/o literature at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Latina/os gain both demographic and political power in the United States, the question of how to differentiate the tactics of resilience used by various Latina/o groups becomes more pressing. This is equally true in literature departments, which have long struggled to validate the field of Latina/o literature while simultaneously acknowledging that no such monolithic grouping could ever possibly exist. Queer Latina/o literature becomes a nexus point in this conversation, when we think of queerness as we have discussed it so far as borne out of Western academe and yet profoundly destabilizing of Western rationalism. In the case of queer Puerto Rican literature, cultural producers use the embodied playfulness of salsa epistemology to inhabit this space between resisting the reality of an antagonistic political climate and creating literary works that imagine utopian outlets.

I will begin by suggesting that the field of Latina/o literature itself has undergone major changes in how considers these issues over the past 25 years. A starting point for a genealogy of these trends is Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes' *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora*, in which he explores the history of queer artistic production in Puerto Rico. In making his argument for the abundance of queer contributions to Puerto Rican culture, La Fountain-Stokes relies heavily on the work of feminist thinkers, many of who are U.S. women of color. For La Fountain-Stokes, both the theoretical and the artistic contributions that these women of color have made can be divided into two categories: U.S. Third World feminism and third wave feminism.

La Fountain-Stokes uses the term U.S. Third World feminist to describe a group of writers and theorists who produced work between the late 1970s and early 1990s, often including María Lugones. Although the thinkers involved in this movement are still writing

today, the term itself has been largely located in the time period in between the radical feminist and decolonial movements of the 1970s, and the multicultural feminist and third wave movements of the 1990s. Notable among the themes taken up by U.S. Third World feminists is an interest in the process of decolonizing the self, the analysis of which largely informs the 1980 compilation *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color*.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. Third World feminists maintained a focus on the inner work necessary in order to complete the process of decolonization. Taking from decolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon, this group argues that while external decolonization in the form of revolution and political unrest is necessary, it must be accompanied a stripping of hierarchical ideas within oneself, and a healing of the various parts of one's identity through coalition work.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast, third wave feminism is a contentious term that is usually used to define feminisms that emerged in the 1990s, particularly those with an emphasis on new forms of cultural production.<sup>27</sup> Third wave feminism is often associated with movements such as the Riot Grrrl movement, which was a punk feminist movement dedicated to dealing with issues of oppression using countercultural methods such as zines, women's music, and political art.<sup>28</sup> As such third wave feminism was associated with various forms of self-publishing, including independent music labels and chapbooks. In many ways third wave feminism emerged as a response to second wave feminism and U.S. Third World feminism, which it saw as overly essentialist. By exploring alternate forms of production and resistance, these feminists believed that they were positing more fluid notions of identity, which relied less on elaborating definite, collective identities and more on rejecting hegemonic cultural representations. A large part of this third wave feminist movement was also multicultural

feminism, which looked at the role of cultural, ethnic, and racial difference in challenging hegemonic feminism.

For La Fountain-Stokes, the differences between these two movements are notable. What he calls U.S. Third World feminism is “marked by a passionate and militant stance vis-à-vis women’s liberation” (*Queer Ricans* 123). In contrast, “the advances and failures of those struggles led younger Latina women writers in the 1990s to adopt a more humorous and less rigid and dogmatic approach” through third wave feminism (*Queer Ricans* 123). La Fountain-Stokes’ depiction of U.S. Third World feminists as “passionate” and “militant,” and third wave feminists as “humorous” and “less rigid,” suggests a fundamental theoretical difference in these schools of thought. I would argue that La Fountain-Stokes’ understanding of these two camps can be loosely correlated to the dichotomy between resistance and creation that I have already posited—in which the U.S. Third World feminists represent a “militant” resistance to oppression, and the third wave feminists represent the use of “humorous” artistic creation to counter this oppression.

There are, of course, problems with La Fountain-Stokes’ categorization of these movements.<sup>29</sup> The first critique being that some writers who are identified with these groups do not fit into the guidelines he has proposed.<sup>30</sup> Even in light of these inconsistencies, I believe that La Fountain-Stokes addresses an important theoretical chasm in the work of feminists and queer theorists over the past 30 years. In partitioning women of color feminism both historically—with U.S. Third World feminism largely representing the 1980s and third wave feminism largely representing the 1990s—and thematically, La Fountain-Stokes alludes to the rift that occurred in the early 1990s with the growing popularity of queer theory in the academy.<sup>31</sup> Since the academization of the discipline in the 1990s, few queer thinkers

have truly embraced a methodology of both present-based resistance and future-based speculation. This had lead to both a theoretical corpus and a state of activism that are either stuck in a cycle of reacting to outside oppression—as the endless process of appeals in the fight for marriage equality suggests—or are so far removed from present conditions that concrete political gains become almost impossible to achieve. An analysis of the feminist texts during this time period further suggests, however, that the way women of color feminists theorized oppression also underwent a fundamental shift.

It is here that I want to pick up again on the tension between present-based resistance and utopic creation. I believe we can view the U.S. Third World feminists as largely concerned with positing new modes of resistance, including but not limited to the resistance of hegemonic white feminism and queer theory. This may be one reason that La Fountain-Stokes chooses to describe the group using the adjective “militant”—a sometimes-derogatory term that, nonetheless, calls attention to the serious and urgent tone of many of their works. The third wave feminists, then, represent the second phase of this counter-hegemonic subversion. Building on the advances of those that came before them, the third wave feminists encountered in the 1990s a queer and feminist theory saturated with resistance, but lacking direction as it teetered on the verge of postmodern relativism. It was here that the group introduced their contribution to theorizing oppression—the creations of new, often humorous queer spaces where subjugation was secondary to artistic expression.<sup>32</sup> What happens, however, when we combine the two approaches? Is there a way to be militantly humorous or humorously militant? The use of play, a tactic of salsa epistemology, represents on such approach for a queer or feminist movement concerned with both concrete social action and the radical rethinking of possibility.

## Salsa Epistemology in the Work of Erika Lopez

Erika Lopez is a Puerto Rican-American graphic novelist, blogger, and cartoonist whose work includes several books published by Simon & Schuster starting in the late 1990s and a newer collection released by her own publishing company, Monster Girl Media, in 2010. Lopez has enjoyed a sort of cult following throughout her career, due in part to an irreverent writing style characterized by cultural critique in the form of vulgar, sexualized prose and images. For Lopez, as well as for a handful of other queer Caribbean performance artists and bloggers, complex social issues are most effectively discussed through wit, hyperbole, and a depiction of sexual excess. Indeed, in her work Lopez has consistently relied on these literary devices to address everything from child abuse to poverty. Lopez makes a contribution to elaborating a queer Caribbean cultural critique that goes beyond just funny quips, however. If we characterize all of her literary techniques under the category of play—where play is defined as engagement with things as they are through the lens of what they could be—then Lopez’s work performs a critique of the present, even as it simultaneously removes its subject from the present and deposits her into utopia. Lopez’s work extends out of a salsa epistemology, as she playfully engages the present-based *and* utopian dimensions of oppressive cultural norms.

My use of the term “play” here is intended as a reference to both Lugones’ elaboration of “playfulness” in social movements and Muñoz’s concern with “hope” as the methodology of the future.<sup>33</sup> Indeed play exists on both registers. It is simultaneously non-antagonistic and imaginative, malleable and non-conformist. Play shares many similarities with humor, since much play is funny, but yet not all humor is playful.<sup>34</sup> By this I mean that not all humor is engaged with a critique of the present. In other words, some humor is

escapist, but play is necessarily rooted in the present. As we are defining it, play does the difficult work of cultural critique while, simultaneously, not taking it too seriously. Play also, like Chela Sandoval's oppositional consciousness, exists on multiple registers. It (playfully) blurs the line between the physical, the temporal, and the spiritual in a way that queers the mind/body divide of Western rationalism.

Through her use of play in the texts that follow, Lopez is able to address the main points of the queer and feminist movements we have looked at, without adopting the more typical genres of poetry, prose, or the testimonial. Her use of the graphic novel format is unconventional in itself, as this genre that has not historically been used for activist work within feminism.<sup>35</sup> Lopez's choice to adopt the graphic novel in order to do feminist work is groundbreaking in that the genre is most often associated with humor, but less commonly associated with the kind of play we are discussing.

Erika Lopez's 1997 graphic novel, *Flaming Iguanas: An All-Girl Road Novel Thing*, combines sketches drawn by the author with the story of Tomato Rodriguez, a bisexual half-White Quaker, half-Puerto Rican. The novel follows Tomato on her cross-country road trip on a motorcycle she has just learned how to ride, in an effort to find herself before reaching the West coast. Lisa Sánchez-González points out in *Boricua Literature* that Puerto Rican coming-of-age texts, like Lopez's, often follow a personal journey in order to make points about larger societal issues. Sánchez-González writes: "these texts reject the conventional 'coming-of-age' novel's tacit endorsement of the status quo by presenting protagonists whose journeys of self-discovery are also indictments of U.S. colonialism, and the racist-sexist society in which U.S. subaltern youths face the daily struggle to survive physical, emotionally, spiritually, aesthetically, and philosophically" (133). Tomato's process of self-

discovery is indeed as much about her own growth as it is about her learning to reckon with a society that disadvantages her in all of the ways Sánchez-González outlines. We can begin by looking at Lopez's use of play to articulate the feminist concept of "intersectionality" in response to these structures of oppression:

I don't feel white, gay, bisexual, black, or like a brokenhearted Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*, but sometimes I feel like all of them. Sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK, experience the brotherhood and simplicity of opinions. / Sometimes I want to feel so heterosexual, hit the headboard to the point of concussion, and have my crotch smell like bad sperm the morning after (*Flaming Iguanas* 28).

In this humorous excerpt we see Tomato dealing with the many identities she inhabits, from the "Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*" to the crotch that "smell[s] like bad sperm the morning after." As the daughter of a Puerto Rican father and a White, Quaker mother, Tomato embodies multiple cultural realities and social identities. Although she acknowledges that no single identity suits her, she does not feel forced to choose between them. Rather she states "sometimes I feel like all of them." For Tomato, the experience of being Latina cannot be prioritized over her Whiteness. She goes so far as to state "sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK." Rather than reflect on her personal identity process at length, Lopez uses shorthand to express her relationship to her own Whiteness. When she writes, "Sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK" she acknowledges her own relationship to the institution of Whiteness as represented by the KKK, and her desire to inhabit that identity by speaking in twang. Lopez does the same for the institution of heterosexuality, which Tomato wants to inhabit by having heterosexual sex that leaves her



“crotch smell like bad sperm the morning after.” Once again, we see that rather than run away from potentially oppressive identities such as Whiteness and heterosexuality, Tomato instead incorporates them into her identity. In the rest of the chapter she later goes on to also incorporate her dark skin color, her lesbian desire, and her non-fluency in Spanish.

In the excerpt above, as in others, we see a Tomato that is able to take on the issue of intersectionality almost exclusively through a playful engagement with cultural norms. This is not, however, intended to avoid the complex identity issues with which she struggles. Rather, it is precisely through her wit that Tomato works out the complexities of her identity, coming to the conclusion that “sometimes I feel like all of them” (*Flaming Iguanas* 28). We might turn here to Joanna Gilbert’s work on female comedians in *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. In it Gilbert writes, “Examining women’s humorous performance as a potential site of resistance cloaked in the guise of entertainment can teach us about the power of telling one’s own story in a culture that continues to marginalize women” (xvii). Although Gilbert is talking specifically about stand-up comedy here, her point about the use of humor and laughter as subversion rings true to Erika Lopez’s work. Lopez’s use of play to subvert power relations serves not only as a form of social critique, but also serves to elevate Tomato (and Lopez herself) to a position of power over the object of her criticism. In this way we might think back to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque, in which we see literature serving a counter-hegemonic function in humor and satire through the insertion of seemingly grotesque and low-brow elements.<sup>36</sup> Lopez’s work complicates the carnivalesque, however, in that it is significant that the vulgarity of her text comes from not only a female protagonist, but also a female author. Gilbert’s work allows us

to locate Lopez's use of play within a genealogy of women that undo the norms of patriarchy through an appeal to what has not been a traditionally female form—comedy.

For Tomato, the multiplicity of her identities makes her extended identification with one sole political or social group both impossible and undesirable. As such, her text does more than just posit a gendered critique. She expresses this sentiment upon waking up one morning after having slept with a woman for the first time. In the prior scene, Tomato has expressed her joy at having had her first lesbian experience, yet upon waking she says:

To my relief, the next morning I didn't feel like a member of a lesbian gang. I didn't feel this urge to subscribe to lesbian magazines, wear flannel shirts, wave DOWN WITH THE PATRIARCHY signs in the air, or watch bad lesbian movies to see myself represented. No. I wanted a Bisexual Female Ejaculating Quaker role model. And where was she, damnit? From now on I would demand to be represented (*Flaming Iguanas* 251).

For Tomato, her identification with the act of lesbian sex is not followed by identification with a lesbian identity. She expresses relief that she does not want to be part of a "lesbian gang," as wanting to join such a gang would mean limiting herself to one identity. Rather than inhabit all of the markers of a lesbian identity as she sees them, including wearing flannel shirts and waving "down with the patriarchy" signs, Tomato continues to want a role model that expresses the multiplicity of her identity. When she writes that she wants a "Bisexual Female Ejaculating Quaker role model," Tomato is basically mocking the idea of a stable group identity that would embrace her.

Throughout the novel we also see Tomato engage playfully with notions of time.

As she continues her journey to California and becomes more comfortable with the different parts of herself, Tomato is also facing a crushing fear of death that seems to remove her from linear time at certain points during the novel. Her obsession with death also breaks up the linearity of the narrative itself, as she does not experience an evolution on the subject throughout the story. As a result, we have a novel that follows the linear progression of most coming-of-age narratives in terms of identity—she does become more comfortable with herself—but at the same time allows the character’s fear of death to remain unresolved.

This unresolvability is intimately linked to play, including the play we have already seen in the novel’s rhetorical devices. Play—itself rooted in a Caribbean “salsa epistemology” that occupies a liminal space in between the present and utopia—is by nature opposed to resolution and fixity. In playfully addressing the issue of death, Lopez calls attention to this. Take, for example, a scene toward the end of the novel where Tomato sits watching her laundry dry at a laundromat in San Francisco. Having reached the end of her geographic journey, Tomato is clearly upset by the fact that her father has died before she could see him again. In the three-sentence chapter where we learn of his death, which is labeled “Untitled” and contains only two drawings of an angel and a wilted sunflower, Tomato refuses to address her feelings on the matter. It is later while watching her laundry that she thinks the following:

We burn people alive and try to hand them at the same time. We rip the fingernails and ovaries out of eighty-year-old women with knives and make them watch as we rape their grandchildren. Suburban kids torture animals on their living room floors and we put cats to sleep if they don’t match the carpeting. (*Flaming Iguanas* 240)

This meditation, which is most definitely not humorous, is nonetheless playful in the way it breaks with linear time. Even while located in a commonplace present, Tomato's fear of death acts as what Anzaldúa would call an "*arrebato*" or earthquake. The daydreaming that follows represents the state of "*nepantla*," or being between worlds. This is also what Muñoz called ecstatic time, if we take ecstasy to mean the state of being outside oneself by way of any intense emotion. It is what happens afterward, however, that is surprising. In the rest of this quote Tomato continues to go through the "Coatlicue state," which Anzaldúa refers to as a period of feeling lost. At the start of the next chapter, however, we see Tomato once again obsessed with sex. This does not follow the rest of the path of healing that Anzaldúa calls *conocimiento* which, again, ends in activism. Nonetheless the theorist has accounted for this as well. For Anzaldúa the different steps of *conocimiento* can take place in any order, or sometimes not at all. When Tomato becomes sex-crazed immediately after this episode, it is therefore not a failure. It is in fact just the opposite as she uses play, this time in the form of sex, as a response to her fear of death. By jutting back to linear time after this episode, Lopez confuses our expectations of resolution in fictitious texts. She also forces us to rethink sex as a form of sociality—or perhaps what Lugones would call a "sociality of resistance" (*On Borderlands* 36)—that serves as a possible response in times of crisis.

Tomato's brushes with death are just as likely to result in a sense of profound joy, as they are a sense of profound despair, however. After falling off of her bike on a muddy path one night, for example, Tomato reflects:

"I looked around me and saw only black./ I heard sounds like a faraway river, but I knew they were leaves blowing in the sky. For a tea bag moment, everything was as it was supposed to be. I breathed with the trees and felt

separated from the collective human consciousness: I didn't want to conquer anything, didn't want to build cheap aluminum developments or shopping centers. I felt I belonged and would've asked for permission to stay if I'd known how" (*Flaming Iguanas* 195).

For Tomato, this moment after falling off of her motorcycle acts as an *arrebato*, in which she is able to stop her frenzied thinking for the first time since setting out of her road trip and appreciate where she is. She writes, "for a tea bag moment, everything was as it was supposed to be." While still maintaining her humorous outlook by using the phrase "tea bag moment," Tomato recognizes that for once she is fulfilled by the moment she is living. She goes on to commune with nature by breathing in the trees, and ultimately feelings "separated from the collective human consciousness." Although Lopez chooses the words "collective human consciousness" to describe the urge to "build cheap aluminum developments or shopping centers," I believe she is actually referring to the lack of consciousness that surrounds human beings who are obsessed with progress. For Lopez the "collective human consciousness" can be equated to this tendency to displace oneself from the moment one is living, in an effort to progress toward a better future. Tomato feels satisfied once she is able to escape this lack of consciousness, and instead finds herself very much within consciousness, or what Sandoval would call differential consciousness, when she acknowledges "everything was as it was supposed to be." It is in this moment that Tomato experiences healing from the identity processes that she deconstructs throughout the course of the book. By achieving "*conocimiento*" at this moment we could say that Tomato has tapped into a differential consciousness that is able to see the "collective human consciousness" from a distance without participating in it.

Tomato's journey throughout this graphic novel is exemplified best by two of the sketches that begin and end the book. The first sketch, which appears in the prologue entitled "before," is of a woman hanging off of a motorcycle as it speeds away. This woman, who the reader is lead to believe represents Tomato, can be seen performing a trick on the motorcycle. However, even as she performs this trick, she is unable to keep up with the fast pace of the motorcycle, and clings to it as it drives off. If we compare this sketch to the book's last sketch, we see a marked difference. The last sketch is of the same woman doing a handstand on a parked motorcycle. Unlike in the first sketch, we can see this woman's face as she is confidently poised on the motorcycle. She no longer looks as though she is not in control of the speed of the motorcycle. Rather, she has stopped the motorcycle altogether to demonstrate her control over it. In many ways, these sketches outline Tomato's journey of inner growth throughout the novel. Whereas in the beginning Tomato is very much a part of linear time, and cannot seem to hold on to the myriad of experiences and identity processes that confront her, by the end she is comfortable with her experience. The fact that the second motorcycle is stopped completely might additionally represent an escape from linear time.

We cannot make the mistake, however, of reading this novel as a progress narrative. While it's true that the character looks more confident in the final sketch, it is also true that just a few pages before there is a two-page spread of sketches of penises. Labeled everything from "chia penis" to "bulemic penis" to "bozo the penis clown," these sketches are presumably ideas Tomato has had at the end of the novel when she accepts a job as a sex toy designer. The return of this obsession with sex and the humorous insertion of penis designs

remind us that, above all else, this novel reverts again and again to play as a mode of both expressing and understanding the world.

Erika Lopez's most recent collection, *The Girl Must Die*, contains a simultaneously hilarious and harrowing tale of poverty and aging entitled, "The Welfare Queen." The other stories in this collecting follow similar themes, including the biographical title story, which touches on issues such as child abuse and close friends committing suicide. Despite this, these tales of resilience often have a hopeful undertone to them, perhaps best expressed in a line repeated over and over again in the collection, and included as the last line of the publication. It reads: "Whatever doesn't kill you, will eventually turn you on" (*The Girl Must Die*). It is here that Lopez is doing the difficult work of playing hopefully, or maybe hopeful playing, that characterizes not only her work, but also an intervention of queer Puerto Rican literary production in queer studies at large.

### **Toward a New Queer Theory**

Returning back again to the film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, we can look anew at Vida Boheme's remark to Ms. Chi-Chi Rodriguez—"You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen." The wisdom of this line is echoed in both queer theory and queer Puerto Rican fiction. There is more to this comment, however. Right after hearing this piece of advice, the smart-mouthed Chi-Chi asks the following: "Well, what if what I want to imagine is a boy I want to go out with?" Chi-Chi's concern with the boy blinds her from the fact that she is in imminent danger of being attacked if she continues to gender-bend in this small town. She is unable to understand how imagination and action can combine as a form of social critique, and instead focuses on her

own individual desires in isolation from the larger social structures that shape them. Herein lies the difference between Chi-Chi's misreading of Vida Boheme's advice and Erika Lopez's use of salsa epistemology. As Lopez's critique of white supremacy and patriarchy demonstrate, a negotiation of present-based resistance and utopic creation *can* uplift the subject by playfully undoing social hierarchies. This move toward a playful critique of social structures is integral to salsa epistemology and is further explained in the next chapter on queer Cuban exile texts. What salsa epistemology offers queer subjects is an antidote to Chi-Chi's reading. By focusing only on herself when she *images good things happening and makes them happen*, Chi-Chi is left wither dreamily deluded or weighed down with antagonism. Vida, on the other hand—who we understand to be older, wiser, and more aware of the dangers drag queens have historically faced while gender-bending—does take a broader viewpoint. Vida's advice suggests that she sees both “imaging” and “making” things happen as important tools for cultivating resilience against persecution.

I fear that queer theory as a discipline has failed to heed Vida and Lopez's advice, however. The field has not adequately addressed the schisms between theorists who are interested in resisting the current state of oppression and those who are interested in positing a utopian queer futurity. The effect of this divide is a queer theory that often lacks the unity to achieve its purported goals, as well as queer theory classrooms that produce scholars who continue to replicate these incomplete notions of subjugation. This split is also relevant to the lived experiences of queer people—even those whose lives exist outside of the specialized realm of queer theory. For actual queer subjects, the task of balancing the energy required to deal with homophobia and other forms of oppression in the day to day, with the imagination necessary to posit queer-friendly utopias in art, literature, and performance, can often be



exhausting. Oppressed subjects, queers among them, must walk the fine line between present-based resistance and utopic creation in their everyday existence.

Puerto Rican cultural production, which extends out of a Caribbean “salsa epistemology” that is concerned with these very issues, has much to offer in this regard. The work that is negotiated by scholars such as María Lugones, José Esteban Muñoz and Chela Sandoval is being approached in new and provocative ways in queer Caribbean literature. Erika Lopez’s use of play is just one example of how queer Caribbean writing allows us to rethink foundational concepts such as oppositional consciousness, intersectionality, and linear time.

By traveling outside of queer theory to queer Puerto Rican literature to elaborate a notion of how queer subjects exist and thrive in the face of oppressive social norms, I have also hinted toward an important trend in the future of the discipline. It is queer theory’s task to uncover situations in which the present and the utopic are being successfully integrated in the lives of oppressed people, and/or in their art, literature, and theory. Salsa epistemology and the Caribbean survival mechanisms that arise out of it—such as play—are key to this endeavor. In the future, theorizations that seek to understand the breadth of queer survival mechanisms may just have to be more playful.

## Chapter Two

### “Zones of Possibility:

### Queer Forms of Lezamian Consciousness”

“Remember that our only salvation lies in words: Write!”

--Lezama Lima to Reinaldo Arenas in the latter’s famed manuscript,

*Before Night Falls*

“For me, writing is a spiritual activity just as it’s a political activity and a bodily act”

--Gloria Anzaldúa (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 252).

This chapter examines possibility as a temporal framework and as a tactic of salsa epistemology. Where salsa epistemology is invested in an embodied playfulness that links a utopian future with an activist present, possibility might be considered the temporal frame where such linkages are enacted. By its very nature, possibility accomplishes a playful queering of time—toying as it does with what could be and that which is not yet. In this chapter I take up possibility through the work of Cuban writer and theorist José Lezama Lima (1910-1976). Lezama, as he is most commonly referred to, is considered one of the most complex writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His fiction and theoretical texts are often read alongside such hermetic writers as James Joyce, Walter Benjamin, and Georg Wilhelm Frierdrich Hegel. In my view, Lezama is the most opaque of all these writers, so it is no wonder that within his opacity is an often overlooked theorization of what we would now

refer to as queer time, defined by Jack Halberstam as what happens when we “try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1). Queer time is, in its most simplified form, a version of temporality more invested in possibility than in linearity. As this chapter argues, Lezama’s theoretical notion of *eras imaginarias* [imaginary eras], alternately translated here as “zones of possibility,” articulates a notion of time rooted in the possibility of the “strange” and the “imaginative”—to quote Halberstam—rather than one based on historical linearity. Not incidentally, Lezama was also himself queer. He was known as a gay writer throughout his lifetime, although he did not publicly assert his sexuality because of homophobic social norms and, starting in 1959, the persecutions of homosexuals by the Castro government.<sup>37</sup> Though there have been studies of gay themes in Lezama’s work (notably, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Eduardo González), there has been no study to date of Lezama’s possible contributions to queer theory, which of course would not become a discipline until thirty years after his death.<sup>38</sup> This chapter takes Lezama’s *eras imaginarias* as a starting point for understanding his take on queer time, inasmuch as this concept is invested in what Lezama calls “infinite possibility,” and critic Brett Levinson has alternately termed “radical possibility” (“Possibility, Ruin, Repetition” 63).

Secondly, this chapter reads Lezama’s theorization of possibility as a temporal framework emerging out of salsa epistemology alongside another, similar epistemological and temporal framework: Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1942-2004) notion of *nepantla*. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in “now let us shift” Anzaldúa, a queer Chicana feminist theorist whose impact on queer theory has been more—though not sufficiently—explored, defines “nepantla” as the second stage of a process of spiritual activism called *conocimiento*

[consciousness]. It is “where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality, [it] is a zone of possibility” (544). *Nepantla*, like Lezama’s *eras imaginarias* is a space characterized by queer, non-linear time. To quote Halberstam again—a space characterized by the “strange” and the “imaginative.” My choice to translate Lezama’s *eras imaginarias* using Anzaldúa’s term “zones of possibility” is a nod toward the similarities between these two notions of queer possibility.

As a final gesture, this chapter understands Lezama’s and Anzaldúa’s takes on mestizaje within the context of their larger projects, in order to articulate a comparative Latino approach toward salsa epistemology. Specifically, it reads Lezama’s *sistema poético* [poetic system]—the theoretical worldview that he proposes in order to understand history through the lens of literature—alongside Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento* [consciousness]. Anzaldúa defines *conocimiento* as a seven-step process of spiritual activism in which the central task is “to determine that your life means to catch a glimpse of the cosmic order and your part in that cosmovisión, and to translate these into artistic forms” (540). This project—to make sense of the world and translate it into art as a form, as Anzaldúa later says, of spiritual activism—is also the driving project behind Lezama’s theoretical works, even if he would shy away from terms like “spiritual.” Noting the similarities and differences between *conocimiento*’s epistemological structure and Lezama’s salsa epistemology (here depicted in his *sistema poético*) helps us engage in the type of comparative Latina/o work so integral to Latina/o studies as a discipline. Although one emerges out of a Caribbean epistemology that this book concerns itself with, and the other out of a Chicana epistemology, both posit similar types of consciousnesses that can and must be viewed in conjunction in the often geographically and nationally divided field of Latina/o Studies. Furthermore, in the wake of

Queer Theory's turn toward utopian futurity, as discussed in the previous chapter, an examination of these two queer consciousnesses rooted in possibility becomes especially timely.

### **Queer Temporality and Eras Imaginarias**

Lezama's work has never been viewed as central to queer theory. Although he was known to be gay in literary and personal circles, many of his theoretical contributions to Caribbean and Latin American thought do not center on the theme of homosexuality.<sup>39</sup> Most existing studies of queerness in Lezama's work focus on his novel, *Paradiso* (1966), which was deemed "pornographic" by the Cuban government because of what were considered vulgar descriptions of homosexuality. While studying gay themes in Lezama's fiction is important, positing a queer theory rooted in his theoretical work is a different project entirely.<sup>40</sup>

In this chapter, I view Lezama's *eras imaginarias* as a form of queer temporality. For Judith Halberstam, queer temporality is "a 'queer' adjustment in the way in which we think about time [... which] requires and produces new conceptions of space" (6). Specifically, Halberstam is referring to how the AIDS crisis, which quite literally cut off the future for thousands of gays and lesbians, led to an understanding of time in queer communities that was focused on the present, as Bersani and Edelman famously argued. Although queer time has its roots in the AIDS crisis, Halberstam notes that it is "not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (2). This means that queer time does look toward the future with a sense of possibility—rather than a sense of certainty—but does not follow the

constraints of heteronormativity. Queer time is, in short, about the potential for non-linear and non-normative constructions of self, and the spaces that queer create to make these constructions possible. Although Halberstam's theorization of queer temporality looks toward the future, he does note that the same could be said of a queer historiography, which would look at history through the lens of queer time—privileging the non-normative, and perhaps dispensing with linear and heteronormative accounts of history altogether. Lezama posits as much in his *eras imaginarias*.

Although Lezama never offers a plain definition of the term, from his work we can decipher that the *era imaginaria* is one or more specific periods of time or creations of literature, in which a culture or group becomes aware of possibility. Lezama writes about the *era imaginaria* in “A partir de la poesia” when he says:

“Esas eras imaginarias tienen que surgir en grandes fondos temporales, ya milenios, y situaciones excepcionales, que se hacen arquetípicas, que se congelan, donde la imagen las puede apresar al repetirse.” (*Obras completas* 833)

[These eras imaginarias need to spring forth from great temporal depths, millenniums, and exceptional situations, that are made into archetypes, that are frozen, where the image can seize them when they are repeated]<sup>41</sup>

In this excerpt we see Lezama exploring the ways in which the *era imaginaria* is an uncommon event, springing forth across millennia. These events are not particular to the cultural context from which they emerge, however. Theorist Irlemar Chiampi, has made the distinction between *era imaginaria* and culture by noting that an *era imaginaria* is actually

an “afloramiento dentro de una cultura [emergence within a culture]” rather than the culture itself (20). When Lezama says that we must focus on *eras imaginarias* rather than cultures themselves, he wants to push our attention toward spaces of exceptional creative production, rather than thinking of literature as belonging to a cultural experience. The actual events that make up the *eras imaginarias* are determined by Lezama in *La expresión americana*.<sup>42</sup> He writes of his method of literary analysis:

Nuestro método quisiera más acercarse a esa técnica de la ficción, preconizada por Curtius, que al método mítico crítico de Eliot. Todo tendrá que ser reconstruido, invencionado de nuevo, y los viejos mitos, al reaparecer de nuevo, nos ofrecerán sus conjuros y sus enigmas con un rostro desconocido. La ficción de los mitos son nuevos mitos, con nuevos cansancios y terrores. Para ello hay que desviar el énfasis puesto por la historiografía contemporánea en las culturas para ponerlo en las eras imaginarias. (58)

[Our method wishes to be more like the technique of fiction, extolled by Curtius, than like the mythical critical method of Elliot. Everything will have to be reconstructed, invented anew, and the old myths, when reappearing again, will offer us their spells and enigmas with an unrecognizable face. The fiction of myths are new myths, with new weariness and terror. For this we have to move away from the emphasis that contemporary history places on cultures, instead placing it on eras imaginarias.]<sup>43</sup>

As we see in this excerpt, Lezama's project is to rethink, or perhaps unthink, linear history, focusing instead on the intertextual links between the great literary masterpieces and myths of the Western and non-Western world. He does this, particularly in *La expresión americana* as a way of inserting the history and literature of the Americas into canons and historical accounts otherwise dominated by Western Europe. In looking at literature as a series of myths necessarily reappearing and "inventionado(s) de nuevo" [invented anew], Lezama shifts our focus from distinct time periods and historical trends, instead choosing to "desviar el énfasis puesto por la historiografía contemporánea en las culturas para ponerlo en las eras imaginarias" [move away from the emphasis that contemporary history places on cultures, instead placing it on eras imaginarias] (58). Lezama opens up room for an understanding of time that is non-linear and instead groups together various geographies and histories.

Lezama's project is positing the Americas not as a geographical or historic entity, but rather as a collection of zones of possibility. In translating *era imaginaria* as "zone of possibility," I suggest that "zone" occupies a necessary intersection between space and place, in which the organizing principle is neither geographic nor temporal, but rather suspended in a third space. In this sense "the Americas" ceases to be a region characterized by geographic proximity or shared histories, and instead is understood as a collection of zones of possibility. For Lezama, this consciousness cannot belong exclusively to the Americas—as *eras imaginarias* would resist any grouping based on culture—but it nonetheless produces an understanding of the history of the Americas rooted in the non-linearity that Halberstam has called "strange" and "imaginative" (1).

This a-linear and, to use today's language, anti-essentialist understanding of the Americas offers a way to think about resistance outside of binary structures, as Brett



Levinson has argued. Levinson notes that Lezama's schema allows us to see alterity as embedded within cultural texts themselves. That is, where subversion responds to the master discourse, Lezama's transgression avoids this binary by "opening up the possibility that the origin itself is a 'mere' copy, a 'refracción de equivalencia' [refraction of equivalence]" (92). In this way Levinson sees Lezama challenging the idea of the origin, upon which linear history is predicated. This reading helps us see how Lezama can be used to articulate a theory of resistance relevant to contemporary society, and ultimately emerging from a salsa epistemology. To rephrase, if Lezama allows us to think history in a way in which America becomes not the antithesis to Europe or its Other, but rather one of many iterations of the West that includes Europe, then he is also toppling the binary of colonizer/colonized upon which the historical relationship of Europe and America is based. Many have already articulated how this falls into a long line of Latin American thought invested in rethinking this relationship, including for example theories of *antropofagia* which look at America as a cannibalization of Europe, or *mestizaje* and *creolité*, both of which see Europe as one of many elements making up American as both an entity and a process or a doing. Lezama's contribution to this conversation is to shift our understanding of the Americas as geographic reality or cultural product, instead arguing for the existence of a utopian consciousness from inside of which America is created.

To give an example of an *era imaginaria*: Lezama performs an expansive analysis that links 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian painters to 15<sup>th</sup> century Dutch painters to a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Chinese text—all of which make up one *era imaginaria*. Juan Pablo Lupi explains how this seemingly random collection of references comes together as one *era imaginaria*: "Each *era imaginaria* is constituted by a collection of different kinds of entities—civilizations, religious

beliefs, legends, historical characters, events, etc.—that have in common their being a manifestation of a certain poetic image that recurs across historical time” (*La expresión americana* 26). For Lupi, *eras imaginarias* are compilations of various mythologies (religious, historical, etc.) grouped by a “certain poetic image that recurs across historical time.” This “certain poetic image” is not simply the repetition of tropes (it is not just the prevalence of trickster characters in African diasporic fiction, for instance). Their “recurrence” across time is in fact more of a creative exercise of comparison performed by the poet, than a hermeneutic of literary analysis of the sort we might expect from New Criticism.<sup>44</sup> It is up to the poet to draw the links between the “poetic images” spanning across centuries and thousands of miles (which Lezama terms “imágenes” or “imagos,” as we will see). There are no preset rules of logic. The *era imaginaria* is, in short, a grouping of historical, religious, and literary moments (as well as others) that disregards the rules of linear history in favor of a logic rooted in possibility.

Lezama himself explains the thinking that allows him to jump so effortlessly between time periods, geographies, and genres. He writes:

Lo que ha impulsado esas entidades, ya naturales o imaginarias, es la intervención del sujeto metafórico, que por su fuerza revulsiva, puso todo el lienzo en marcha, pues, en realidad, el sujeto metafórico actual para producir la metamorfosis hacia la nueva visión. (*La expresión americana* 53)

[These entities, natural or imaginary, have been propelled by the intervention of the metaphoric subject, whose stimulating force activated the painting. In

reality, the metaphoric subject produces a metamorphosis that creates a new vision]<sup>45</sup>

For Lezama, zones of possibility are created when metaphors are used to craft links between time periods and histories that might not otherwise be read alongside one another. He clarifies this when he writes:

“el sujeto metafórico actúa como el factor temporal, que impide que las entidades naturales o culturales imaginarias se queden *gelée* en su estéril llanura.” (*La expresión americana* 54)

[The metaphoric subject acts as the temporal factor, which impedes natural or cultural imaginary entities from becoming frozen in their sterile prairie].

The “sterile prairie” here is the normative, unimaginative, and linear plane of straight time. With the insertion of metaphor, however, a “temporal factor” is introduced that reorganizes this temporality, allowing for a zone of possibility that spans, quite literally, millennia. This is an exercise of creative comparison performed by the poet or writer that disregards the rules of linear history and propels us the queer time that is the *era imaginaria*.

In short, for Lezama history is a fiction, as the causality attributed by historians is often the stuff of invention. Lezama is in favor of imaginative versions of causality, but his concern is that they be labeled as such. The presumed rationalism of history concerns Lezama, as he believes the actual logic of storytelling is based more on possibility than a de facto version of cause and effect. Chiampi writes as much in the introduction to *La expresión americana*: “en vez de relacionar los hechos culturales americanos por la relación de causa-efecto, denunciando una progresión evolutiva, su contrapunto se mueve erráticamente, para

adelante y para atrás en el tiempo, en busca de analogías que revelen el devenir” [Instead of describing the relationship between American cultural happenings in terms of cause and effect, Lezama denounces an evolutionary progression. His counterpoint moves erratically forward and backward throughout time, in search of analogies that reveal logic of these happenings] (17). This take on history as the product of imagination, or as a fiction based in possibility, gestures toward a playful temporality that produces queer time.

### **Anzaldúan Zones of Possibility and *Eras Imaginarias***

Let’s look now at Gloria Anzaldúa’s project, which bears striking similarities to Lezama’s. As we saw in chapter one, Chicana decolonial theorist Gloria Anzaldúa put forth a version of non-linear time in her theory of “conocimiento” [consciousness]. Where the previous chapter looked at the catalyst that pushes one out of linear time, this chapter concerns itself instead with the way that temporality operates within *conocimiento*. Specifically, both Lezama’s *eras imaginarias* and Anzaldúa’s *nepantla* [one stage of *conocimiento*] refer to liminal spaces of possibility existing outside of linear time and geography. Despite the forty years that separate their creation, and the thousands of miles that separate Havana from the Western United States, both of these ideas can be used to expand our understanding of queer temporalities and the consciousness that produce them.

In “now let us shift,” Anzaldúa theorizes *nepantla* as “where the outer boundaries of the mind’s inner life meet the outer world of reality, [it] is a zone of possibility” (544). As with Lezama’s *era imaginaria*, it is a melding of imagination and social reality. Anzaldúa goes on to say that it is “the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited

from your family, your education, and your different cultures” (548). *Nepantla* is a space of in-betweenness where new viewpoints are possible. It, like the *era imaginaria*, incorporates multiple places and perspectives at once.

The purpose of experiencing *nepantla* as part of the larger process of *conocimiento* is, according to Anzaldúa:

“To make meaning from your experiences [so that] you look through an archetypal psycho-mytho-spiritual lens, charting the various shifts of consciousness as they play out in your daily activities. You use your imagination in mediating between inner and outer experience.” (“now let us shift” 559)

The privileged place given to imagination in Anzaldúa’s notion of *nepantla* is akin to Lezama’s emphasis on the metaphor, which is used to make meaning of the various perspectives inherited through straight, linear history and time. For Anzaldúa it is necessary to inhabit *nepantla* because:

“what you or your cultures believe to be true is provisional and depends on a specific perspective. What your eyes, ears, and other physical senses perceive is not the whole picture but one determined by your core beliefs and prevailing societal assumptions.” (“now let us shift” 542)

Like Lezama, Anzaldúa engages in historiography to make clear the perspectives that shaped what we believe to be fact. Specifically, she re-centers the history of the borderland on pre-conquest indigenous beliefs, from Coatlicue to Coyolxauhqui, in order to fight back against the myopic historical lens that often excludes these myths. Anzaldúa’s willingness to incorporate pre-conquest mythologies into her descriptions of the present-day border

resonates with Lezama's own time travel across millennia in *eras imaginarias*. It is not just that Anzaldúa wants to *remember* Coyolxauhqui—remembering would suggest the preservation of linearity—it is that Coyolxauhqui also exists in the present for Anzaldúa. The zone of possibility makes this version of queer time possible.

For Anzaldúa, Western science is not “the best knowledge system, the only true, impartial arbiter of reality” (“now let us shift” 560). *Nepantla* occupies a liminal space between what Lezama terms “infinite possibility” and the rationality of Western science and history. Anzaldúa cautions that the West’s “definition of progress,” which she links to “manifest destiny,” often “imperializes other peoples’ energies and snuffs out their realities and hopes of a better life” (560). In *nepantla* Anzaldúa instead chooses to “accept the guidance and information provided by symbology systems like the Tarot, I Ching, dowsing (pendulum), astrology, and numerology” (543). Putting all of these together and seeing through the eyes of all of these perspectives, Anzaldúa argues:

“reveals a discourse of signs, images, feelings, words that, once decoded, carry the power to startle you out of tunnel vision and habitual patterns of thought. The snake is a symbol of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought.” (Anzaldúa 540)

Like the *era imaginaria*, this grouping of various types of knowledge gives rise to an awareness or consciousness that does not follow the rules of logic and linearity. To quote Lezama's words about his own zone of possibility, it “destruye el pseudo concepto temporal de que todo se dirige a lo contemporáneo, a un tiempo fragmentario” [destroys the pseudo

concept of the temporal that argues everything leads toward the present] (*La expresión americana* 63).

### **Mestizaje as a Form of Possibility**

By now any scholar of both Lezama and Anzaldúa has become concerned with the proverbial “elephant in the room”—*mestizaje* (defined, loosely, as theories concerned with racial mixing). Lezama was open about his opposition to mid-century theories of *mestizaje*, and his dislike of [racial] identity-based literary movements. Anzaldúa, in contrast, is best known for her early work on “mestiza consciousness,” which argues, in short, that *mestizaje* offers a powerful viewpoint through which to approach social activism. How, then, do we move past what seems to be a fundamental disagreement on the role of race in queer time? As a first move, I posit that we *cannot* and *should not* move past this tension.

Queer time, as it is posited by Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz (for the latter in the form of “ecstatic time”) contends that there is something particular about the queer experience that pushes one to rebel against the linearity of heterosexual progress narratives: i.e. first you get married, then you have kids, then you buy a house, etc. At its most basic, this “particular” thing is the impossibility of biological same-sex reproduction, which makes it so that same-sex couples quite literally do not look to the future in the same way that heterosexual couples do. The release from linearity can be quite freeing, hence Muñoz’s move to theorize potentially pleasurable practices such as sex and dance. It becomes more complicated, however, when we account for the fact that queerness is racialized, which means that queer time is also necessarily racialized.

Lezama does not account for the role of race in this theorization of *eras imaginarias*. Not all of the *eras imaginarias* come from White cultural experiences, but he does not highlight the race of a writer or theorist as an important factor in how this alternate historiography is crafted. This is likely because Lezama is a light-skinned Cuban writer whose inattention to race represents a form of white privilege. To quote Anzaldúa herself “The refusal to think about race (itself a form of racism) is a ‘white’ privilege” (“now let us shift” 564). Beyond this, when Lezama discusses race he does so to discredit its use as a lens through which to approach art. In “Coloquio con Juan Ramon Jimenez,” for instance, Lezama discards the theories of *mestizaje* that were popular in Latin America in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century because he thought they were excessively based on blood and biology. [Insert quote]. Lezama’s concern, however, is with the biological (today we would say essentialist) implications of *mestizaje*. Specifically, he would likely stand in opposition to theories like José Vasconcelos’ notion of the “raza cósmica,” which was popularized in the 1920s and argued that a superior race could be formed in the Americas through racial mixing. For all of his White privilege, Lezama’s opposition to *mestizaje* was less about a disdain for discussing race and more about what we would now call a constructivist approach to understanding identity. For him, *eras imaginarias* were a more interesting way to approach one’s past and present, and therefore he had little patience for a biological discussion of race. As Tace Hedrick notes of 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of *mestizaje*: “Discourses of *mestizaje* in particular, despite efforts to assert their cultural rather than (biological) racial implications, have yet to escape their dependence on the lexicons of the plant and animal sciences, still relying on physicalized metaphors such as ‘hybridity’ and ‘grafting’” (68). Along these same lines,



Lezama also expressed disinterest with the “negrista” movement in Cuban poetry, which became popular in the 1930s and focused on the biology and culture of Afro-Cubans.

As a whole, Lezama’s theoretical work evaded the discussion of race, in turn putting forth a notion of the universal White subject that unintentionally perpetuated White privilege. His theorization of modes of time rooted in possibility does, however, ironically allow for an incorporation of non-normative histories into otherwise normative historical accounts. This does not excuse his problematic inattention to race, but it does call attention to the fact that queer time is racialized regardless of whether this racialization is made overt, and notions of time rooted in possibility can be useful to non-normative subjects despite the racial blind spots present in their theorization.

It is also notable that, like Lezama, Anzaldúa shies away from biological theories of *mestizaje*, even as she puts forth a “mestiza consciousness.” Unlike Lezama, Anzaldúa was a brown-skinned Chicana very much aware of and concerned with racial difference. It therefore comes as a surprise to many that Anzaldúa does make reference to Vasconcelos in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. The majority of the points put forth by Anzaldúa in the book are incompatible with Vasconcelos’ theories, which relied on the social Darwinist theories that it claimed to overturn. Unlike for Vasconcelos, for Anzaldúa *mestizaje* is a consciousness, rather than just a racial trait. She writes in “now let us shift,” “A retribalizing *mestizaje* becomes your coping mechanism, your strategy of resistance to both acculturating and inculturating pressures” (561). Her inclusion of the word “retribalizing” is meant to differentiate between theories of biological *mestizaje* and the “mestiza consciousness” of her early work (theorized in her later work as “*nepantla*”). To “retribalize” *mestizaje* is to define one’s “tribe” beyond just racial markers. What she calls “New Tribalism” destabilizes

traditional identity categories, allowing for a more expansive understanding of one's identity markers. Anzaldúa writes:

“Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla. Like the river downstream, you're not the same person you were upstream. You begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been.” (“now let us shift” 556)

Like Lezama, Anzaldúa was against the unreflective adoption of identity categories. While she understood the importance of organizing around identity for social change, she also warned her readers against knee-jerk adoption of identity categories imposed on us by society. When she writes in *Borderlands* “It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions” she denaturalizes the link between which side of the river one is on and which point of view one must hold (78). That is not to say that there are not real historical facts that influence one's identity markers, particularly in the war zone of the U.S./Mexico border, but it does mean that identity is something one should interrogate, try on, perhaps even change. For Anzaldúa, one must be aware of the “changeability of racial, gender, sexual, and other categories rendering the conventional labels obsolete. Though these markings are outworn and inaccurate, those in power continue using them to single out and negate those who are ‘different’ [...]” (“now let us shift” 541).

Despite Anzaldúa's hyper attention to racial difference, she—like the less attentive Lezama—does include some problematic racial viewpoints in theorizing queer possibility. Andrea Smith and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo have called attention to Anzaldúa's use of indigenous figures and tropes, charging the writer with a fetishization of indigeneity that

places natives in a historical past without concern for the current plight of native peoples. Indeed Anzaldúa's treatment of *mestizaje* is largely dependent on indigenous iconography. This interest in indigeneity—which is simultaneously genuine and fetishistic—fits into a pattern of Latin American intellectuals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who made links between *mestizaje* and esotericism, where one was used to explain the other. Tace Hedrick names just some of the ways that *mestizaje* and esotericism become interlinked in Latin American writing, stating: “the notion of the unity of opposites, effected through racial, cultural, sexual, and/or spiritual means; the appeal to ancient or primitive knowledges as a foundation for the rebirth or renewal of the present; and a conceptual reliance on a notion of the static nature of the primitive as antidote to the sense that modernity's emphasis on technology, science, and rationality had precipitated a spiritual crisis” (70). Although Anzaldúa's appeal to indigeneity is in many ways problematic, her schema—like Lezama's—ironically allows for the incorporation of marginalized identities into historical accounts.

### **Sistema Poético and the Other Stages of Conocimiento**

The *era imaginaria* and *nepantla* each represent possibility within their respective theoretical frameworks. Each term is also a part of a larger system of thought, however, that when taken as a whole explains the process of enacting or tapping into this possibility. For Lezama, this is the *sistema poético*. For Anzaldúa, *conocimiento*.

Lezama's “sistema poético” introduces “poesía” [poetry] not as a cultural artifact, but rather as a methodology. In its entirety, the *sistema poético* outlines how poetry is an organizing principle through which we can both understand and interact with the world. The

*era imaginaria* is one part of this system, but there are also others. In the following extended quote from “A partir de la poesía” Lezama outlines his “sistema poético”:

Si dividimos por el espíritu de las nieblas o un sueño inconcluso, tratamos de precisar cuando asumimos la poesía, su primer peldaño, se nos regalaría la imagen de una primera irrupción en la otra causalidad, la de la poesía, la cual puede ser brusca y ondulante, o persuasiva y terrible, pero ya una vez en esa región, la de la otra casualidad, se gana después una prolongada duración que va creando sus nudos o metáforas causales. Si decimos, por ejemplo, el cangrejo usa lazo azul y lo guarda en la maleta, lo primero, lo más difícil es, pudiéramos decir, subir a esa frase, trepar al momentáneo y candoroso asombro que nos produce. Si el fulminante del asombro restalla y lejos de ser rechazados en nuestro afán de cabalgar esa frase, la podemos mantener cubierta con la presión de nuestras rodillas, comienza entonces a trascender, a evaporar otra consecuencia o duración del tiempo del poema. (*Obras completas* 821)

[If we divide by the spirit of the fog or of an unfinished dream, when we take on poetry we attempt to specify its first step, it would give us the image of a primary invasion in the other causality, that of poetry, which can be brusque and undulating, or persuasive and terrible, but once it is in this region, the region of the other causality, it gains a prolonged duration that creates its links and causal metaphors. If we say, for example, that the crab wears a blue ribbon which he stores in a suitcase, the first thing, the most difficult thing is,

we could say, to rise to this phrase, to climb up to the fleeting and innocent surprise that it produces in us. If the suddenness of the surprise crashes and far from being rejected in our eagerness to mount this phrase, we can keep it covered with the pressure of our knees, it begins then to emerge, to evaporate other consequences or lengths of time in the poem.]

In this beautiful excerpt Lezama both outlines the various steps of the poetic process, and takes us through them. Just as we lose ourselves in the language of his writing with phrases such as “el cangrejo usa lazo azul y lo guarda en la maleta” [the crab wears a blue ribbon which he stores in a suitcase], so too does the quote outline for us the steps of our getting lost. First there is the eruption out of linear time via the interruption of another causality as we begin to read a text: “a primary invasion in the other causality, that of poetry, which can be brusque and undulating, or persuasive and terrible.” Then there is the act of allowing ourselves to get lost in the text: “the first thing, the most difficult thing is, we could say, to rise to this phrase, to climb up to the fleeting and innocent surprise that it produces in us.” Next we embrace the text like one would a lover: “far from being rejected in our eagerness to mount this phrase, we can keep it covered with the pressure of our knees.” Finally we reach a state that goes beyond the actual moments we spend reading the poem: “it begins then to emerge, to evaporate other consequences or lengths of time in the poem.” In this excerpt, Lezama explains how it is possible for a poetic text to jolt us out of linear time and causality.<sup>46</sup>

For Lezama, *poesía* represents the methodology for tapping into possibility. A sentence about a crab can, when nurtured, produce “the fleeting and innocent surprise” of possibility, thereby jolting us into queer time. As Lezama writes in a paraphrasing of

Nietzsche in “Ernesto Guevara, comandante nuestro,” “Donde quiera que hay un piedra [...] hay una imagen” [where there is a rock there is an image] (*Obras completas* 4). Indeed for Lezama the “piedra” [rock] can represent something as small as a single line about a crab in a poem, the “imagen” [image] can represent the poem itself, and—when the timing is right—the “imagen” can give way to the zone of possibility or *era imaginaria*.

Anzaldúa’s zone of possibility—*nepantla*—functions in a similar way. For Anzaldúa, the seven-step process of *conocimiento* is about tapping into *nepantla* and using this experience to transform self and world. Anzaldúa describes *conocimiento* as:

“A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity).” (“now let us shift” 542)

Like with Lezama, Anzaldúa is interested in actualizing the possibility present in *conocimiento* through “creative acts.” Where Lezama organizes his system around poetry, Anzaldúa takes a more expansive approach that also includes other forms of creative expression such as dance and meditation.

For Anzaldúa the process of tapping into possibility has seven steps: 1) the “arrebato” that destabilizes the subject, 2) “*nepantla*,” or the zone of possibility, 3) the “Coatlicue state,” or despair, 4) the “call to action” that pulls one out of despair, 5) “putting Coyolxauhqui together” or the process of making meaning of one’s experiences, 6) the “blow-up” when one re-enters the world, and 7) “spiritual activism” or the point of transformation. Taken together these seven steps outline the path toward consciousness.

It is important not to let the differences in each theorist's lexicon fool us into believing that their projects are more dissimilar than they are. In fact, the *sistema poético* and *conocimiento* have much in common. Where Anzaldúa might say "spiritual," Lezama might refer instead to "myth." Where Anzaldúa might say *conocimiento*, Lezama might refer to a "poetic consciousness." For each theorist, the goal is to produce a method of decoding the world that relies upon non-linearity as what Anzaldúa would call a form of "activism" and Lezama would refer to as "a metamorphosis that created a new vision" (*La expresión americana* 53). In Anzaldúa's words, this process:

reveals a discourse of signs, images, feelings, words that, once decoded, carry the power to startle you out of tunnel vision and habitual patterns of thought.

The snake is a symbol of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought." (540)

For Lezama the "awakening consciousness" would not be represented by the "snake," so much as the "crab."

### **(Queer) Time for Social Change**

As a final gesture, I will look in this section at what exactly a queer conception of time *does* within the real of social justice, in order to move on to a discussion of what it provides specifically for the field of Latina/o Studies. As my analysis of the *sistema poético* and seven steps of *conocimiento* illustrate, both of these systems seek to have an impact beyond the poem or creative act. Lezama's *sistema poético* exists on both an aesthetic level and the level of consciousness. It is both text and act, interacting. It is not merely that an act follows the experience of reading, though this is certainly true as well. It is that reading is

itself an act that can bring about the space of creation in the text itself. As Brett Levinson says, for Lezama, “transfiguration does not happen to cultural artifacts (“texts”) but pertains to them, is part of their infrastructure” (“Possibility, Ruin, Repetition” 57). Here Levinson points toward the fact that imagination is not what matter so much for Lezama, as what I would term possibility. Where imagination connotes a trait possessed by human beings, possibility connotes a state that exists independent of individuals and their traits. The act of reading uncovers the possibility inherent in the text, producing what Levinson calls “the space of radical possibility” (“Possibility, Ruin, Repetition” 63). We are not talking here about the type of close reading that literary scholars usually engage in, however. Lezama cautions:

Algún día cuando los estudios literarios superen su etapa de catálogo, y se estudien los poemas como cuerpos vivientes, o como dimensiones alcanzadas, se precisará la cercanía de la ganancia del sueño en Sor Juana, y la de la muerte, en el poema contemporáneo de Gorostiza. El sueño y la muerte, alcanzándose por ese conocimiento poético la misma vivencia del conocimiento mágico. (*La expresión americana* 97-8)

[One day when literary studies surpasses its cataloguing phase, and instead studies poems like living bodies, or like dimensions that have been reached, we will need close to us the gains of Sor Juana’s dream, and that of death, in the contemporary poem of Gorostiza. Dreams and death, reaching through this poetic consciousness the same experience as that of a magical consciousness.]



For Lezama, the close reading of most literary scholars is a type of cataloguing, undoubtedly connected to producing linear historical narratives and ethnographic accounts of cultures. This, however, is not enough. We must study literature as a poet would, as “cuerpos vivientes” [living bodies] or “dimensiones alcanzadas” [dimensions that have been reached]. To do so, Lezama continues, we need to use the tools of the writers themselves—Sor Juana and Gorostiza in this case. By appealing to their “conocimiento poético” [poetic consciousness], even sleep and death can be transformed into magic.

The utopian dimensions of the type of reading Lezama asks us to engage in can guide action in the present, as well. In *La expresión americana*, he explains “lo americano” as a spirit or consciousness of the Americas that also effect daily life:

Primero, hay una tensión en el barroco; segundo, un plutonismo, fuego originario que rompe los fragmentos y los unifica; tercero, no es un estilo degenerescente, sino plenario, que en España y en la América española representa adquisiciones de lenguaje, tal vez únicas en el mundo, muebles para la vivienda, formas de vida y de curiosidad, misticismo que se ciñe a nuevos módulos para la plegaria, maneras del saboreo y del tratamiento de los manjares, que exhalan un vivir completo, refinado y misterioso, teocrático y ensimismado, errante en la forma y arraigadísimo en sus esencias. (80)

[First, there is a tensión within the baroque; second, a plutonism, an fire of origin that breaks fragments and unifies them; third, it is not a degenerative style, but rather a plenary one, that in Spain and in Spanish America represents language acquisition, sometimes unique in the world, furniture for a

home, forms of life and of curiosity, mysticism that adheres to new units for prayer, ways of savoring and treating feasts, that exhale a complete form of living, refined and mysterious, theocratic and daydreaming, wandering in form and incredibly rooted in its essence.]

This for Lezama is not a cultural trait so much as a consciousness that can be adopted elsewhere. Made up of the tension that comes from resisting colonial norms, this “plutonismo” or fire destroys and rebuilds, producing a way of being that informs everything from the furniture for one’s house to living a complete and even mystical life. It is a way of understanding the world through a lens of possibility that informs the everyday actions of citizens of the new world.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of *conocimiento* makes more obvious overtures toward the social realm. As AnaLouise Keating and Gloria González-López articulate in their introduction to *Bridging*, for Anzaldúa suffering has a redemptive quality inasmuch as it “enacts a movement from the personal to the communal” (1). This link between inner transformation and social change is one of Anzaldúa’s most important interventions. Anzaldúa urges people to “deal with personal concerns while also confronting larger issues in the public arena” (“now let us shift” 572). For her the inner and outer are connected, and queer time is one way to change one’s engagement with the outer world. Lezama, with his desire to go beyond even the space of the poem, would agree. Where Anzaldúa was more public about her political leanings and social positions, Lezama was more muted after the 1959 Cuban revolution, which stifled political dissent. He did, however, have one frequently cited statement that is often used by scholars to demonstrate his covert interest in social justice. Lezama called the baroque writing style popular in Latin America:” “un arte de la

contraconquista” [an art of the counter-conquest] (*La expresión americana* 80).<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the queer consciousnesses that both he and Anzaldúa posit can be viewed in this light, as a creative response to the histories imposed by conquest.

## Conclusion

In closing, Lezama and Anzaldúa dismantle linear historical narratives and force us to rethink what matters when telling our stories. This epistemological shift toward queer time is profoundly relevant to thinking, writing, and enacting queerness, particularly in light of Queer Theory’s turn to utopian futurity, which pushes us to think about queer time as integral to queer politics.

For Anzaldúa, *nepantla* is part of a consciousness that allows us to shift toward spiritual activism. Lezama would shy away from words like “spiritual,” but really his is a similar project. In positing the *era imaginaria* as a sort of queer time that allows us to reorganize history, he deploys a tactic of salsa epistemology to playfully reorder history. That is, in putting forth zones of possibility that disregard the conventional rules of logic, opting instead for this creative approach, Lezama taps into the notion of time that Halberstam called “imaginative” and “strange.”

Both Lezama and Anzaldúa are therefore integral to queer theory’s genealogy of thinking about time, and also to a Latin American and Latino genealogy of thinking about time. Both are also fundamental to a Latin American and Latino genealogy of theorizing consciousness as simultaneously local and diasporic. Lezama did this by theorizing a Cuba that looked outward—focusing on a literary consciousness that could be exported.<sup>48</sup> In doing so he outlined a salsa epistemology originating in the Caribbean, but also accessible

elsewhere. Similarly, Anzaldúa is concerned with the geographic and cultural specificity of the borderlands, but part of her project is also positing *conocimiento* as a way to access a consciousness that goes beyond just outward identity markers. She, like Lezama, was invested in possibility as both a temporal framework and a consciousness that expanded beyond geographic borders. Reading these two theorists alongside one another puts forth a comparative Latino theorization of queer time, which is useful for understanding queer *Latinidad* less as an amalgamation of identities, and more as a system of epistemologies that are simultaneously local and diasporic.

## Chapter Three<sup>49</sup>

### “Penetrating Utopia:

#### Sex as Embodied Politics in Queer Cuban Exile Literature”

Queer bodies have long played a role in the telling of Cuban national history, beginning with José Martí’s treatment of male effeminacy in “Vindication of Cuba” (1889), continuing on to the Castro government’s persecution of sexual deviants in the infamous Unidades Militares para la Ayuda de Producción (UMAP) labor camps (1965-1969), and culminating in the current campaign lead by the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual to improve the status of the homosexual in Cuba.<sup>50</sup> In short, Queer bodies have been the battlefields on which the war of national identity has been fought—from American occupation, to republican governments, to the socialist state. While this may be true of many nations, it is particularly true of Cuba, and especially reflected in Cuban literature. More than any other nation that I am aware of, Cuba’s literary and intellectual history reflects an atypically high presence of queer authors. In fact, any discussion of the great Cuban literary masters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century will likely name at least three queer authors—José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, and Virgilio Piñera. The same is true of the Cuban diaspora, which has been largely defined by the queer literature produced by exiled authors, such as Reinaldo Arenas and Achy Obejas.<sup>51</sup> What this says about Cuba is not so much that queerness is more important there than in other places, but rather that we cannot read Cuban literature without taking into account the foundational role that the queer body and queer sex has had in shaping its production.<sup>52</sup>

This chapter reads sex as an embodied tactic of salsa epistemology in queer Cuban exile literature. It argues that queer sex scenes are frequently inserted into Cuban exile literature as a way to resist oppressive gender and sexual norms. In these instances, the embodied joy of the queer sex act is used to playfully resist the demonization and institutional criminalization of queer bodies that occurs, for example, when U.S. immigration policy bans the entrance of homosexual immigrants.<sup>53</sup> Looking at sex as a powerful tool of resilience in the exile experience—including its use as a literary tool to address the very serious questions of trauma, healing, and political activism—suggests that an embodied politics is not only possible, it already exists as an integral part of salsa epistemology.

In what follows I perform a reading of the trope of sexual penetration in 20<sup>th</sup> century queer Cuban exile short stories, through the authors Calvert Casey and Sonia Rivera-Valdés. These writers use sexual penetration to put forth non-linear notions of time and anti-essentialist identity expression as a form of engagement with social issues. They push us to see sex not only as a literary aesthetic of representation, but also as a politics in action. This produces a space of back and forth, or contamination of ideas, of queerness. In the case of Calvert Casey, he depicts the inside of a male lover's body in "Piazza Margana" as a fluid space existing outside of time or geography, where a new queer-friendly politics is possible. For Sonia Rivera-Valdés, the use of penetration in lesbian sex scenes in *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* recodes the male-centered optic of queer literary studies, Cuban literary studies, and Cuban exile politics.

Essential to this reading, however, is an engagement with the violent connotations that "penetration" conjures. The images of boundary crossing that sexual penetration evokes are often non-consensual, indicating the potential for sexualized violence that exists for the

queer bodies this chapter discusses. The fact that queer authors choose to posit the body as a site of resistance in spite of, or perhaps because of, the body's vulnerability to violence is an indication of the centrality of embodiment to Spanish Caribbean survival mechanisms such as salsa epistemology.

### **Sex Like Death**

Calvert Casey may seem like an unusual author to choose to discuss the role of sex in Cuban narrative of the 20th century. On the one hand there are so many others, Casey's fellow writers, who experienced considerably more success and notoriety for both their sexuality and the sexuality of their prose (José Lezama Lima, Reinaldo Arenas, and Severo Sarduy among them). Utopian sexual outbursts are certainly much more present in *Paradiso*, *Cobra*, or *Antes que anochezca*. On the other hand, Casey's lack of attention in critical and artistic circles has precisely to do with his unwillingness to be the spokesperson for a way of life or even an artistic aesthetic. He was in many ways an outsider to the queer culture of 1960s Havana, inasmuch as he was born to an American father and a Cuban mother, and moved to Cuba as a child. He also had a heavy stutter, a fact that friends like Guillermo Cabrera Infante have written about to explain the reasons for Casey's reclusiveness.<sup>54</sup> His eventual suicide in 1969 while in exile in Italy contributed to this mysterious, if marginal, place he holds in Cuban literature.

Within his work, Casey's treatment of sex was infrequent compared, for instance, to how frequently he took up the theme of death. The Casey most of us know is not a writer interested in sexuality, but rather one who wrote haunting stories like "Homecoming," the story of a lonely Cuban expat in New York City who wants to recuperate a lost utopia on the

island, but ultimately is unable to when faced with the crushing military violence of a changed nation. This expat, like many of Casey's other protagonists, finds death as his only reprieve. Several of Casey's other short stories revolve around a need for human connection that often manifests itself in non-sexual ways, such as caring for the dying or communicating with death. On the occasion that there is a fulfilled sex act, it seems to appear as a mirror image to death.

Casey's theorization of sex alongside death tells us something that Lezama's, Arenas', and Sarduy's sex scenes do not. For Casey sex—like death—is an attempt to temporarily escape linear time to create a space where harmful social norms can be reworked. This is a space I call a “disidentificatory space,” a reference to José Esteban Muñoz's work in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, in which he argues that the homosexual subject in the diaspora is a double minority, marginalized by both sexuality and ethnicity/nationality, and therefore must negotiate two “minority identifications [which] are often neglectful or antagonistic” to one another (8). Muñoz posits that, for “[q]ueers of color,” identity is often established through a process called “disidentification,” whereby the subject learns to survive in the public sphere, and even take pleasure in it, by reworking and reusing contradictory or harmful cultural norms (32). Where Muñoz posits disidentification as a process of working with and against cultural norms, I add the word “space” to highlight the escape from linear time that makes this process possible during the sex act and death, as Casey's work explores. The French term for orgasm—*la petite mort*—comes to mind as a colloquial reminder that what orgasm shares with death is its immediacy—its rootedness in a present completely removed from what came before or what will come after.<sup>55</sup> Casey's use of sex like death (as well as sex-like



death or death-like sex) is a tactic of salsa epistemology rooted in the body that creates a space for reworking the homophobic cultural norms that have characterized much of Cuban history.

### **The Queer Body in Piazza Margana**

“Piazza Margana,” describes the voyage of a protagonist penetrating his male lover’s body, dissolving into his blood stream, and floating endlessly throughout it. The text was written in 1967 during Casey’s self-exile to Italy, during which he feared being deported back to Cuba to face the persecution of homosexuals in the island’s labor camps.<sup>56</sup> “Piazza Margana” is part of a larger work that Casey destroyed before his suicide in Italy 1969. The story is generally read as a description of Casey’s own romance with his Italian lover, Gianni. If we view the protagonist’s performance in “Piazza Margana” as a negotiation of Casey’s identities as a homosexual, an exiled Cuban, and an expatriated American, we can argue that the story represents a resistance to oppressive cultures norms performed through a utopian articulation of sexual penetration. We can see the way Casey creates a disidentificatory space within his lover’s body that is sparked by sexual penetration, as well as posits an escape from linear time that is otherwise associated with death. Casey demonstrates a salsa epistemology through the use of penetration on two levels: the protagonist’s physical penetration of the lover to enter a space existing outside of any political system, and Casey’s linguistic penetration of the English language with Italian and Spanish phrases throughout the piece.

One useful way to conceptualize Casey’s depiction of penetration is through Judith Butler’s understanding of the “other,” which understands otherness in corporeal terms. As

Judith Butler would argue, dominant cultural perceptions of the “other” rely on distinctions between the internal and the external: “‘Inner’ and ‘outer’ make sense only with reference to a mediating boundary . . . determined in large part by cultural orders that sanction the subject” (170). That is to say, the “other” (in this case the gay man) is viewed as a barrier between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable—a barrier that is crossed through activities such as anal sex. “[A]nal and oral sex among men,” according to Butler, “clearly establishes certain kinds of bodily permeabilities unsanctioned by the hegemonic order” (168). For Casey, an openly gay writer, the decision to explore the male body in his final story through penetration (that is the penetration of one man’s body by another’s) is an act of disidentification that runs the risk of “other”-ing its protagonist, even as it destabilizes the criteria on which such “other”-ing would occur.<sup>57</sup> This is particularly true during the time period when Casey was writing, especially when we consider that concurrent to his time in Italy a large-scale persecution of homosexuality was taking place in Cuba, which likely affected many of his friends and colleagues. Casey’s decision to write a gay story at this particular moment therefore re-appropriates the idea of the gay man as penetrator, playing with the very cultural stereotypes of homosexuality that were being violently persecuted.

Casey’s protagonist has entered a body, which, on a physiological level, he is in danger of being expelled from. Yet it is through this entrance that his new self, the one that has found a timeless peace, is constituted. This sense of simultaneous internality and externality recalls Julia Kristeva’s notion of the “abject”—an object that is both inside and outside of us, that both summons and repels.<sup>58</sup> Using the example of feces, Kristeva states, “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*” (3). The abject, though repulsive, cannot be completely separated

from the self, thereby blending the borderline of subject and object. To see sex as rooted in abjection is to acknowledge its liminal qualities as an act between bodies and, as Casey shows us, between even life and death. Faced with images that are at once nauseating and sexually enticing, Casey's protagonist is caught in "a vortex of summons and repulsion," as Kristeva would put it (1). He states of his lover's body: "I wondered what the smell and taste of it could all be . . . to lick the bones, to chew the soft, tender flesh, lay the scrotum open, deplete the bladder" (187). The physicality of his descriptions of the body—and particularly the sexualized body connoted by "lick," "soft," "tender," and "scrotum"—draw attention to the queerness of the space Casey creates. The border crossing that the abject allows—between subject and object, internal and external—make it so that Casey is able to disidentify with dominant perceptions of the gay male as sexual deviant.

The abjection invoked by the protagonist's penetration also makes possible a comingling of each of the cultures Casey inhabits. Like the abject itself, each culture exists both inside and outside of him, is both peripheral and constitutive of him. Gustavo Pérez-Firmat suggests in "Bilingual Blues, Bilingual Bliss" that Casey finds refuge from the Cuba that has abandoned him in his English prose. Pérez-Firmat argues that Casey seeks to expel the Cuba that persecutes gays when he writes: "I have attained what no political or social system could ever dream of attaining: I am free, utterly free inside you, forever free from all fears and cares. No exit permit, no entry permit, no passport, no borders, no visa, no *carta d'identità*, no nothing!" ("Piazza Margana" 188-89). Here Casey reiterates that the queer space he created within his lover's body is not only free of the profession of time—"utterly free inside you, forever"—but also free of geopolitical boundaries "o passports, no borders." Casey is refashioning the concept of a home in a geographic sense with the concept of a home in his

lover's body. For Casey's protagonist, this territory is completely uncharted. He expresses this when he writes that his experience "has no precedent in history and will go down in the annals of mankind" (188). For the protagonist, the feat of having escaped the human existence in this utopian space is liberating. At the same time, Casey's protagonist has created a specifically queer space, produced by the use of sex as a tactic of salsa epistemology that uses utopian joy as a catalyst for social change. This is evidenced in the prior quote through the use of the word "annals," likely a reference to the word anal in Spanish or English.

Throughout the text we consistently see Casey disidentify with stereotypes generally attached to homosexuality. For instance, the narrator's prolonged interest in genitals and rectums is significant. The text reads, "diet for weeks on the genital cord; ever more earnest, ever more eager, feed, feed slowly on the eardrums, the eyes, the tongue, gnaw at the rectal opening" (188). Casey consistently returns to the images of genitals and rectums, despite the fact that the journey is of course throughout the entire body. He writes:

I know that I will be with you, travel with you, sleep with you, dream with you, urinate and generally defecate with you, make love *with and through* you, hate with you, think, cry, grow senile, warm, cold and warm again, feel, look, jerk off, kiss, kill, pet, fart, fade, flush, turn into ashes, lie, humiliate myself and others, strip, stab, wilt, wait, wail, laugh, steal, quiver, waver, ejaculate, linger, backscuttle, pray, fall, doublecross, triplecross, ogle, browse, goose, suck, brag, bleed, blow with and through you. (188)

A careful dissection of this quote leads us to a further understanding of Casey's ability to disidentify with gay stereotypes. Of the 47 clauses in this sentence, about half have a relation

to sex, genitals, or the rectum. Of these clauses, several have blatantly sexual connotations, namely: “jerk off,” “quiver, waver, ejaculate, linger, backscuttle,” “suck,” “bleed,” “blow with and through you.” These clauses reinforce the cultural view of gay men as a sex-obsessed being that Casey is working against. The use of the slang terms “backscuttle,” “jerk off,” and “blow” suggest a further level of engagement with popular culture. Not only is Casey choosing to stick to these common gay stereotypes, he is also choosing to do so in a rudimentary way.

On the other hand, some of Casey’s references to the lover’s genitalia have no relation to sex at all, and in fact toy with abjection. The use of the terms “urinate and generally defecate with you,” “fart,” and “flush” suggest that there is nothing stereotypically gay at all about this relationship. Casey humanizes gay male sexuality by suggesting that the protagonist’s relation to his lover is commonplace, everyday. It is no more gay than any of the other non-sexual clauses would suggest: “dream with you,” “grow senile,” “humiliate myself and others.” Casey’s interspersing of sex with bodily functions links daily existence to the ecstatic space of sex and forces reader to think of gay male sex as existing on both registers.

Casey creates a text that, as Muñoz argues, goes beyond creating a “sanitized and desexualized queer subject” to create one that “stirs up uncertain desire-zones” (*Disidentifications* 99). The author’s careful interweaving of sexual imagery with commonplace occurrences completely transforms what the reader might expect from a gay text. That is, it posits the gay person as both hyper-sexualized and human at the same time, thereby toying with popular notions of gay man as sexual deviant. Although the narrator is overly concerned with his lover’s genitals and rectum, the reader is given a complex

portrayal of gay life. As the narrator says, it is “[n]ot only the soft hair on your pubis but also your heart” (191). Indeed, Casey acknowledges that sex exists on both of those registers, as it is both the embodiment of the pubis and transcendence of the heart.

Casey comments on his own willingness to “stir up desires” in his 1956 article “Nota sobre pornografía,” in which he explores D.H. Lawrence’s campaign against pornography. He argues, in contrast to Lawrence’s viewpoint, that “[a] pornographic film can be a catalyzing agent of great value” (“Note...” 108). The catalyst that Casey refers to is sex’s potential as an embodied tactic of social change. By seeing the potential of pornography to incite critical reflection, Casey is perhaps prefacing his eventual performance in “Piazza Margana.” As Casey argues in the article, a purely sexual text can be freeing to the reader. He writes: “The pure pornographic experience, stripped of its makeup and of all limitations imposed directly or indirectly by the prejudices, can be supremely beautiful and can lead to serenity or to exaltation” (109). This “serenity” and “exaltation” is precisely what both the protagonist and the reader experience as a result of the story’s unabashed sexuality and the queer timelessness that results from it. By writing penetration in an overtly sexual and queer way, Casey creates in his short story exactly the type of liberation that he called for in his 1956 article, and exactly the type of politics rooted in embodiment that salsa epistemology makes possible.

Casey’s choice of verbs in the short story echoes this queer timelessness. The first paragraph begins with a description of his lover’s bodily functions—“I have gone beyond the urine, beyond excrement and its sweet, acrid taste, and have at last lost myself in the warm recesses of your body” (187). The speaker’s intent in this excerpt is to express how he has “lost” himself “at last.” His function, then, is neither to move forward nor backward, but

instead to enjoy the queerness of timelessness. Similarly, Casey ends the story with a paragraph that includes the following: “I could now take a respite before it is too late and make the long voyage down to the tip of your cock, with a brief stopover inside the testicles” (192-93). We find the protagonist concerned less with linear time than with “respite” or “stopover” in the queer space of the “cock” or “testicles.” Sex, here functioning as an embodied tactic of salsa epistemology, has disrupted linear temporality, demonstrating how the body itself has the ability to transcend boundaries and rework cultural norms through the sex act.

### **The Language of Queer Penetration**

In his essay, “La política queer del espanglish,” Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes speaks to the similarities of sexual and linguistic transgression, determining that both Spanglish (a mixture of English and Spanish occurring among Latina/o immigrants in the United States) and homosexuality result in a *queering* of the dominant culture—meaning that both present a challenge to normative concepts of linguistic and sexual purity (143). We might take this as a starting point for understanding how Casey’s literary experiment in the body posits queerness on both the linguistic and sexual registers. In “Piazza Margana” we can view the protagonist’s sexual and linguistic penetrations performing similar functions.<sup>59</sup> It becomes difficult, in fact, to distinguish where language ends and action begins.

Written almost entirely in English, “Piazza Margana” is one of Casey’s only two non-Spanish language works. Many critics have taken Casey’s use of English as a rejection of the Cuban culture that forced him into exile, and its language. In “Bilingual Blues, Bilingual Bliss” Gustavo Pérez-Firmat posits that Casey’s use of English in his final story is a

conscious choice to rebel against the nation from which he is in exile, Cuba, and the culture that prohibits his homosexuality, Cuban culture. Others have seen his linguistic choice as less important, arguing, as Guillermo Cabrera Infante does, “his Spanish is English by other means and both are nothing more than an end to Calvert Casey” (120). In contrast to both views, I see Casey’s use of language in the story not as a rejection of one identity, or as an inconsequential detail, but rather as an attempt to negotiate all of his identities through a penetration of one language by the other, in a way that parallels his depictions of sexual penetration. Though the story is written in English, Casey interjects Spanish and Italian phrases to assist his journey through the body. Inasmuch as these languages are representative of the cultures from which they originate, Casey’s final piece is a reworking of the cultures he inhabits within the disidentificatory space of the body.

The first example comes when the narrator states of his lover “‘Envejeceremos juntos, dijiste,’ and we will” [“‘We will grow old together, you said’ and we will”] (“Piazza Margana” 187). We can note that the word “dijiste” [you said] is also within quotation marks, insinuating that the entire phrase “envejeceremos juntos, dijiste” [We will grow old together, you said] is being reflected upon. This suggests two possibilities. First, it can suggest that someone uttered the entire statement “Envejeceremos juntos, dijiste”—presumably the lover in whose body the narrator is swimming. If this is the case, it suggests that the narrator is reliving his *own* promise to his lover—his own statement “envejeceremos juntos.” Alternately, it can suggest that the narrator uttered to the lover “envejeceremos juntos, dijiste”. If this is the case, then the narrator is reliving his *lover’s* promise to grow old together. Either way, this quote is significant in that it suggests there has been some Spanish



dialogue during at least two points prior to the story. It is not necessarily, as one might first assume, that the narrator thinks in Spanish as he tells the tale.

On this front, Pérez-Firmat has argued that for Casey “Spanish is the language of family, of history, of the *sosiego* of social life and the *bienestar* of companionship” (“Bilingual” 446). In opposition to Pérez-Firmat’s reading, I would argue that it is not entirely clear whether Spanish represents “the *bienestar* of companionship” in this instance. We cannot be sure whether it was chosen by Casey to display his own emotional diglossia—his need to express love in Spanish—or whether it was chosen because, on a very basic level, the statement was actually originally uttered in Spanish. To view Casey’s use of language in terms of emotional diglossia would imply a clear-cut dualism in not only his writing, but also in his cultural identification. Rather, I suggest Casey’s choice to use Spanish or English is a deliberate reworking of precisely these cultural stereotypes.

At another point in “Piazza Margana,” Casey returns to Spanish in his description of the lover’s body using Latin and Spanish medical terms—a phenomenon Pérez-Firmat refers to as “latent and blatant multilingualism” (“Bilingual” 443). On this point, I agree with Pérez-Firmat’s analysis. Casey’s use of languages other than English suggests a “blatant” disidentification not just with Cuban culture, but rather with all of his cultures. Casey chooses to use each language when it suits him—unabashedly switching back and forth between the three. In this way Casey is not entirely approaching the text through English. He effectively uses both Spanish and Italian—“latent” and inactive as they may be throughout the rest of the story—to explore the inner depths of the queer body. The mixture of all three languages shows that Casey is not simply identifying or counteridentifying with any *one* language.

This point is later exemplified when Casey launches into an Italian monologue:

Sono il tuo sangue! Quello che senti rimbalzarti dentro, questi brividi, questa strana gioia, questa paura, questa bramosia, sono io, sono io, galleggiante nelle tue arterie, è la carne che rammenta, dorenanti rammentiamo insieme per l'eternità, amore, amore, pauroso amore mio! (191)

[I am your blood! What you feel bounding within you, these shudders, this strange joy, this fear, this desire, is I, is I, floating within your arteries, is the flesh that remembers, as from now on we shall remember together, my timorous love!]

Casey's sudden eruption into Italian suggests that English—as he himself said of Spanish—“en este caso . . . no me servía” [In this case...didn't serve me] (“Bilingual” 439). In other words, it suggests that at the end of this sterile and medicalized portion of his trip throughout the body, he must burst out in another language to express his emotion. Because we see that this quote is not unlike some of his English exclamations—namely “Your heart! At last I am your heart!” (Piazza Margana” 191)—it becomes clear that Casey's interspersing of various languages represents a blending of cultures, and the creation of a space in which he uses one language to penetrate another, in a queering that allows Casey's text to both void linguistic purity and the nationalistic associations that accompany it. Beyond that, he is also negotiating the very relationship between language and culture itself, between the linguistic realm and the realm of doing. Penetration does that for Casey, as writing penetration becomes more than just an aesthetic exercise, and penetration itself becomes more than just a physical act. The act of writing, like the content of the piece, echoes the queer penetration made possible

by an embodied salsa epistemology.

### **The Queer Body in “La más prohibida de todas”**

Sonia Rivera-Valdés’ work provides an interesting contrast to Casey’s oeuvre, in that while it also articulates issues of queer Cubanidad, it chooses to do so primarily through the use of lesbian sex. In *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda*, Rivera-Valdés writes the experience of exile through the lens of sex, much of it lesbian. Over the course of the collection we see myriad stories, all about immigration and many about Cuban exile, in which the protagonists attempt to work out complicated issues of diaspora—including the Pedro Pan experience, sending money to family in Cuba, and travel to the island. They do so, however, through a complicated web of sexual experiences with people that either represent a link to the island by virtue of being Cuban themselves—as is the case with Mayté’s relationship with Laura in “Cinco ventanas del mismo lado”—or epitomize the protagonist’s estranged relationship from the island by serving as an antithesis to Cuban traits—as represented by the narrator’s tryst with his unclean neighbor in “El olor del desenfreno.” The collection also differs from “Piazza Margana” in both historical context and popular recognition. Rivera-Valdés, who was born and raised in Cuba, wrote the collection in the 1990s after having moved to the United States some time before. Despite the fact that the collection was written outside of Cuba, it received considerable praise within Cuba, winning the prestigious Casa de las Americas literary prize in 1997.<sup>60</sup> The differences between Sonia Rivera-Valdés’ work and Casey’s are obvious, inasmuch as Casey feared persecution for his queer-themed work and Rivera-Valdés was awarded a prize for hers. While this certainly tells a story of the expansion of LGBTQ rights in Cuba in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also pushes us

to try to understand how the stories do similar critical work despite the years that separate them.

Like “Piazza Margana,” *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* is a text marked by the permeation of boundaries through sex. The short story we will look at, “La más prohibida de todas,” tells of the sexual encounters of the Cuban-born Martirio, who moved to the United States just before the 1959 revolution. The story traces the trajectory of Martirio’s love life, from having frequent sex with men during her adolescence in Cuba to a passionate affair with a homosexual man in the U.S., marriage to an Irishman, several lesbian relationships, and finally falling in love with a Cuban woman. Because each of these encounters pushes Martirio along in her process of self-discovery, we can view her sexual history as part of her cultural and sexual identity formation, and furthermore as a tactic of salsa epistemology that helps her reject damaging norms throughout this process. Martirio’s sexual experiences represent the process of creating a disidentificatory space, in which she can recode damaging cultural prejudices against women and lesbians. Like with Casey, I will show that this sexual penetration is paralleled by a linguistic penetration, in which her code-switching between English and several registers of Spanish embodies her negotiation of queerness in the cultures associated with these languages.

The two texts differ, however, with respect to how this penetration is gendered. Although we can maintain, as Butler does, that any type of bodily penetration represents a transgression, we must also acknowledge that this transgression holds different connotations in lesbian versus gay male sex. With Casey’s protagonist, we view penetration as a rebellion against the cultural trope of the gay man as penetrator/perpetrator of anal sex. Lesbians, however, are not culturally construed as penetrators, because lesbian sex is not conceived in

terms of anal penetration. In Rivera-Valdés's text Martirio's penetration rebels against different stereotypes than Casey's: that of women and lesbians as necessarily virginal and essentially invisible in Cuban literary history.<sup>61</sup> By initiating physical and linguistic penetration with various sexual partners, Martirio is disidentifying with this de-sexualized female stereotype to produce a queer female subject that is both the penetrator and perpetrator of sex. This has implications for discussing violence, as many of Martirio's sexual experiences must contend with undercurrents of violence both directed toward her and coming from her. This is particularly important to consider when discussing Rivera-Valdés work in the context of queer Cuban writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as she joins writers such as Achy Obejas, who insert the story of lesbian sexual violence into a history that is largely written by and concerned with men.

Martirio's history is revealed to us throughout the story in the form of an interview between her and Marta Veneranda, the researcher for whom the book is named, whose job it is to compile testimonials about secrets for her dissertation. Early in the story Martirio shares with Marta the details of her youthful exploits with older, married men in Cuba—encounters characterized not just by physical penetration, but also by the verbal penetration that accompanies it. As Martirio describes it, “Eran sesiones de sexo con acompañamiento vocal ininterrumpido” [They were sessions of sex with uninterrupted vocal accompaniment] (*Las historias prohibidas...* 111). Martirio describes the dialogue of one such session. It begins with a verbal declaration of the penetration: “Ábrete, mami, enseñale a tu papi todo lo que tu tienes guardadito entre las piernas y que tú sabes es mío aunque te resistas” [Open up, *mami*, show your *papi* what you've got saved away between your little legs. You know it's mine even though you resist]<sup>62</sup> (114). The use of the diminutive here—“guardadito entre las

piernas” [saved away between your little legs]—highlights both the power dynamic between this older man and this younger woman, as well as the playfulness of the encounter. By referring to Martirio using diminutives, the older man both infantilizes her and infantilizes the situation, demonstrating how this is not a serious adult encounter. The woman, playing her role, begs her partner to penetrate her, to which he responds with insertion: “él, suavécito, iba poniendo los dedos dentro de mí al ritmo de las palabras” [he would gently put his fingers inside of me to the rhythm of the words] (114). Although Martirio participates in and enjoys these encounters, she never plays her part verbally. “Y yo miraba hacia todos los espacios posibles del cuarto menos para donde suponían las reglas del juego que lo hiciera” [I’d look anywhere else in the room, any possible place but where the rules of the game said I should] (112). This is not because Martirio is offended by the word play, but rather because she finds it funny, as she articulates when she says of her quietness: “Por un lado era la timidez y por otro el mantener una distancia de la escena que me dejaba percibir lo mucho que había de cursi y cómico en ella” [On the one hand it was timidity but on the other hand the distance I maintained from the scene allowed me to see how corny and funny it was] (113). Martirio prefers sex that engages in playfulness—or what she terms the corny and funny—as demonstrated when she later critiques another lover for being so serious he must have learned the game in a “military school.” By refusing to participate in the verbal aspect of penetration, Martirio assures that she is an active participant in the verbal sex game while still maintaining the agency of when to speak.

After moving to the United States, Martirio longs for the verbal component of Cuban heterosexual sex. She attains this combination for the first time in the U.S. when she sleeps with Shrinivas, her Indian modeling partner. She describes sex with Shrinivas as “la primera

vez que hice el amor, la primera vez que me lo hicieron” [the first time I made love, the first time someone made love to me] (119). Although Shrinivas does not speak during sex like her previous Cuban partners, they open up to one another after sex—telling each other the darkest secrets of their upbringings. Martirio says of the experience “no puse condiciones a la entrada de su cuerpo en el mío, ni de su alma en la mía” [I imposed no conditions on the entry of his body into mine, nor of his soul into mine] (122). This experience with Shrinivas begins to create the type of queer space that Martirio seeks. Although the sex is heterosexual, it begins to transform some of the sexual norms that Martirio rebels against—namely the idea that sex has to be an exercise in domination. This is also complicated by the fact that the space dissipates when the experience ends abruptly, with Shrinivas informing Martirio that he must go back to his lover—a man.

At this, a turning point in the text, Martirio becomes aware of her desire to fuse the physical and verbal penetration of her teenage years with the emotional connection she experienced with Shrinivas—her need to use embodiment as a tactic for navigating the world she inhabits. What follows are several failed relationships, including the marriage to Mark, and several female lovers—all of which are missing some component of the space she seeks to create.

One such example, her relationship with Ada, shows that queer sexual spaces do not result from every same-sex encounter. Martirio, having made the decision to begin sleeping with women, thinks that they will be able to offer her both the physical and verbal penetration that she desires. With Ada, however, she learns that “no todas las mujeres son capaces de la intimidad de palabra y obra de que yo las suponía dotadas en su totalidad” [not all women are capable of the intimacy of word and deed that I thought was natural to them

all] (130). Though Martirio and Ada have lesbian sex, Ada's sexual behavior adheres to heterosexual stereotypes. Martirio complains about Ada's refusal to take an active role in sex when she says, "El amor era un acto de diversión aguada por ella misma, en el cual más que hacer esperaba que le hicieran, y del que salía alienada y confusa" [She herself watered down the act of love making. Rather than doing it, she let it be done to her, only to emerge feeling alienated and confused] (129). Martirio stays with Ada for six years, despite the fact that her inability to take an active role in sex is reminiscent of Martirio's own relationships with men in Cuba.

Ultimately, Martirio does not find a sexual space that she is comfortable in until she sleeps with Rocío, the Cuban woman who she meets while the latter is on a trip to New York. With Rocío, Martirio is finally able to create a sexual space that combines the positive aspects of her past sexual experiences. She states, "[l]e ofrecí desde el primer abrazo lo mejor, las palabras del dueño de la finca de Camagüey, las posiciones de Shrivanas, la pasión de Betina" [From our very first hug I offered her the best of me, the words of the ranch owner from Camagüey, Shrivana's positions, Betina's passion] (145). She maintains the sexual practices that represent each of her cultures: the verbal cues she learned from her lover from Camaguey, which represents her Cuban past; the sexual positions she learned from Shrivanas, which represents her experience in American immigrant culture; the passion she learned from her latest lover Betina, which represents her inclusion into American lesbian culture. Martirio takes each of these, and refashions them into a sexual experience that is not representative of any of these cultures. She disidentifies with each culture—meaning that she reworks their cultural norms—in order to create a space where she, as a subject constantly oscillating between them, can finally feel at home.



We can see an example of this disidentification when Martirio whispers to Rocío, “Ábrete, rica, enséñale a tu mami todo lo que tienes guardadito entre las piernas y que tú sabes es mió aunque te resistas” [Open up, my beauty. Show your *mami* what you have saved away between your little legs. You know it’s mine even though you resist] (145). In this interaction we see Martirio using the language of her past Cuban lovers, but adapting it by substituting the word “mami” for “papi.” She also maintains the diminutive form of “guardadito” [saved away] as a gesture toward the playfulness of the script. Through her use of the linguistic games characteristic of heterosexual Cuban sex in a homosexual situation, Martirio disidentifies with the Cuban heterosexual culture. The scene takes another unexpected turn, however, when Rocío responds, “estoy como tú me querías, para ti solita, para que me goces. Ahora tú me vas a dar a mí lo mismo” [Take a good look, my queen, I’m just the way you want me. Just for you alone, for you to enjoy. Now you’re going to offer me the same] (145). In this excerpt Rocío reverses the roles of the dialogue by dispersing the power. She goes along with the role-play at first, but in stating “tú me vas a dar a mí lo mismo” [Now you’re going to offer me the same] she establishes an equality between the two women. Rather than playing the passive role and allowing Martirio to play the active role—thereby reproducing the power games of the heterosexual sex of Martirio’s youth—Rocío changes the rules of the game by playing the active role as well. Rocío goes on to create this egalitarian space when she states “fíjate lo buena que soy yo contigo, vas a ser tú igual conmigo” [You see how good I am to you. That’s how good you’re going to be to me] (145). Here Rocío clearly states that the domination usually present in this role-playing has been replaced by equality between both women. What’s important here is not that power dynamics are completely missing from the women’s’ encounter—after all a verbal

articulation of power is clearly part of their sexual game. More important is that the two are playful within these dynamics, to where both co-create the disidentification with the heterosexual script. In addition, like Casey's, the sexual space that Sonia Rivera-Valdés writes in this scene uses embodiment to exit linear time. Martirio states that she experiences, "el diálogo perfecto que yo había vislumbrado hacía cuarenta años pero del cual no había tenido certeza hasta hoy" [the perfect dialogue that I had glimpsed forty years ago but that I hadn't been sure of until today] (145). For her, the sex act removes her from the present and makes her feel as though she is in "una tarde de sábado viejo" [one of those Saturday afternoons from long ago] (144).

### **The Lesbian Penetration of Language**

The timelessness that the two women create is more than just sexual, however. It is a linguistic space where Martirio can work on and against the dominant ideologies of the cultures she inhabits. Language and the body become blurred for Martirio, as sex and penetration always exist for her on both registers. In this way we can see penetration as both a linguistic and a bodily act. Martirio's code-switching between languages is one example of this. Although "La más prohibida de todas" is written in standard Spanish, Martirio interrupts her narrative with English and other registers of Spanish. Once again we see parallels between a "queering" of language, as La Fountain-Stokes defines it, and sexual queering. Both operate in this narrative to work out the complexities of identity formation, denying the purity of any one set of cultural norms through the interjection of competing cultural and linguistic paradigms. In the case of code-switching, Martirio's penetration of one language into the other takes several forms. In many instances, the switches seem casual, such as: her

use of the terms “los panties” (129), her description of a card she keeps on her refrigerator “cerrada con scotch tape para que nadie la lea” (132), and her description of the effects of “global warming” (142). The latter two linguistic switches are inserted into the text without italics, perhaps suggesting that Martirio herself does not notice the use of these English words in her Spanish speech. The same is true when Martirio states that she is “terminando el Master,” which is an incorporation of the American *masters* degree, pronounced as though it were a Spanish word (130). What these seemingly unintentional code switches show us are the ways in which both of Martirio’s cultures influence her speech. Martirio’s assumption that Marta, her interviewer who is also a Cuban immigrant, will understand her references to these English or modified-English terms, also suggests that she shares a common immigrant culture with her.

In the final scene of the story, however, Martirio’s code-switching represents a penetration of one language by the other, in ways that work out complicated issues like the pain of exile, the feeling of being culturally split, or the power dynamics between these two women. To return to this scene once again, it takes place when Martirio and Rocio finally have sex in Rocio’s apartment in Cuba. In the confines of this apartment, a timeless space is created in which these women disidentify with the complicates social realities that have followed them into the space of the bedroom.<sup>63</sup> Much of this is represented through code-switches between various registers of Spanish. Martirio uses a Spanish vocabulary representative of her youth in Cuba that represents a world and culture that is now distanced from her. Upon entering Rocío’s room, she states with a certain nostalgia: “en este cuarto había una ventana frente al mar y por ella entraba un chorro de luz que nunca hubo en los de hacía cuarenta años y mi corazón estaba colmado y mi lengua llena de palabras que había

perdido el miedo a pronunciar” [This room had a window facing the sea, admitting a flood of light like there never had been in those rooms of forty years ago. My heart was overflowing and my tongue full of words I was no longer afraid to say] (144). This moment of return to Cuba takes Martirio back to a time before she left Cuba—a time that was filled with turmoil as much as it was with pleasure. Nonetheless, upon returning Martirio is filled with hope, and her tongue seems to remember words that she has been afraid to pronounce since going into exile. Martirio acknowledges the fact that the space created in this apartment allows her to play with language, as she states “Al cerrarse la puerta tras de mí, sentí haber entrado en una tarde de sábado viejo, una de aquellas en que días, meses y colores permanecían afuera para dejar espacio absoluto a la voluptuosidad del lenguaje” [As the door closed behind me, I felt as though I had entered into one of those Saturday afternoons of the past, one of those in which days, months and colors remained outside to leave absolute space for the voluptuousness of language] (144). It is in this space of the “voluptuousness of language” that Martirio is able to engage in the sexual wordplay we have already examined, as she works out the weighty issues of her past through penetration that exists on the linguistic and the bodily dimensions.

For Martirio code-switching seems to come more naturally than it does for Casey’s protagonist. Whereas Martirio shifts back and forth between different languages and registers throughout the entire story, Casey uses Spanish and Italian only a handful of times. Furthermore, Martirio’s code-switching is so effortless that it often occurs within the same sentence. This is not the case for Casey, whose code-switching is usually separated into different sentences. The ease with which Martirio moves from one language to another suggests a permeability that is not present in Casey’s piece. Casey’s text demonstrates the

penetration of one body by another. His use of language takes on a similar dimension, with only one language penetrating the narrative at a time. Rivera-Valdés, on the other hand, describes the mutual penetration of lesbian relationships, strengthening the link between language and body as both suggest reciprocity.<sup>64</sup> Where Casey seems to disidentify with one language at a time, Martirio allows her languages to flow into each other.

This is not intended to reinforce stereotypical notions of lesbian sex as somehow more egalitarian than gay male sex, but rather to draw attention to how the use of the trope of penetration by this female writer complicates dominant narratives of Cuban sexuality. Penetration had been used by many canonical queer Cuban writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to do precisely the kind of work I am talking about—the de-stabilization of the dominant order that comes from overtly sexual texts, many of which were government censored. The insertion of female writers into this history complicates the story, however, by forcing us to understand how there are different things at stake for women attempting to write the queer experience in a way that is intelligible to a larger audience, while still being true to the specificities of lesbianism.

### **Toward an Embodied Politics of Queerness**

“Piazza Margana” and “La más prohibida de todas” are two texts in which the protagonists rework normative ideas of sex and sexuality through an engagement with the body. Where Casey’s protagonist combines penetration with the concept of a linguistic home, Martirio mixes her sexual past with the languages she has inhabited. Where Casey’s protagonist finds his comfort in the endless traversing of his lover’s body, Martirio finds comfort in her sexual space with Rocío. Where Casey’s protagonist ends his narrative by

asserting “I am NOT leaving” (“Piazza Margana” 193), Martirio declares her continued happiness at the end of her story by stating, “[y] en eso estamos” (*Las historias prohibidas...* 145).

In some sense, however, just as these texts show the creation of a successful disidentificatory space, so too do they display the dissipation of such a space. One must be conscious of the fact that although both protagonists assert the permanence of their situations, neither Casey nor Rivera-Valdés is truly able to create a lasting state of peacefulness. Rather the disidentification that both characters engage in is a continuous process of creation and destruction.<sup>65</sup> As a tactic of salsa epistemology, sex creates a destabilizing force that playfully reworks norms while resisting rigid resolution.

For Casey’s protagonist, the possibilities of disidentification seem to be endless. At the end of the story, the protagonist claims, “I have entered the Kingdom of Heaven and taken proud possession of it. This is my private claim, my heritage, my fief. I am NOT leaving” (194). Of course, one cannot help but wonder whether this statement is more a wish than a fact. Although the protagonist does claim to write the tale while “traveling at ease in unspeakable merriment through your bloodstream,” the story itself begins as a fantasy (188). According to the protagonist, his travels began with “a terrible urge to have a taste of it [blood]” (187). He then goes on to describe how he “thought of the red raw tissues of the stomach . . . saw the inlets of your mouth . . . wondered what the smell and taste of it all could be” (187). At some point, however, the narrator goes from thinking, seeing, and wondering—as the prior quotes suggest—to actually inhabiting his lover’s insides. This transition is not explained in the text, leaving the reader to wonder whether the voyage actually occurs, or whether it is a fantasy. In this way the disidentificatory space created by

Casey is, actually, only partially successful. On the one hand, the story envisions a private, disidentificatory space far from the confines of the public life mandated by each of the protagonist's cultures. It is a location from which the narrator can safely say, "I am NOT leaving" (193) and boldly declare "Who could stop me except death and then it would be *our* death" (193). On the other hand, the reader is left wondering whether the protagonist has indeed crafted this space he boasts about, or whether the space must necessarily dissipate once his fantasy ends. The latter reading suggests not the impossibility of using sex as a tactic to negotiate hardship, but rather the impossibility of its permanence in a world in which queer subjects must constantly remain vigilant to the threat of persecution.<sup>66</sup>

In Martirio's case her disidentificatory space is undone when she must return to the United States, as evidenced by the fact that her interview with Marta Veneranda takes place in New York. We can understand this through the context of the story's last line: "y en eso estamos." Unlike Debra A. Castillo, who argues that the story is "a happy return to the motherland instantiated fully" (141), or Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel who argues that Martirio's journey is "mediado por el deseo de recuperar la patria perdida" (359), I would argue that no permanent reconnection with Cuba occurs. This reading is substantiated in "La semilla más honda del limón," a follow up story written by Rivera-Valdés in her second book, *Historias de mujeres grandes y chiquitas*. This story is meant to be a retelling of "La más prohibida de todas" written by Martirio herself. In this version of the story, Martirio confirms that her relationship with Rocío does in fact continue, long distance, after her interview with Marta. The love affair ends, however, during a visit to Cuba in which Martirio discovers that Rocío has not been faithful to her. Upon admitting this fact, Rocío bombards Martirio with a list of reasons that the two have never been compatible—namely, Martirio's

distance from Cuban culture. Rocío proclaims, “Me hubiera gustado secuestrarte y amarrarte y obligarte a comer lo que yo comía, a fumar, prohibirte el brócoli y el tofú y hacerte olvidar el yoga” (*Historias* 181). This desire to reintroduce Martirio into Cuban culture and make her forget about her American culture—as it is represented in broccoli, tofu and yoga—will ultimately be the force that drives Martirio and Rocio apart. Martirio is, in fact, unable to have “a happy return to the motherland instantiated fully,” as Castillo suggests, because the fluidity of her experience in exile means that she must inhabit multiple spaces at once. When Rocío states that she would have liked to “secuestrarte y amarrarte,” she is demanding a rigidity that Martirio, in accordance with the playfulness of salsa epistemology, cannot provide her. For this reason I offer a second reading in which the verb “estamos” refers to Martirio’s collective self. In this case the final sentence of the story, “y en eso estamos” (*Las historias prohibidas...* 145), alludes to the fact that she, as an amalgamation of all of her cultures, is still at it—the ongoing process of playfully resisting harmful cultural norms. The present tense of “estamos” here represents the continuity of the process of working out these cultural norms. Such a reading resists the idea that this one sexual encounter resolves gay persecution in Cuba or damaging hegemonic and rigid conceptions of gender and sexuality. Just as the process of fighting homophobia is still ongoing, so too is Martirio’s survival in the public sphere predicated upon a constant renegotiation of these identities through a continuous cycle of the construction and destruction of disidentificatory spaces

We can see this in the example of Casey’s protagonist, as well, who is in a constant state of motion. He does not inhabit any tangible identity, but rather distances himself from rigid definitions. He states, “My freedom of choice and sojourn knows no limit. I have attained what no political or social system could ever dream of attaining” (188). Rather than



reconstruct a new stable identity within this body, the protagonist revels in his decision to be fluid in the situation. He continues traveling throughout the entire piece, never resting for long in any one place or any one definition of the self.

The same can be said for Martirio's movement between Cuba and New York. The character is aware that she is never fully a part of Cuban culture, American immigrant culture, or lesbian culture. She flows in and out of all of these, depending on the situation. In this sense, "La más prohibida de todas" is a kind of "nomadic literature" which does not lend itself to stable definitions of identity, but rather works from various positions of subjectivity (Brooks 13). Martirio herself moves in and out of subject positions while always maintaining a sense of play. It is rigidity—as seen in the form of the Cuban lover that refused to play along with the verbal sex talk, instead strictly matching his words to his actions—that she tries to escape through her disidentification with various cultural norms.

Reading both texts through the lens of sexual penetration allows us to see the identity construction process not in terms of absolutes, but rather in terms of movement—a useful distinction when studying exile literature, which by definition is always displaced. This reading is necessary in order to avoid relegating minority subjects to fixed and potentially oppressive identities—both in exile literature and in the queer community. Salsa epistemology does this work by understanding the body as a way to engage with social issues. Despite the thirty years that separate the writing of "Piazza Margana" and "La más prohibida de todas," both stories display a desire to blur boundaries that is often present in queer texts. Although the former was written at a time when homosexuals were being systematically persecuted in Cuba, and the latter was written during a decade when homosexual texts and films experienced a boom on the island, both stories seem to rise above

these differences to focus on creating a solution for the oppression and challenges faced by queer Cubans in exile.<sup>67</sup> In doing so they disrupt the national narratives that omit the presence of queer bodies by using these to interrupt both the linearity and the essentialized notions of gender upon which these narratives are predicated.

If, as Victor Fowler claims, Casey's oeuvre was characterized by a "fascination with the reverse of history, taking reverse to mean bringing to light the dark and the dirty," then we can read "Piazza Margana" as one of the only texts in which Casey looks forward (187). It is a text that opens up a path "to the beyond of death" (Fowler 199). Likewise, we can read "La más prohibida de todas" as a piece that looks beyond the difficulties of the immigrant experience as presented in the other stories of *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda*, toward a utopian future. As such, these stories lend themselves to a reading that shows how queer exile subjects, and exile subjects in general, can flow in and out of multiple spaces of oppression by using sex to both embody and rework dominant cultural norms.

**Chapter Four**  
**“Choteo as a Tactic of Resilience**  
**in *¿Qué Pasa U.S.A.?*”**

From 1977-1980, *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*, which holds the distinction of being the United States’ first bilingual sitcom, chronicled the hysterical happenings of the Peña family, a three-generation Cuban exile family living in Miami. The importance of the television show to Cubans in Miami, even today, cannot be overstated. As *Miami Herald* writer Joe Cardona wrote in 2012, “To many Cuban families, like the Cardonas, the show had an uncanny, revealing feel to it — our Cuban American Waltons or Jeffersons.” He goes on to describe it as “the most poignant and impactful television show I have ever watched.” For families who emigrated in the ten or fifteen years following the Cuban revolution, *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* was as much as documentary as it was a comedy about the Cuban experience. It was what happened when Cubans met the unfamiliar—and often racist—United States of the 1970s. It was what unfolded when the old boleros of Cuba met the classic rock of the times. It was, and continues to be, the Cuban exile experience—even for those that were one generation removed from exile, from the 1970s, and even from the Caribbean.

This chapter looks at *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*’s use of a Cuban form of humor called “choteo”—loosely translated as “kidding”—as a tactic of salsa epistemology. The sitcom relies heavily on choteo as a narrative device and production style, inasmuch as it refuses to treat seriously the often quite serious issues that the show addresses. *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* succeeded in making poignant critiques of classism, sexism, and racism, as this chapter’s readings will demonstrate, but it did so using the relaxed and joking style of choteo, creating

a marked juxtaposition between tone and content. This intentional contrast became the show's signature style, and its use of choteo the engine that drove its social commentary

Like the other embodied and playful tactics of salsa epistemology we have explored, choteo destabilizes hegemonic norms of classism, sexism, and racism (among others), in this case by using the joy and laughter elicited by humor to work toward social change.<sup>68</sup> This playful critique is subtly queer—often appearing at first to replicate harmful norms, only to challenge them a moment later. When we define queerness, as we have so far, as a relationship to power, we understand Cathy Cohen's assertion that queerness is as much about asserting an LGBT identity as it is about inhabiting an identity that renders one vulnerable and attentive to the violence of the nation-state. Choteo is a queer form of critique precisely because it pushes participants and viewers to interrogate the relationship of class, sex, and race to power. Although the members of the Peña family do not inhabit LGBT identities—they are heterosexual, light-skinned, working class, Cuban Americans—they are able to queer these very identity categories nonetheless. This chapter, then, explores choteo as a queer form of resilience against hegemonic power structures.

### **The Cuban Public Meets Public Television**

*¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* was created by Cuban exile writer Luis Santeiro. Throughout the course of its three-year run on PBS Miami from 1977-80 and its run on other PBS stations nationally after its first season, *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*, was funded entirely by U.S. Office of Education Emergency School Assistance Act-Television Program (ESAA-TV), which came with a mandate to “hire minority media professionals and attract particular regional and national minority audiences” (Rivero 93). The mandate was intended to address the issues

surrounding school desegregation by allowing school districts with high minority populations to apply for and receive funds that allowed them to address discrimination. For *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*, the target audience was Cuban American teenagers first and general Cuban exile population second, as indicated in the show's grant proposal, which sought to "improve inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations in general and help Cuban American adolescents in particular to become bicultural, well-adjusted, self-fulfilled individuals" (Rivero 95-6). The language of this proposal gives us an indication of the cultural moment out of which *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* emerged. In the late 1970s much of the rhetoric around Cuban American immigration had to do with the importance of assimilation to "American" (read: White) ideals. Terms such as "well-adjusted" highlight the process of assimilation that was deemed so dire for newly arrived Cuban exiles.<sup>69</sup> For institutions like PBS and the U.S. Office of Education, improving "inter-ethnic relations" meant providing models for how Cuban Americans could fit into the racial, cultural, and economic framework of the U.S.

In order to provide models for Cuban integration, the makers of *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* cast actors with light to medium complexions as the series' stars. The perceived racial composition of the 1959-generation of Cuban exiles is integral to understanding this decision. Cuban exiles following the 1959 revolution were largely White and economically privileged. To be sure, identifying the racial composition of the 1959-generation of Cuban exiles is a difficult task. Racial categories in Cuba tend to differ from those in the United States, meaning that the way exiles self-identify, even in the present day, may not match the way that they are racialized in the U.S. In particular, Whiteness has historically been synonymous with beauty in Cuba, and exiles are more likely to self-identify as White than they are to identify with another race—despite the largely mixed-race composition of Cuba.

In addition to this, race and class have historically overlapped in Cuba, so there is data to suggest that this particular wave of Cuban exiles was not just more affluent, but also more White than the Cuban population at large. As Silvia Pedraza-Bailey explains: “While data on race is not available for the early waves of migration, it [the predominance of white exiles] can be inferred by the change in the proportion of Black Cubans in the U.S. The U.S. 1960 Census showed that 6.5 percent of Cubans were Black; the 1970 Census showed only 2.6 percent” (“Cuba’s Exiles” 23). The way that these Cuban exiles were racialized in the U.S. varied greatly according to their individual skin color, however. As Maritza Quiñones-Rivera articulates in an article about Puerto Rican racialization in the U.S., in the U.S. it is color, more than other racial markers such as hair or phenotype, which places one within racial categories. This is not to say, however, the light-skinned Latina/os do not experience discrimination “through ethnicity not on the basis of color, phenotype, or other racial markers,” as Quiñones-Rivera explores. However, as Susana Peña puts it in *Oye Loca*, a book that expertly explores queer Cuban migration to the U.S., “Whereas in most U.S. urban centers Latino men are clearly categorized as nonwhite, in Miami Latinos are often positioned closer to Whiteness. Significantly, Miami’s Cuban Americans typically understand themselves to be white and do not see a contradiction between participating in Latino culture, being a member of the white race, and enjoying a dominant place in U.S. economic, social, and political life” (153). Likewise, this particular generation of Cuban exiles tended to be more affluent than the Cubans that remained on the island after the revolution. As a result, they were likely to see themselves as part of the middle class or, at the very least, as very close to reaching middle class status.

The series itself was critical of the notion that to become “self-fulfilled” was to attain

middle class Whiteness, however. The fact that it demonstrated this critique of White supremacy and classism through the comedic style of choteo produced an unusual experiment for public television in that it was both bilingual and used the sitcom format to provide a meta-commentary on problematic hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

Public television, since its inception in the 1960s, had been used to “mobilize *and* reform the imagined public, activate *and* guide the citizenry, enlighten *and* classify TV viewers according to unquestioned hierarchies of knowledge and power” (Ouellette 16). It was intended as a way to enlighten television viewers and create a more informed American public, where “American” was often defined hegemonically. *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* appealed to a multicultural demographic of viewers, both Cuban and non-Cuban, many of which likely ascribed to different “hierarchies of knowledge and power.”<sup>70</sup> As a result, the various audiences that consumed the series probably received it differently. For Cuban American viewers it played a didactic role, perhaps introducing them to middle-class, White American cultural norms. For non-Cuban viewers, it may have performed the same function in reverse. It was able to do both so deftly in part because of its use of the sitcom format, which was unusual for public television at the time. As David Stewart notes, “the system produces excellent documentaries in very large numbers, but few programs characterized by wit, elegance, hilarity [...]” (10). In this way *¿Qué Pasa U.S.A.?* is extraordinary in its success as a comedy series created for public television, and in many ways comparable to network TV series being produced at the time, such as *All in the Family*.<sup>71</sup> Its bilingual format reached beyond the norms of other sitcoms on television, however, as the humor operated in two languages and in two cultural registers. The insertion of this humor in the form of choteo resulted in the presentation of the embodied playfulness of salsa epistemology to multiple

populations.

### **The Salsa of Choteo**

In his work on choteo, Alberto Laguna correctly notes that most of the scholarship on Cuban exiles has depicted the community as one “organized around a set of negative affective dispositions,” by focusing on the pain and trauma of exile. Speaking specifically of the 1970s and 80s, Laguna argues that what he terms “El choteo de adaptación” [the *choteo* of adaptation] counters the fractured nature of exile by functioning as a familiar narrative form that Cuban exiles can identify, practice and mobilize in order to produce an alternative, pleasurable narrative of exile experience” (4). Laguna described *choteo* as “a form of humor common among the masses and articulated through the idiomatic specificity of Cuban popular culture. It is a culturally specific form of play that acts as a way to filter serious or distressing experiences in a non-serious, often irreverent, relaxed manner that provides an alternative, critically ludic perspective on people, events and other social phenomena considered taboo in more officious societal circles” (5). The relaxed playfulness of *choteo*, in other words, often exists in response to non-relaxed, non-playful situations. We see this in *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* with the characters kidding each other to draw attention to the ridiculousness of the situations in which they find themselves, as well as to provide a biting critique of the hegemonic norms that underlie them. This form of playfulness emerges from salsa epistemology, of which choteo is one tactic. Like the other tactics of salsa epistemology, choteo’s ability to destabilize power hierarchies gives it a queering function. For this reason José Estban Muñoz read choteo against the queer form of humor “camp” in *Disidentifications*. He notes that both accomplish “important cultural critique while at the



same time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance itself of, scenarios of direct confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies (119).

*Choteo* has historically had an important function as cultural critique. According to one of the early twentieth century's most respected Cuban intellectuals, Jorge Mañach, *choteo* "no toma en serio nada de lo que generalmente se tiene por serio" [does not take seriously what should generally must be taken seriously] (11). Mañach wrote these words in 1928 to explain how this characteristic of the Cuban people is profoundly destabilizing of hierarchies and abuses of power.<sup>72</sup> Philosopher Félix Valdés García goes one step further to suggest that *choteo* is an active ingredient in resisting globalization. He points specifically to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, which Cuba opposed along with only a handful of other nations in 1994. Valdés García draws a link between the joking nature of Cuban character and lasting institutional change. In one instance, he points toward the popular Cuban phrase "*¡No es fácil!*" [It's not easy]. This phrase is used in Cuban and diasporic communities as a kneejerk response to quotidian difficulties. If one is broke, if one's washing machine breaks, or if one is in an argument with a spouse—"¡No es fácil!" is always an appropriate response. Valdés García highlights the syntax of the phrase, however, to posit that although it has the same meaning as the more dramatic "This is difficult!," the roundabout way in which Cubans express this sentiment is actually a rejection of this difficulty. Valdés García asserts that "Lo difícil de cada momento queda en la posibilidad, en el intento y que el lograrlo no es del todo fácil" [The difficulty of each moment rests in the possibility, in the intent to accomplish what is not easy] (60). In this way difficulty is not something to succumb to, but rather something that is approached through the lens of possibility and intent to overcome.

The analyses that follow examine *choteo* as both narrative device and production

style in two episodes of *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* As a narrative device, choteo is used by the show's writers to advance the plot of each episode. Choteo appears in these as a way of revealing or dealing with new information. In addition, choteo is used narratively to both provide and resist resolutions to each episode. This means that choteo often delivers a punch line for episodes, while also inserting a rupture that suggests the central problematic of the episode comically persists far past the punch line. The unresolvability that choteo makes possible is useful for drawing attention to the ongoing nature of the racial, sexual, and class norms that the show contests. Racism is not solved in one television episode, as choteo reminds us, but in one episode it can certainly be queered. The use of *choteo* as a production style in *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* additionally suggests that even the directors, set designers, and other production crew “no toma[n] en serio nada de lo que generalmente se tiene por serio” [Don't take seriously what should generally be taken seriously], to once again quote Mañach. Throughout the series the costuming and mise-en-scène appear as playful challenges to cultural hierarchies. Likewise, the editing is often used to subtly reinforce these points. This means while watching the show one often gets the perception that the show is playing with us, the viewers, just as much as the characters are playing with one another.

### **“Bodas de porcelana”**

By the time *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* was produced in the late 1970s, the original generation of exiles found themselves raising bi-cultural, and even “Americanized”—to quote a term frequently used in the show—teenage children. Like many Cuban exile families, the Peñas were a multi-generation family made up of two hip teenage children, their slightly-acclimated exile parents, and their non-English speaking grandparents. The show emerged

from the midst of discourses about acculturation and bi-culturality. Its theme song, for instance, begins with a very earnest salutation. In the accented English of someone who has learned it as a second language, the song chimes: “Say hello America. We are part of the new U.S.A.” It continues, in a mix of English and Spanish, announcing the arrival of the show’s protagonists—the Peña family—as well as the demographic they represent—Cuban exiles living in Miami during the duration of the show’s run. *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*’s opening line—“Say hello America”—says a lot about the show itself. It is an introduction non-Cubans to the cultural logic of a new type of American—the Cuban exile. Far from being outsiders, the show’s protagonists are “part of the new U.S.A.” that is emerging, particularly in the city of Miami, in the late 1970s. They are also, however, cultural ambassadors to Caribbeans themselves. The song continues “Gente, oiga gente. Hay que ver...” [“People, listen people. You have to see...”]. Switching into Spanish to repeat the same sentiment as before, the song now demands the attention of Cuban immigrants. It says to the Cubans, just as it did to non-Cuban viewers, there is something new here. There is both a clash and a convergence of cultural frameworks during this time period that begs to be recognized in popular culture. “Say hello America” (and Cuba) it seems to announce from the get go—the Caribbean meets America in this bilingual sitcom, *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?*

One major tenet of the culture clash that most of the series’ episodes revolved around is money, or the absence of it, in the Peñas’ lives. As was common among exiles of this generation, the Peñas were often critical of the United States. The older generations in particular lived in a nostalgic past that imagined Cuba as a paradise ruined by communism. Their working class daily existence in the United States seemed tragic in comparison, although we have no indication that they were in fact affluent in Cuba. Many of the series’

funniest moments come from the Peñas trying to preserve their memories in Cuba, while quite obviously enjoying the benefits and consumer goods that the United States has afforded them. The series is remarkably self-conscious about this tension, however, and the camera work and jokes are often set up to draw attention to the irony of the Peñas praising Cuba while enjoying their lives in United States.

“Bodas de Porcelana,” an episode that kicked off the show’s third season, kiddingly draws our attention to the Peñas’ complicated relationship to money and the way it gets intertwined with gender. In this particular episode Juana and Pepe, the parents, are celebrating their 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. When Pepe comes home late from the second job he has taken, working at a gas station to supplement his wages as a construction worker, Juana is furious with him. She, her parents, and her children have been waiting for Pepe to celebrate the couple’s 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Pepe enters, exhausted from a day of work, without realizing the trouble he has gotten himself into.

Juana: Don’t you remember what day this is?

Pepe: Of course I remember. Pay day! I got my check!

Juana: Ay viejo, que materialista te ha puesto este exilio.

[Oh, *viejo*, exile has made you so materialistic]

From this very first exchange between the couple, competing discourses about money emerge. On the one hand, Pepe is proud of himself for having brought home money to support his family. On the other hand, Juana, who also works full time at a garment factory, sees Pepe’s drive to create wealth as rooted in the materialism of U.S. culture. While one or both of them likely had to work in Cuba to support themselves, the opening scene suggests that money has taken on a new importance in their lives in exile. The audience laughs

knowingly at Juana's line—"que materialista te ha puesto este exilio" [exile has made you so materialistic]—precisely because this type of argument is not uncommon in Cuban exile homes. Because the Peñas were among the generation of Cuban exiles that left Cuba in opposition to communism, they remain very concerned throughout the series about the prospect of attaining the American Dream of economic freedom, which they see as an antithesis to Cuban communism. From this interaction we see that Juana, however, believes that this dream of economic freedom has gone too far.

Continuing their argument in the kitchen, Juana hurriedly puts on her bowling shoes as she announces to Pepe that she has joined a women's bowling league:

Juana: In this country, Pepe, wives have the right to have fun too.

Pepe: Fun? Fun? Do you think I took this part-time job just for fun? Estoy trabajando de noche por sacar a esta familia a flote. [I am working at night to keep this family afloat]

Juana: Sí. En el bote que te has empeñado a comprar. [Yes, to keep us afloat on the boat you're determined to buy]

The argument becomes gendered at this point, with Juana reminding Pepe that if he wants to play by the rules of "this country" in taking a second job, then he must accept the gender norms that characterize "this country" as well. Juana's play on words with "afloat," an example of the antics of choteo, produces a laugh from the live studio audience, as Pepe's masculinist understanding of himself as the breadwinner is made into the butt of a joke. The viewer is led to understand that Pepe's work ethic is not necessarily forgivable just because he is the male head of the family. Juana suggests that it is in fact his ego, not his concern for the family, that drives his materialistic ambitions. Pepe continues:

Pepe: Juana. Juana. Todos los cubanos están echando para adelante, menos los Peña. Los Peña para atrás como el cangrejo. [All Cubans are getting . Except for the Peñas. The Peñas are going backward like a crab.] And this is the land of opportunity. It's about time we have enough money to take a trip, to have a boat, to have a Cadillac.

Juana: What for? To drive to McDonald's?

Juana and Pepe navigate being working class in what they consider to be “the land of opportunity.” Whatever they have, Pepe wants more. He fantasizes about the luxury trends of the day—“to have a Cadillac”—and laments the time he and Juana have already lost to being poor—“It's about time we have enough money.” To Pepe, every moment his family spends in the working class without consuming the goods they desire is a moment lost. Juana on the other hand, believes that Pepe has become too invested in U.S.-based models of success. She doesn't want a fancy car in the future. She wants to spend time with her husband right now. She uses *choteo* to kiddingly reject this focus on consumerism. What good is the fantasy of money, she asks, when it removes Pepe from the reality of their actual present lives—lives in which they would most likely use their Cadillac to “drive to McDonalds.”

The argument continues in the kitchen when Marta, the neighbor, enters uninvited. Always wearing tight, outlandish clothing and her hair in rollers, so as to signal her lesser class status as what Cubans would call a *chusma*<sup>73</sup>, Marta is the series' joker character. Her role, in most episodes, is to incite or exacerbate the central problematic of the episode. In this particular case Marta enters to goad the Peñas into telling her what all the fuss is about, and, upon confirming that they are indeed fighting, to remind Pepe that he is always welcome in her bed. There is a turning point in the fight and in the episode once Marta leaves. Pepe,

Juana, and the viewers are reminded that while gender norms in the United States might claim to be more egalitarian than in Cuba, Pepe still holds all of the power in this situation. Where Juana's only recourse is to join a bowling league, Pepe has been offered a replacement wife right there in front of his current wife. In response he reminds Juana: "Cuídame que me pierdes! [Take care of me or you will lose me!]. Pepe's warning brings to forefront the question of Juana's role in the family's financial success. His reminder that she must take care of him suggests that, as in traditional Cuban families, her role is to take care of her husband as he makes and maintains sole access to money. In the United States, however, Juana also works full time and, as she reminds him in this scene: "I make almost as much money as you do!"

The episode continues, as the discourses of money and gender get increasingly intertwined. Pepe blames Juana for spending too much of the money on the children, and indeed for having children in the first place: "Getting pregnant is the woman's department!" he yells. Juana fights back by reminding Pepe that he can't blame all of his problems on her or on exile. Carmensita, the couples' teenage daughter, supports this viewpoint when she reads aloud a newspaper advice column that advises Cuban couples to see a marriage counselor and "stop blaming this country for their personal problems." Pepe becomes enraged. To him, it is the unfair condition of exile that has presumably robbed them of the upper middle class status that they either had in Cuba, or pretend to have had in Cuba. Carmen and Juana are the only family members that question his idealistic view of their Cuban past, and the consumption patterns that he employs to cope.

The scene reaches its pinnacle hours later, as the grandparents and children pace the apartment, unable to sleep because of the yelling.

Pepe: Juana, you are too much!

Juana: And you are not enough!

The audience laughs at Juana's use of choteo to play on Pepe's statement. The directness of Juana and Pepe's statements, however, is an indication of the importance of this central problem not only in the episode, but also in the Peñas' conception of self. If Juana is "too much," it is because exile has shifted the gender dynamics in their relationship to where she demands an equal say. If Pepe is in turn "not enough," it is because he cannot be present while working two jobs.

The episode continues in this way—as a back and forth between the couples' serious problems and their choteo responses to them. In one example, Pepe attempts to convince Juana that their money problems are not affecting their marriage. She responds:

You think fighting all the time is normal? You think that living just for working and sleeping is normal? ¿Tú crees que es normal que mi marido me ignore cuando yo me he puesto el *nightgown* más sexy que yo tengo? [Do you think it's normal that my husband ignores me when I've put on the sexiest *nightgown* that I own?]

The juxtaposition between the gravity of their working class lives that revolve around work and sleep and Juana putting on "el *nightgown* más sexy que yo tengo" [the sexiest *nightgown* that I own] is another example of choteo's ability to treat with lightheartedness something that is quite serious. In doing so, the comedic form playfully addresses the un-addressable: divorce. Juana mentions the word—a taboo in Cuban families—when Pepe refuses to see a marriage counselor. She goes so far as to begin weeping—or at least pretend to weep—until Pepe finally agrees to see a counselor. Juana then whips around joyfully—pleased at having



gotten her way. The use of choteo in this moment, in the form of Juana's comedic change of mood when Pepe agrees to counseling, allows the viewer to playfully confront the possibility of divorce in Cuban families.

The episode has no real resolution—an important part of a salsa epistemology that playfully addresses damaging social norms as a way to queer them, rather than claiming their complete eradication. Juana and Pepe go to marriage counseling, but continue to fight despite this. The fighting continues throughout a party that their family throws them to celebrate their anniversary, as the sign says, “again.” Juana and Pepe continue to argue over how to strike a balance between work and family, until both agree to meet in the middle—Juana will quit her bowling league and Pepe will quit his second job. Reflecting on the seriousness of their problems, the couple has the following dialogue:

Pepe: How could it be my fault? I always try to give my family everything.

Juana: Maybe we cannot have everything. Maybe we should concentrate in the more important things.

The tentative tone of this exchange suggests the lack of a definitive solution to the issue of being a working class couple with marriage problems. Pepe has no answers, just questions about how to be better. Juana also has no conclusive answers, instead suggesting that “maybe” they should focus less on acquiring goods, and turn their attention instead to the family, which she understands as “the more important things.” The fact that Juana and Pepe are not in a position to make didactic proclamations to the viewers speaks to the fact that they are still, like the viewers at home, navigating their class status in the United States versus in Cuba. The series itself is set up in this way, to make viewers feel as though the Peñas are not that different from them. Still, the Peñas push the envelope of the Cuban American

experience by pushing viewers to confront issues of class and gender in this episode, and ever so slightly queering this dynamic within the Peña family. Although the economic landscape for exile families in the 1970s is such that Juana and Pepe must continue to work to provide for their family, this working class status becomes bearable for both them and the viewers through the insertion of choteo.

### **“Computer Friend”**

Another common thread in many of the episodes is the disharmony that exists between ethnic groups in Miami during the time period in which *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* was filmed. In Miami, unlike in the rest of the South during the late 1970s, the primary racial divide was not between Blacks and Whites, but was rather a three-way rift between Blacks, Whites, and Latina/os. The Latina/o population during this time period was mostly Cuban, with the migration of Cuban exiles in the years following the Cuban revolution of 1959 creating a significant Cuban population in the city, though the large-scale exodus of Nicaraguans to Miami after the Somoza regime fell in 1979 was also a contributing force to Black-Brown discord in the city.<sup>74</sup> This gave rise to what Sheila L. Croucher refers to as the “tri-ethnic” thesis, which contends that these three groups were pitted against each other in a competition for the jobs and resources of a still burgeoning city.<sup>75</sup> Although this thesis oversimplifies differences among Black and Latina/os in Miami, as Croucher warns, it was nonetheless widely believed by Miamians during the time period. Whether or not the competition for resources was as dire as the thesis suggests, residents of Miami were prone to think themselves in competition with other ethnic groups in the late 1970s. The way *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* narrates ethnic and racial conflict largely mirrors the discursive construction of

Miami. For instance, the show draws attention to how Cuban exiles settled in what were once the largely White neighborhoods of Riverside and Shenandoah, re-christening the area “Little Havana.” The conflicts between Cubans and White non-Cubans plays out in the show in the form of the Peña’s racist White next door neighbor. The show also draws attention to how Cubans and Black non-Cubans often considered themselves in competition for the same service-sector jobs and even entrepreneurship opportunities, particularly as Cubans started gaining access to the many affirmative action programs intended to create minority-owned businesses in the city. The rifts between Cubans and Black non-Cubans was complicated by the mixed racial composition of many Cubans, which confused racial categories in South Florida. These categories had become institutionalized in the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the northwest section of Miami being reserved for Blacks and holding the name “Colored Town” (now Overtown).<sup>76</sup> Even in the 1970s, the city’s Black non-Cuban residents still resided largely in the Northwest.<sup>77</sup> The appearance of Cubans in the southwest section of Little Havana created confusion, as many Cubans could not be easily placed within the Black/White racial binary. To add to this confusion, Cubans’ use of Spanish presented a threat to the city’s other residents, with many non-Cubans feeling as though Spanish had become the predominant language of Miami.<sup>78</sup>

The show’s writers force the Peñas to confront race and ethnic relations in Miami in the episode “Computer Friend.” Through the use of choteo they succeed in queering the very racial and ethnic norms to which the Peñas cling. In “Computer Friend,” which marked the last episode of the show’s first season, Carmen and her two best friends, Violeta and Sharon, fill out questionnaires for a computer-based friend matching program. While her parents are initially resistant, Pepe and Juana grow excited about Carmen’s questionnaire when they

realize that the computer will match her with someone just like her—i.e. someone from “una buena familia” [a good family]. The phrase “una buena familia” is repeated time and time again in this episode by both the parents and grandparents. We, the viewer, understand that when the Peñas say “una buena familia” they are referring to a racial, class, and cultural background that matches theirs. The only families that are good families, we are made to understand by this and other episodes, are middle-class White Cuban ones. Juana reiterates this assumption when she confirms excitedly that the computer “te empareja con alguien de tu mismo *background*” [matches you with someone from your same *background*].

The process of Carmen filling out the questionnaire with her parents’ help is rife with her parents’ loaded assumptions, as well as the cultural misunderstandings they are not aware of but that we viewers are made to understand through choteo. It begins, for instance, with Carmen asking her father: “Are you a white collar or blue collar worker?” Pepe replies, pointing to the plain white t-shirt he wears under his work uniform: “White collar I think, because I wear a t-shirt.” The audience laughs, gesturing toward the dramatic irony that occurs because we, the audience, can see that Pepe’s white t-shirt is worn underneath a blue collar shirt at this very moment. The scene continues with other similar instances, not the least of which is Pepe’s culminating response to the question of income bracket: “Medium, because in this country everybody’s in the middle!”

Enter, then, the central problematic of the episode: racial difference. Joe, the couples’ teenage son, comes home with a black eye after having gotten in a fight with a Black classmate. The entire family gathers around him as Juana shouts out “Tu te peliaste con un negrito?!” [You fought with a Black boy?!]. The word “negrito” is of utmost importance here, since there is no adequate translation into English for this word that is at times used as a

term of affection, but most definitely used in this case as a marker of racial othering. To say that Joe fought with “un negrito” is to distance oneself from the humanity of Joe’s classmate, making him into a random Black boy, rather than a boy that happens to be randomly Black. Juana, most definitely portrayed as the most empathetic of the adult characters throughout the series, is guilty here of the instinctual racial othering that she generally resists but that we, the viewer, have perhaps always suspected her parents and culture have inculcated in her. In this moment she is horrified that Joe has fought, but equally horrified at the thought of his physical/cultural/national body having come into contact with a Black one.<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile, later in the episode Carmen awaits the arrival of her new “computer friend,” named Charles Powell. Adela opens the door when he knocks, only to see a Black teenage boy standing on their doorstep. She immediately slams the door in his face, turning to Carmen with an expression that suggests she is sure this boy is dangerous. This choteo moment—where Adela’s anti-Black racism (discovered just a few moments ago in the prior scene) is challenged by a Black visitor—results in resounding laughter from the audience. The laughter is crucial here. *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* was filmed in front of a live studio audience, and the audience’s enthusiastic laughter is an example of choteo at work. The very serious issue of anti-Black racism among Cubans is made the butt of the joke, as Adela’s knee jerk response is to protect herself from the Black visitor by shutting the door. For some audience members, this produces a laugh at Adela’s blatant racism. For others, however, the laughter may be a response to the ridiculousness of seeing a Black person at the Peña’s door. The Peñas, to be sure, are a light-skinned Cuban family that interacts primarily with other light-skinned Cubans. To see a Black person at their door is therefore quite shocking for some viewers—many of who probably dread this experience themselves.

The show uses choteo to kid with each of these racialized responses—both Adela’s and the audience members. Adela defends having slammed the door by proclaiming to her husband, Antonio, and Carmen that nobody has called a “repairman,” which produces another laugh from the audience. In making this statement, Adela suggests that the sole function of a Black man in their house would be in a service capacity. The phrase “Black man” is most appropriate here, because despite the visitor obviously being a teenage boy, Adela understands his Black masculinity as that of a threatening man. For audience members that share this view, the visitor’s Black masculinity appears startling when juxtaposed against the fear displayed by this little old White (in skin tone, even if not in ethnicity) lady. Racist tropes of Black man as sexual deviant are invoked by Adela here, as she tries to protect both herself and eventually Carmen from the Black man at the door.<sup>80</sup>

Carmen does not skip a beat, however, opening the door and welcoming Charles in. The two begin to talk excitedly, Carmen apparently unfazed by his Blackness, while her grandparents begin to remove their belongings from the living room one by one, presumably to prevent Charles from stealing them. The juxtaposition between Carmen’s refusal to be scared of Charles and Adela and Antonio’s certainty that Charles will steal even their parakeet is the perfect setup for a choteo moment in which their shared humanity becomes obvious. Walking around, Charles marvels at the similarities between their house and his. “My family has the exact same furniture,” he states. With this statement viewers are pushed to see the similarities that the grandparents cannot. As Charles sits down to admire a vase that his family also owns, camera work is used to subtly highlight the brutality of the grandparents’ position. The scene cuts back and forth between a wide angle of Charles sitting childlike at the table, and a tighter angle of the grandparents staring cruelly from behind a

doorway. The use of the wide angle shot to make Charles appear small, and the tighter shot to highlight the malice on the grandparents' faces, results in a reversal of the power dynamic. Charles no longer looks menacing—he looks like an innocent child. Likewise the grandparents no longer look feeble—they look like spiteful adults. This camera work and editing playfully uses choteo to demonstrate the viciousness of adults racially profiling a child.

Over the next few scenes several more instances of choteo are used to draw attention to problematic racial norms. When Charles is left alone in the living room for a moment, for instance, he opens the door for Violeta, who has been knocking. Upon seeing a Black man in the Peña household, Violeta assumes he is a burglar or kidnapper, and informs him that she is a black belt in karate. She paces nervously until Carmen returns, making a scene and eventually rushing out to cancel her own application for a computer friend—lest she, too, should be matched with a Black boy. Violeta's reaction is interesting because although she and Carmen are the same age, gender, and cultural background, they clearly do not share the same assumptions about race. Any viewer attempting to make a clear-cut thesis for the episode—i.e. X type of people is racist, and Y type of people is not—is unable to do so. Drawing these types of conclusions becomes even more difficult when Juana returns home to find this spectacle. Unlike the other Cuban adults in the scene, Juana is perfectly nice to Charles and even leaves the house to buy him the “guanábana juice” that he requests. The critical viewer is of course asking herself about Juana's sudden change of heart, from her outrage over Joe's fight, to her kind—even if forced—treatment of Carmen's new Black friend. We understand her to be a nuanced character, perhaps fighting a battle within herself, in direct opposition to Pepe, who later arrives, and is unabashedly outraged at Charles'

presence in their house. The episode continues—with problematic and humorous occurrences like a neighbor calling to check in because she just saw a Black person go into their home—as the realities of racial difference slowly encroach on the Peñas. The intentions that started the episode—matching Carmen up with a friend from “una buena familia” [a good family], are being slowly unraveled as they must reckon with racial difference.

Perhaps most telling is Pepe’s eventual conversation with Charles’ mother, who comes over equally indignant that her son has befriended a Cuban. In trying to appear non-racist, Pepe informs Mrs. Powell that: “In Cuba we have many great and famous black people.” What is interesting about this key moment in the episode is that the live studio audience does not laugh. While the audience has laughed at the absurdity of the scenes before it, namely the one where the grandparents exaggeratedly remove their belongings so that Charles does not steal them, there is no laughter at this moment. Pepe delivers this line—“In Cuba we have many great and famous black people”—and the audience accepts it as fact or perhaps as narrative filler, but not as a joke. We can’t be sure whether or not the writers intended it to be a joke, but the irony of Pepe boasting about Cuba’s Black population given his own racism is not lost on the critical listener. Pepe’s comment could be taken out of any treatise on race written in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba—from Fernando Ortiz to Jorge Mañach.<sup>81</sup> The tendency, up until the 1959 revolution, was to incorporate Blackness into the narrative of Cuban national identity only minimally, and it discourage any race-based activism or thinking in favor of a more universal understanding of “Cubanidad” [Cubanism].<sup>82</sup> This is an example of colorblind ideology, defined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva as that which explains “contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics (2). Colorblindness is the practice of claiming not to see race, and therefore refusing to



engage in the very real issue of racial inequality. Historically in Cuba, this colorblind approach allowed White Cubans to believe in a notion of Cubanidad where Blackness was made invisible, while allowing gross inequalities to persist between Black and non-Black Cubans.<sup>83</sup> It is this discourse of racial colorblindness that we see Pepe tapping into when he says, defensively, to Mrs. Powell: “In Cuba we have many great and famous black people.” Pepe’s character is attempting to reckon with Blackness by pretending that it is an irrelevant fact in Cuba, when of course to him it is a very big deal. It is so important to Pepe, in fact, that he refuses to acknowledge the fact that given the racial mixing that characterizes Cuba’s history, it is likely that one or more of his family members is part-Black. He is unable to see the irony of this, and the audience, complicit by virtue of not laughing at the absurdity of his statement, is blind to that irony as well. The issue at hand here is not one of the individual—Pepe Peña or the individual audience member that may or may not have wanted to laugh—it is a matter of the collective. There are many Pepe Peñas eschewing their Blackness in Miami, and many witnesses who become complicit by virtue of silence.

The episode pretends to resolve itself with any number of unimaginative and cliché solutions, all of which the shows writers insert but—in a meta-commentary on how half hour sitcoms *should* be resolved—move past. For instance, there is a point when Carmen, frustrated at the elders’ overt racism, shouts, “Us young people are so understanding of each other!” It is at that moment that Joe walks in to see Charles Powell, who we instinctively understand to be not just Carmen’s new computer friend, but also the Black boy that Joe fought with earlier in the episode. Given the number of Black boys that probably go to their high school, the fact that Joe and Carmen have managed to get involved with the same one calls attention to how the family itself conflates Blacks and Blackness, refusing to see

difference within the community. The show's writers quickly throw out the narrative of generational racism once again, as we see Joe gearing up to punch Charles again, and the question of how the Peñas will come to terms with Blackness is sustained.

Enter then Mrs. Peabody, the (not incidentally) White school guidance counselor. Mrs. Peabody, the only White Miami resident in the scene, is not surprisingly positioned as the cultural intermediary between the Blacks and the Cubans in this scene. It is she, we suspect for a moment, that knows better than these other two groups. It is she that will restore peace, force the boys to get over their differences, and bestow the rationality and clear-mindedness that her Whiteness affords her onto the Peñas and Powells. On the level of allegory, it is her people, the Whites that will resolve the racial fighting in Miami. But Mrs. Peabody is unable to do this and—in another amazingly meta-cognitive moment for the sitcom genre—the writers give us a resolution that is not much of a resolution at all. Mrs. Peabody is ineffective, Whiteness is not the answer, and the question of how the Peñas will come to terms with Blackness is once again sustained.

The answer does come eventually, after Joe's telling statement: "Charles is Black and I'm Cuban. Maybe it's better we stick to our own groups." The show uses choteo to kiddingly address the impossibility of this statement as, at this very moment, someone that belongs to both groups knocks on the door. It is none other than Joe's friend, Angelito, who is a Black Cuban. Angelito's entrance reminds us that Blackness and Cubanness are not mutually exclusive. The character's name, "Angelito," translates into "little Angel"—likely to foreshadow his almost divine intervention in the narrative. The addition of "ito," meaning "little," serves to indicate to viewers that this is not a character to be feared. Rather Angelito is a non-threatening figure that is used to deliver a lesson about racism. The name "Angelito"

also gestures toward this lesson, as Theresa Delgadillo points out in her article “Singing ‘Angelitos Negros’: African Diaspora Meets Mestizaje in the Americas.” Delgadillo highlights the ways that “Angelitos negros” [Black little angels] are a reoccurring trope in the music, literature, and film of the Americas. These Black angels are inserted into texts to draw attention to the fact that depictions of heaven are often missing Black angels. The presence of a Black angel, then, signifies the introduction of racial consciousness into the scene.

Angelito enters this chaotic scene—The Powells, the Peñas, and Mrs. Peabody, all outraged in the living room. He is welcomed by the Peñas, who appear to have never noticed his skin color. He is clearly a good friend. The story is recounted to him, with Charles pointing out the very obvious issue of his Blackness when he says “He’s Blacker than I am!” Joe retorts: “Angelito’s not Black, he’s Cuban!” Their differing racial paradigms come up against each other in this moment, with Charles’ reaction reminding us that in the United States skin color is the “floating signifier” that marks one racially in relation to others.<sup>84</sup> The question of race and its intersections with national belonging are of utmost importance here, as Joe himself performs the same colorblind narrative his father was guilty of only moments ago, and announces to a now hysterical audience that Angel’s race is trumped by his Cubanidad.

Joe’s proclamation—“Angelito’s not Black, he’s Cuban!”—is met with laughter as the audience begins to realize he is both. To demonstrate this fact, Angelito asks, “What’s happening Joe? Is there a problem with this brother?”—the use of the term “brother” likely intended to show his fluency and perhaps membership in Black American culture. Once the situation is explained, Angelito exclaims “¡Caballero! Cómo ustedes se complican la vida” [Dude! You guys complicate your lives!]. “Caballero,” a colloquial term for friend, likewise

demonstrates his membership in Cuban culture. To help resolve this issue, Angelito delivers what appears to be the episode's final thesis: "I'm a living example that when different groups come together they can make something really outstanding." With resounding applause and laughter, the audience confirms that this is the point the show has wanted to make all along. What we have here are three different groups—Blacks, Whites, and Cubans—that must learn to get along.

Choteo resists such easy resolution, however. Rather than end on this totalizing narrative of racial harmony, the show pushes it one step further. Angelito is not an example of cultures getting along (though his comment leaves us to wonder whether he is the child of a Cuban and an African American, rather than of Black Cubans). Angelito is an example of cultures being inserted into each other, of the inextricability of different cultural categories, of the fallacy that is race, and of the Black Atlantic which did not—as many Cubans would like to believe—navigate around the island, depositing Blackness on to its neighbors' shores, but missing Cuba altogether. Racism has not been solved—neither for the Peñas nor for the population at large—within this single episode. The show reminds us of this fact as Sharon, Carmen's White non-Cuban best friend enters the Peña residence in the final sequence with her own computer friend—Ni Wa. Ni Wa is Asian and the audience roars with laughter as the Peñas try to wrap their heads around yet another form of racial difference. In one more choteo move, however, the show's writers queer even this idea of difference as NiWa greets the Peñas in none other than Spanish—thereby raiding the question of whether she, like Angelito, may be more of an insider than racist ideologies would lead them to believe.

## **The Salsa of Laughter**

In its four seasons *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* succeeded in bringing Cuban choteo humor to a U.S.-based audience. In doing so it not only made viewers laugh, but it also facilitated a queer critique of the hegemonic class, gender, and racial norms of the day. The playfulness of choteo extends out of a salsa epistemology that can be experienced as easily on the dance floor as it can on the television screen. While the kidding word play of choteo looks quite different than a salsa step, both can be used as a playful form of resilience against cultural norms that otherwise marginalize those that society deems queer.

## Chapter Five

### “Capitalism *Con Salsa*:

#### Money and Popular Culture in the Cuban Diaspora”

“I knew my rent was gon' be late about a week ago  
I worked my ass off, but I still can't pay it though  
But I just got just enough  
To get up in this club  
Have me a good time, before my time is up  
Hey, let's get it now”

--“Time of Our Lives” (Armando C. Pérez et al., 2014)

The chorus for the 2014 pop hit “Time of Our Lives,” ends with an exhortation: “Let’s get it now.”<sup>85</sup> These words, sung by NeYo, are interspersed between the song’s verses, in which Pitbull raps about attending a party despite having serious money problems. NeYo’s invocation—“Let’s get it now”—serves as the song’s thesis and a recap of the experiences that Pitbull narrates. The message is that although poverty is a concern—“I knew my rent was gon’ be late about a week ago”—one has to enjoy the present moment before one’s “time is up.” The finitude of life, in other words, makes it so that one’s best option is to have “a good time,” which can be best accomplished by seizing the present moment or, as NeYo would put it, “get[ting] it now.”

To “get it now” is to make oneself available to the present moment—the “now”—despite inequality or injustice or, as this chapter will argue, because of it. In this song and in

his oeuvre at large, Cuban American rapper Pitbull appeals to the present moment time and time again as a mode to navigate difficulty. He does this most frequently through the use of his catchphrase “dale” [pronounced dah-lei], which translates into a Spanish-language version of Ne-Yo’s impulse to “get it now.” To “dale” is quite literally to “give it” or, more colloquially, to seize the moment and all that it has to offer. Pitbull’s constant reminder to “dale” serves not just as a catchy saying in his songs and merchandising, but also as a philosophy to which many of his listeners ascribe. Pitbull pushes listeners to “dale” both because he appears to believe in the philosophy as a mode of navigating hardship, but also because his fans’ willingness to just “give it” translates into them “giving” large sums to money to be a part of his global empire through music, live shows, and merchandise.

This chapter argues that Pitbull’s focus on the present moment represents a non-teleological engagement with capitalism, which I term “capitalism *con salsa*” [capitalism *with salsa*]. Capitalism *con salsa*—defined here as being in the present moment while also participating in the capitalist system—is a tactic of salsa epistemology. Just as the other tactics we have examined are able to queer hegemonic norms, so too does capitalism *con salsa* queer capitalism. As this chapter demonstrates, the embodied playfulness of salsa epistemology can produce embodied and playful interactions with capitalism—interactions in which one buys and sells within the capitalist system without “buying” into capitalism’s future-oriented narrative timeline.

Taking as its starting point that idea that ways knowing influence ways of consuming, the chapter contends that there exists a distinctly Spanish Caribbean approach to capitalism that refuses to glorify the future as the site of consumer fulfillment. Capitalism, in its many manifestations, including neoliberalism, relies not only upon the buying and selling of goods

for a profit, but also upon progress narratives that require subjects believe in the possibility of their increased purchasing power over time. The willingness to believe that one can purchase more and more as time passes is paired with a belief that this purchasing will also make one happier and happier. The futurity of the capitalist narrative is dangerous inasmuch as it draws attention to the future at the expense of the present. The future becomes a site of limitless possibility for the symbiotic growth of happiness and wealth, whereas the present becomes nothing more than a precursor to this state. In the capitalist system, then, rejecting futurity is an act of rebellion.

In this chapter I examine the *interplay* between the future-based narratives of upward mobility that emerge from capitalism, and the modes of non-linear time that I characterize as capitalism *con salsa*. Looking specifically at the Cuban American diasporic community in Miami, I contend that capitalism *con salsa* pushes back against the expectation that immigrant communities living in a capitalist system must always look toward a richer and brighter future. I focus specifically on Pitbull, a Cuban American rapper born and raised in Miami, and now worth an estimated \$15 million. I choose to read Pitbull as a cultural text born out of the Miami diaspora because for many Caribbean people, and particularly Cubans, the geographic area of Miami has come to represent much more than a physical home in the United States.<sup>86</sup> It has achieved a mythological status as an extension of the Caribbean where dreams of wealth and homeownership can finally be achieved.

To be sure, the Cuban community in Miami has had a long, and sometimes problematic, history with capitalism. The first large-scale Cuban migration to Miami took place after the 1959 communist revolution, and consisted in part of affluent Cuban families seeking to avoid the seizure and redistribution of assets promised by Fidel Castro's



communist government. This generation of Cuban exiles opened businesses in Miami, and quickly became known for their business acumen and praised as a model Latina/o community—a problematic distinction because it obscures how the privileged exile status granted to these immigrants by the U.S. government facilitated their successes. Many scholars have helped drunk the myth of Cuban exceptionalism through a rigorous analysis of the extrinsic factors that lead to large-scale Cuban entrepreneurship, rather than attributing this entrepreneurship solely to intrinsic qualities. Among them is Silvia Pedraza-Bailey, who highlights how the Cuban refugee Act enacted by President Kennedy resulted in Cuban exiles receiving health care, student loans, and financial assistance unavailable to other immigrant groups (“Political and Economic Migrants”). Pedraza-Bailey and others, however, still maintain a narrative that suggests Cuban Americans have profited from their investment with capitalism largely by not critiquing the system. Reading cultural texts produced by this Cuban Americans complicates this narrative, however, by suggesting that the community does not buy into the capitalist system unquestioningly. As Pitbull’s music and persona make clear, embedded within the Cuban American engagement with capitalism is a playful reordering of the timelines of capitalism that emerges from a salsa epistemology. Pitbull’s constant emphasis on the now—displayed through his catchphrase “dale” and the state of radical presence it endorses—represents an act of rebellion against the future-based progress narratives of capitalism. It represents a capitalism *con salsa* that forces us to rethink the Cuban American community’s engagement with capitalist consumption through the lens of playfulness.

## The Precarious Aesthetics of Ephemerality

The 1960s ushered in new financial models for Cuban Americans in Miami.<sup>87</sup> To be Cuban American in Miami starting in the 1960s meant beginning to have access to small business loans given out by Cuban-owned banks in the city.<sup>88</sup> Although the notion of Cuban wealth in the city during that time was highly exaggerated, the perception was that wealth had become a possibility for Latina/os, and particularly Cuban Americans that made up and continue to make up the largest Latina/o group in the city.

This belief in the possibility of wealth continued into the neoliberal age. Neoliberalism, defined here as a form of capitalism dependent on deregulation and free trade, benefited Cuban Americans financially in a way that was less true for other Latina/o and Latin American populations. With the advantage of American citizenship made possible by their exile status, as well the cultural capital that their perceived Whiteness granted them over other Latina/o groups, the Cuban American community began to see themselves as the sellers of products in the neoliberal age, rather than the producers. While maintaining cultural links with both Latin America and the United States, the Cuban American community benefited from the institutional structures in place in the United States and absent from Latin America, which allowed them to sell goods available *here* and produced *over there*. In Miami, the establishment of the Miami Free Zone (MFZ) in 1979 best exemplifies this setup. Today, the MFZ is a free trade zone operating outside of the regulatory and tax jurisdiction of the U.S. government, though which \$1 billion of goods are brought into the U.S each year. The MFZ helped reshape Miami into a transit hub for products made in Latin American and the Caribbean and sold in the U.S., in many ways cementing the notion that Cuban American financial success was imminent in the neoliberal age. In sum, to be Cuban American in the

1960 and 70s was to have wealth available to you, but to be Cuban American beginning in the neoliberal period was to believe oneself destined for it.<sup>89</sup>

The idea that Cubans not only *could* but *would* become wealthy in the future oftentimes eclipsed the reality that many Cubans continued to live below the poverty level. As recently as 2010, 9.9% of non-hispanic Whites in the U.S. lived below the poverty line, while 16.2% of Cubans did. The starkness of these statistics reminds us that neoliberal capitalist success is not distributed evenly. As Lisa Duggan outlines in *The Twilight of Equality*, “Neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism, organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion” (3). In other words, neoliberalism is a set of processes that both produce economic policies such as free trade, deregulation, and privatization (to name a few), and obscure the way that these economic policies are dependent on specific discourses of race, gender, sexuality, etc. The processes that make up neoliberalism are many. To quote Arlene Dávila in “Locating Neoliberalism in Space, Time, and Culture,” neoliberalism can refer to “a particular ideology, or a technique of government, or a policy, or a financialization regime, or perhaps to all these dynamics at once (552).” To be invested in neoliberalism, then, is to ignore the way that neoliberalism, both as a financial structure and as a belief system, benefits those that are light skinned, male and straight over those that are dark skinned, female, and queer. To be sure, the Cuban American community’s desire to make money is not in itself bad, but the discourses of race, gender, and sexuality upon which neoliberalism is founded are extremely damaging to many both inside and outside of the community. The ability to both benefit from capitalism while still pushing back against neoliberalism’s racial and gendered implications is made possible through the community’s

epistemological roots in salsa. Pitbull's form of capitalism *con salsa* is one example of this phenomenon, in which one is able to navigate the disparity because Cuban Americans' ideal of wealth and the statistical and lived realities of many Cuban Americans in Miami, all through a disruption of the linear timeline of capitalism.

To be clear, in both late capitalism and neoliberalism the future is heralded as the potential site of consumer fulfillment: i.e., one will be happier once one consumes the next available product or service, making the future the de-facto site of satisfaction. This is, of course, an unreachable future. A future that, particularly for Caribbean diasporic populations, becomes intimately linked to the American Dream narrative that imagines one's future as always potentially better than one's present. To purchase a home or car is not just to be happier, in this case, it is also to have achieved the promise of "America," where "America" becomes a signifier for freedom and opportunity accessed through purchasing power. Capitalism *con salsa* disassociates the act of consumption from the ideas that the future is always better.

Consumption, in this instance, is located in the present with little regard for future happiness, fulfillment, or "Americanness." It is not that one ceases to believe in the future or in happiness, but rather than one recognizes the present as a potential site for complete fulfillment. This complete fulfillment is what I term the "radical present"—made "complete" by its lack of interest in a telos or goal placed in the future, and made "radical" by the fundamental reordering of the chronology of capitalism that it facilitates. In short, capitalism *con salsa* posits that it is possible to both *want* goods and *be*, without *wanting* goods being the fundamental core of one's *beingness*.<sup>90</sup>

I enter this alternative engagement with capitalism through the lens of consumption (i.e. to want is to consume in this analysis, rather than to sell for a profit) in accordance with Arjun Appadurai's observation that consumption is the defining act of Late Capitalism. In *Modernity at Large* Appadurai posits that during Late Capitalism it is consumption, rather than production, that dictates the experience of time. For Appadurai, consumption has become a temporal marker of leisure, as "time away from work" (79) is often time spent consuming. Appadurai argues that the consumer's experience with time is always located somewhere between fantasy and nostalgia. He believes that fantasy, in the form of fashions and trends, intersects with Frederick Jameson's notion of "nostalgia for the present." Jameson explains that a sense of longing emerges when one understands the moment one is living as a moment already lost, and therefore a moment one has to seize through consumption before it is too late. For Appadurai, Late Capitalist time is always understood at the intersection of fantasy and nostalgia, meaning that the present moment is always displaced. Appadurai terms this relationship between consumption and time the "aesthetics of ephemerality," to argue that consumption and ephemerality are and have long been intimately linked in Late Capitalism. The aesthetics of ephemerality are the pleasing, and ultimately purchasable aspects of the future that keep one desiring more.

Appadurai warns that consumption is ephemeral, which places one in the precarious position of existing between fantasy and nostalgia. Certainly many of us have rushed to buy a new blouse before the end of the three-day sale, for example. But what is so bad about precarity?—capitalism *con salsa* pushes us to ask. And why do the aesthetics of ephemerality require a warning? Appadurai does not use the word "precarious," but it is precisely precarity that is at stake in his analysis. Appadurai suggests that *because* the act of

consumption is often linked to fantasy or to nostalgia, one's engagement with *time* during the act of consumption must also be fantastical or nostalgic. The aesthetic that one attempts to consume is therefore always ephemeral or, in my words, always precarious. It is possible, however, to consume in a way that is both fantastical and nostalgic while also reveling in the precarity of this position. This mode of consumption is capitalism *con salsa*—defined, once again, as the non-teleological capitalist consumption made possible by the embodied playfulness of salsa epistemology. Capitalism *con salsa* consumes the aesthetics of ephemerality, as Appadurai has characterized them, while also reveling in the precarity—the not held in place-ness—inherent in such a position. Like dance, the act of consumption can be so pleasurable that one does not, in fact, have to be displaced temporally in a fantastical future or a nostalgic past. One can in fact consume the aesthetics of ephemerality while understanding, and even enjoying, the precarity of the radical present (once again, the site of complete fulfillment within a capitalist system that is not invested in the future).<sup>91</sup>

### **Capitalism: Dale**

Miami-born rapper Pitbull came into national prominence in the early 2000s, following a local career as an emcee in Miami. Born in Miami to Cuban-born parents, Pitbull raps in both English and Spanish, and has become a success among both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking audiences. Since his commercial debut in 2002, he has collaborated with other prominent artists such as Emilio and Gloria Estefan, Timbaland, Enrique Iglesias, Justin Timberlake, and JLo. As he so aptly put it in his June 2013 performance in Los Angeles, Pitbull has gone “from a boy to a man to a brand.” This statement serves as both an abridged biography of Pitbull's life and a synopsis of the market forces that drive popular

music production in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Armando Pérez, the person, has certainly gone from a boy to a man, and from a man to the multi-million dollar business and brand that is “Pitbull.” Of course he hasn’t done it on his own, making the process of going from a boy to a man remarkably different from the process of going from a man to a brand. Where the former is presumably a matter of aging and a multitude of masculinist overtones, the latter is driven by the same market forces that create vast amounts of privatized wealth derived from an increasingly globalized consumer base. Pitbull’s empire, for instance, benefits from neoliberal policies such as NAFTA, which allow him to sell his music and merchandise globally. The artist—a light-skinned, blue-eyed male—is also a beneficiary of race and gender hierarchies upon which these policies are constructed.<sup>92</sup>

Pitbull is part of the capitalist markets that are complicit with, some would say constitutive of, the oppressive power structures that many work so hard to undo. Yet he plays a part in this undoing through the worldview expressed in his catchphrase “Dale.” “Dale” is a Spanish word that exists somewhere at the intersection of “carpe diem” and “get it girl!” Pitbull has long used “dale” as a way to punctuate his raps and hype a crowd. The Spanish word “dale” has caught on so strongly that one can now buy t-shirts, hats, and other merchandise with either “dale” or “#dale” printed on them. On August 23, 2014 NPR’s news website published an article entitled “To Pitbull’s Fans Around the World, ‘Dale’ is a Way of Life.” The article suggests that “dale,” has a meaning that far exceeds its translation into English. Among the meanings suggested are “Just keep working hard and don’t look back,” “keep looking at what is ahead,” and “Let’s go.” Dale is also understood as “a nod of encouragement,” “a forceful demand,” and “a warm coo of sexual invitation.” An 18-year-old Iranian interviewed by NPR asserts, “I learned how to live in life from Pitbull.” The

redundancy of “live” and “in life,” though likely a linguistic slip up, draws attention to “Dale” as performative utterance. “Dale” *does* something when it is said. The something that it *does* (in this case, teach Afshin Gholizade how to live) is *done* in a specific time and location: life. For Gholizade, “dale” isn’t *done* in the imagination or in memory. It is *done* in life—that is, in the sequence of present moments that compose the act of living. Pitbull’s catchphrase may have many meanings to many people, but what these meanings all have in common is that they all understand “Dale” as a performative speech act that is, by its nature, rooted in the present. Dale—as coo, as nod, as instruction—brings something into being at the very moment it is said.

We can think of dale as a sort of punctum, in the Barthesian sense. The “moment” that Pitbull theorizes in this song is not unlike what Roland Barthes theorized in photography as the “punctum.” Salsa epistemology’s relationship to the punctum has already been theorized with regard to Erika Lopez’s work in chapter one. In short, Barthes refers to the punctum as that which “pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” For Barthes, and for theorists like Chela Sandoval that have expanded on his reading, the punctum is a break in linearity. It can surprise through a “prick,” hurt one through a “bruise,” or just intrigue by being “poignant.” For Pitbull, the moment exists as a punctum experienced as a state of ecstasy. It is a moment outside of time, but also, importantly, a moment to be enjoyed. The importance of ecstasy, or the feeling of being outside oneself, to the moment is paramount. The Pitbullian moment does not just shock, it transcends.

Georges Bataille theorizes this state of transcendence as ecstasy in *Tears of Eros*. For Bataille, ecstasy is a state that can be elicited from experiencing images of violence and death (205). Looking at a photograph of a person being tortured can, against all logic, stimulate a



state of erotic pleasure. Bataille makes a link between religious ecstasy and the erotic to argue that there is a sadistic pleasure that can occur when witnessing moment of great pain. Pitbull's moment functions as a midpoint between the Barthesian punctum and Bataillan ecstasy. Like Bataille's ecstasy, Pitbull's moment is pleasurable and even erotic. If one is bruised or titillated by the Pitbullian "moment," then this bruising or titillation is elicited by joy and experienced as pleasure.<sup>93</sup> However, for Pitbull images of violence or death would not spur the "moment" that he calls life. Rather, the moments he calls life—in this case more similar to the beauty one experiences in the Barthesian punctum elicited by a photograph—are an antidote to this very violence and death that pushed Bataille to a state of meditative ecstasy. Violence and death here become something to be experienced in and through the "moment," which is unequivocally joyful in a Barthesian sense. The result of this moment is "poignant," to use Barthes' word, only in the sense that it evokes an emotional response. It is not poignant in a sorrowful or regretful sense. For Pitbull the moment is not something to be saddened by or to be melancholically longed after. It is now. It is joyous. And, as is the case for both Barthes and Bataille, it is a breaking point that moves one above or outside of both the scene they witness and the space in which this witnessing occurs. In the case of capitalism, this manifests in the form of capitalism *con salsa* that moves one above or outside of the futurity of progress narratives.

### **"Give Me Everything Tonight"**

This brings us to Pitbull's first number 1 hit on the Billboard Top 100: 2013's "Give Me Everything Tonight," performed by Pitbull in collaboration with Nayo and Nayer, and co-written by Pitbull, Nick van de Wall and Shaffer Smith. The lyrics of the song outline

Pitbull's journey from growing up poor to becoming a multi-million dollar hip hop mogul. This narrative is a familiar one in the hip hop genre, with many of the world's most famous rappers articulating it—from the Notorious B.I.G.'s iconic "Juicy" to Jay Z's "Hard Knock Life," to name a few. In Pitbull's version, the chronological telling of his life story is disrupted by a return to the radical present, however. He raps:

Took my life from a negative to a positive.

I just want y'all to know that.

And tonight, let's enjoy life.

Pitbull, Nayer, Ne-Yo. That's right.

We see in this example a progress narrative—"took my life from a negative to a positive"—interrupted or punctuated by a declarative command that forces that audience back into the present—"tonight, let's enjoy life." Like his catchphrase "dale," "let's enjoy life" is meant as both advice and imperative here. It navigates the audience back to the present—"tonight"—without negating the success narrative that comes before it.

The use of "and" as a conjunction in the prior verse is also indicative of the relationship between "tonight" and the progress narrative that precedes it. The two are not unrelated or contradictory—as the use of *but* "tonight let's enjoy life" would connote. Rather, one flows into the other seamlessly—and "tonight, let's enjoy life"—suggesting that jumping back into the present is not a distraction from the process of making money, but rather a part of it. Let us return to the progress narrative for a moment to understand the relationship between the two. Pitbull lays out a Hard Work Equals Success narrative in the opening lines of "Give me Everything Tonight. Here is the verse from which the earlier lyrics were excerpted:

Me not working hard?  
Yeah, right! Picture that with a Kodak  
Or, better yet, go to Times Square  
Take a picture of me with a Kodak  
Took my life from negative to positive  
I just want y'all know that  
And tonight, let's enjoy life  
Pitbull, Nayer, Ne-Yo, That's right

The lyrics appear to tell us a condensed life story: Pitbull, the person, has gone from taking photographs to being photographed. Pitbull, the business man, has gone from someone that might visit Times Square, to someone whose face is on a Billboard hanging over it. He is no longer the purchaser, but the seller. And, as the references to the brand name Kodak and the tourist mecca that is Times Square remind us, Pitbull, the product, is worth a lot of money. The many discourses of Pitbull converge here in a way that is both clever and indicative of the inner workings of the neoliberal capitalist system within which he operates. While the story he tells seems to have the elements of a traditional American dream narrative—“took my life from a negative to a positive. I just want y’all to know that”—the way that Pitbull, the person, became successful was not simply through hard work; it was through making himself into a global commodity. Pitbull is both the seller and the product. Pitbull is what is being sold, but Pitbull is also the one collecting the money. In a city that makes its money primarily from the tourist industry, and that has rapidly become one of the largest media producing regions in America, it is no longer feasible to work at a gas station as a pathway to upward mobility. The road from Pitbull the person to Pitbull the mogul is lined not just with

hard work, but also with selling a global commodity. It seems fitting, therefore, that Pitbull's statement, "took my life from a negative to a positive," would be missing the object. Who, exactly, took Pitbull's life from a negative to a positive? It is not just Pitbull the person, but also the global markets that drove his success, and the media industry professionals that took part in it. The subject of the sentence is multiple—it is not just Pitbull, but the producers, writers, and investors that had a hand in taking him "from a boy to a man to a brand." The old narrative, Hard Work Equals Success, must therefore be adapted for Pitbull's story to read Hard Work Plus Commodification Equals Success.

The interesting thing about Pitbull (the man *and* the brand) is that he doesn't obscure the existence of these market forces, but rather draws attention to them through his marketing and lyrics. We might think of his debut studio album, released in 2004, entitled M.I.A.M.I. The title of this album is an acronym for the words "Money is a Major Issue." Money is indeed a major issue, and Pitbull has largely dedicated his oeuvre to examining the inner workings of money—what it's like to not have it, how to get it, and finally what life is like once you do have it. In naming his first album M.I.A.M.I., Pitbull gives us a preview of the larger project of his music: drawing links between Miami the city and the major issue that is money.<sup>94</sup>

Pitbull draws a link between his road to money and the radical presence of "tonight" in Ne-Yo's chorus:

Tonight I want all of you tonight

Give me everything tonight

For all we know we might not get tomorrow

Let's do it tonight

There is a sense of urgency in this refrain that adds another layer to the progress narrative Pitbull has already laid out. Yes, upward mobility is important, but the thesis of the song remains rooted in the present. “For all we know we might not get tomorrow,” Nayo reminds us, which suggests that utopian progress narratives must not come at the expense of the present. Pitbull chimes in, reminding us that even he, the boy/man/brand, loses himself in the moment:

And I might drink a little more than I should tonight  
And I might take you home with me, if I could tonight  
And, baby, Ima make you feel so good, tonight  
Cause we might not get tomorrow

The introduction of a sexualized narrative—the present has suddenly gone from a moment of personal fulfillment to a chance to have sex—is not surprising. The themes of women and alcohol reintroduce themselves, this time connoting that the party, we might say the salsa, is not in opposition to progress in capitalism *con salsa*, particularly in a city that has generally embraced its reputation as a party mecca. Although Pitbull’s drinking and sex are typical of hip hop lyrics, their function in this song is important not just for genre but for content. The present moment functions as a pleasurable interruptor to capitalist progress narratives, and this pleasure comes here in the form of sex of alcohol, among other things.

I will turn here to Crunk Feminist Collective blogger Crunktastic (aka Emory professor Britney C. Cooper), who said it best in a 2014 response to fellow feminist bell hooks controversially calling the singer Beyoncé a “terrorist” and suggested “she is colluding in the construction of herself as a slave.”

Beyoncé is an entertainer, who sings good songs and choreographs routines, so that we can dance and feel good and fuck well and talk shit with our friends or partners as we navigate our lives in this neoliberal, capitalist machine. She might be a bigger cog in the wheel than most of us, but she certainly ain't driving the bike.

For Crunktastic, Beyoncé's sexualized depictions of herself and the money she makes from them do not make her a "slave." Rather, the importance of 'feeling good' and 'fucking well' cannot be underestimated, as Crunktastic highlights. The blogger understands the ability to "dance and feel good and fuck well" to be a tactic for "navigat[ing]" neoliberalism, and Beyoncé's music as one part of this. I read her use of "navigate" here as the ability to both live within the neoliberal system and at the same time resist this "capitalist machine" through dance and feeling good and fucking.

The same is true for Pitbull, whose work suggests that feeling good and fucking well are intimately linked to financial success, and therefore to the project of 'navigat[ing] our lives in this neoliberal, capitalist machine.' For Pitbull, money is not condemnable, but the linearity of the progress narrative is. In this sense, it's not that one should try to jump off of the moving bike that is neoliberal capitalism, but rather than one should feel free to hop off and on, take it for a spin around the block, ride it with one's eye closed, and any other euphemism that suggests the importance of not taking the teleological ideals of success too seriously. This form of capitalism that seems at once detached from capitalist progress narratives is the cornerstone of Pitbull's capitalism *con salsa*.

Breaking with the linearity of the progress narrative is not solely a male phenomenon in Pitbull's music, either. Although "Give Me Everything" has two male singers as its lead,

Cuban American female singer Nayer does sing the lead into the chorus and appear in the song's video. Nayer plays a small role in the song musically, but her presence in the music video, directed by David Rousseau, does represent the only female body to be kept consistently in focus. While the other women who dance scantily clad around Pitbull and NeYo remain generally out of focus, Nayer occupies the position of a subject in the video (rather than an object). Her screen time is often shared with Pitbull, an indication that she is not an equal partner in the song's billing, but the lyrics assigned to her do echo the capitalism *con salsa* that we hear in Pitbull's verses and Ne-Yo's chorus. Nayer sings:

Don't care what they say.

Or what games they play.

Nothing is enough

'til I have your love.

I want you tonight.

I want you to stay.

I want you tonight.

Nayer's subjecthood is confirmed by her declarative statement—"I want you tonight." She, like Ne-Yo, is an actor whose entrance into the present moment is made possible by sex. When Nayer says "I want you tonight," she accesses the possibilities of the present moment much like Ne-Yo does when he sings in the song's chorus: "I want all of you tonight." The difference is in the word "all," of course, which Ne-Yo uses to refer to *all* of the women in the room. He reiterates this by pointing at them when he sings the lyrics—making clear that he does not want "all" of one woman, but rather "all" of the women present. Nayer's desired must be kept monogamous, the lyrics suggest, whereas Ne-Yo's desire can be directed at all

women. While this discrepancy does represent a double standard that requires women be chaste, it also does not foreclose upon the possibility of Nayer, and other women, engaging in a pleasurable interruption to the capitalist progress narrative. Understanding Nayer's role in the song from this perspective, rather than rehashing accusations that Pitbull and other hip hop artists objectify women—no matter how warranted—allows for a more nuanced reading that recognizes double standards while also noting women's active role in capitalism *con salsa*.

In this particular video, Nayer's sexuality functions as part of her entrance into the present moment. While some may condemn the blatant sexuality of her dress and lyrics—an aesthetic that Jillian Hernández refers to as “sexual aesthetic excess”—it is precisely the over-the-topness of her sexuality that, in Hernández's words complicates the dichotomy of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ girls and also express non-normative politics that trouble the disciplining of behavior and dress for girls of color” (64).<sup>95</sup> Nayer's sexuality allows her to have fun right now—regardless of double standards that police female sexuality—and in doing so gain full access to the radical present that is “tonight.”

### **Feel This Moment**

I will turn here to Pitbull's 2012 hit with Christina Aguilera, “Feel This Moment,” which depicts a similar message within a slightly different gender dynamic.<sup>96</sup> The video begins with three split panels of black and white footage. While some depict screaming fans asking for autographs, others depict Pitbull putting on one of his iconic suit jackets, and still others show the artist rapping soberly into the camera. From these three partitioned video screens the viewer understands Pitbull to be sharing valuable life advice. He looks directly



into the camera through his aviator sunglasses. With none of the usual pomp his backup dancers behind him, Pitbull counsels his followers that the road to screaming fans and commercial success is paved with business suits and a serious work ethic. He raps:

Ask for money, get advice.

Ask for advice, get money twice.

I'm from the Dirty, that Chico nice.

Y'all call it a moment. I call it life.

The “advice” here comes from Pitbull himself. In this take on the “give a man a fish, teach a man to fish” adage, Pitbull articulates that he will not be giving loans, but rather offers this song as a guide to large-scale financial success. In reminding fans that he is “from the Dirty” he locates Miami as part of the so-called Dirty South region of hip hop, known for a gritty folk aesthetic that separated it from the flashier and initially more commercially successful mainstream East Coast and West Coast hip hop. By claiming the Dirty South, Pitbull presents his own rags to riches story as testament to the validity of his advice. He echoes this when he raps “that Chico nice” while pulling smugly on the lapels of this designer suit jacket, identifying himself as an economically successful Latino—a “chico.”<sup>97</sup>

As the opening verse to this song reminds us, Pitbull’s ability to live his “life” in the present “moment” is part of the “advice” that he offers fans. Money and the present moment are interrelated in Pitbull’s capitalism, appearing so frequently within the same verse. The moment posits a rupture in the capitalist system through this oppressed people (i.e. those from the “Dirty”) can access the riches that they—despite their geographic, economic, or ethnic backgrounds—are entitled to. These same people must be careful not to get caught up in the linearity of capitalism, however. Pitbull’s insistence that capitalism not displace

subjects in a perpetual future is re-articulated in the song's chorus, sung by Christina Aguilera—an extremely successful U.S.-based pop artist with a net worth far higher than Pitbull's at \$100 million. She sings:

One day while my light is glowing  
I'll be in my castle golden  
But until the gates are open  
I just wanna feel this moment

As Aguilera sings these words, she squats by herself on a stage and touches herself sexually. Her eyes flicker back and forth between prolonged eye contact with the camera and wishful glances toward the sky. The juxtaposition between Aguilera's enticing looks at the camera and the youthful innocence of her glances toward heaven lead the viewer to see her both as someone to be desired and as someone to be saved. The language of the chorus supports this iconography, as she wistfully wishes for "one day" in the future when she will be in her "castle golden." This castle is undoubtedly a reference to princess fairytales in which honor and virginity are both dutifully guarded by the "gates" that Aguilera hopes will one day soon be open. One assumes that it is Pitbull, whose image continues to appear in the other two frames, that will open her "gates," in all senses of the word.

The lack of agency suggested by the references to princess fairytales is misleading, however. Outside of the confines of this music video, we know Christina Aguilera to be an incredibly successful artist with a net worth that is five times as great as Pitbull's. It is unlikely that the actual Christina cannot open the gates to her own castle, so to speak, or at the very least pay someone to do so. There is a tension in the lyrics, here, with Aguilera stuck in a state of perpetual wanting—"I just wanna feel this moment"—that contrasts Pitbull's

state of already *being* in the moment, which he calls “life.” It begins to seem as though the “moment” is in fact a boys’ club that Aguilera has been shut out of because of her gender. This perpetuation of the idea that women are stuck in this state of “wanting” and men in this state of “being” in the moment serves a larger narrative of female passivity that Aguilera rebels against when she winks knowingly at the camera later in the music video.

The video goes on to suggest that entrance to financial success and to the present moment for women sometimes comes by way of sleeping with a man like Pitbull. Pitbull seems to be encouraging Christina Aguilera to get in on the action when he interpellates her after the first chorus: “Oye mamita. Dale que la cosa está rica.” The colloquialism of the phrase makes it difficult to translate, but loosely Pitbull’s invitation means: “Hey little mama. Let’s go, this stuff is hot.” The “cosa” or “stuff” that Pitbull is referring to operates on multiple registers, referring cunningly to all things that he assumes a woman to desire: his penis, financial success, and access to the present. Pitbull also uses his famous catchphrase, “dale,” in this line and throughout the song. When Pitbull says “Dale que la cosa está rica” the double meaning is a reminder that one must both seize the day and seize his penis. Either one will work as a way to step outside of the teleological framework of neoliberal progress narratives. The choice of how to “dale” or seize the day is ultimately Aguilera’s, however. She may, in fact, decide that the “cosa” or stuff that she wants to pursue has nothing to do with Pitbull. To “dale” is to go for it in all senses of the word—both to seek riches and to enjoy the moment as one pleases. Christina seems to have made that choice, either consciously or by way of a directorial decision, when she appears alone in her own shots throughout the video, rather than dancing peripherally around Ne-Yo as Nayer did in “Give Me Everything Tonight.”

As the song continues, Pitbull reiterates his capitalism *con salsa*, with lyrics such as:

I see the future.

But live for the moment.

Makes sense don't it?

And:

But time is money

Only difference is I own it.

Like a stopwatch

Let's stop time

And enjoy this moment.

Dale.

In these lyrics, Pitbull confirms the relationship between time and money that underlies capitalism *con salsa*. He is able to both “see the future” and live in the “moment.” Yes “time is money” as the old saying goes, but for Pitbull this adage takes on an entirely different meaning. Time quite literally *is* money—it is something to take hold of, to seize. To stop time is to not let it dictate one's life. To enjoy the moment is to reinsert time for play into the linearity of the capitalist progress narrative. Pitbull invokes the audience one last time when uses the plural “let's stop time and enjoy this moment.” By punctuating his sentence with “dale” once more, Pitbull again makes it so with his words. The introduction of “dale” does metaphorically stop time in this song, as Christina Aguilera's chorus loops around once again, and as the hordes of fans in the videos are seen dancing frantically, presumably completely free, even if only for a moment, from the confines of time.

## Rent Parties and Conclusions

The video for Pitbull and Ne-Yo's 2014 hit "Time of Our Lives," discussed in the opening to this chapter, was directed by Gil Green. It begins with a Latino family sitting together in their living room on New Years Eve 1999. The wife sits worriedly, holding up bills as she reminds her husband that the rent is two months late. The husband, on the other hand, expresses a desire to go out and celebrate New Years Eve. In a recliner beside them, an older mother figure puts down her book to offer some advice from her past: "When we needed a little help to pay the rent, we threw a rent party!" The rent party is a perfect emblem of capitalism *con salsa*. The older woman's exclamation reminds the husband and wife that money and fun can go together—that having fun right now and paying the bills tomorrow are not mutually exclusive.

The rest of the video takes place at a rent party, where Pitbull is dressed as though it were 1999. He raps, "This is the last \$20 I got, but Imma have a good time ballin' or out." The video is shot in the past to remind viewers of Pitbull's working class beginnings. He instructs his fans to "Forget about those bills and the first of the month. It's my night, your night, our night, let's turn it up." The "night" in this verse represents the present moment that Pitbull accesses to push back against capitalism's focus on tomorrow—here represented by "the first of the month." The universality of this experience is depicted in Ne-Yo's hook—"Everybody goin' through something"—and Pitbull's breakdown "This is for anybody goin through tough times. Believe me, been there, done that. Everyday above ground is a great day, remember that."

Pitbull's introduction of a radical present into teleological capitalist narratives constitutes a playful rebellion against the damaging aspects of capitalism that keep those that

don't have always wanting more. This intervention is particularly poignant when understood as emerging from the Cuban American community Miami—a group that has historically been seen as unquestioningly capitalist. While still being confined to the demands of his genres—hip hop and pop music—Pitbull has managed to talk about money, women, and success in a way that makes capitalism *con salsa* readily accessible to fans around the world. His blending of the utopian ideals of capitalism (i.e. I will be rich one day) and the focus on the present characterized by Caribbean cultures (i.e. Why think about tomorrow when it's still today!), is a recipe for blending financial success with the joy of the present. In this way, to understand Pitbull as either a product of neoliberal capitalism or an unscrupulous businessman at the helm of it, is at best misguided, and at worst racist. Pitbull's espousal of capitalism *con salsa* represents a departure from the progress narratives that it seems, on the surface, to rely on. Pitbull demonstrates that Cuban American populations do not unquestioningly accept capitalism, nor do they engage in a knee jerk resistance to money often perpetuated by those who already have it. Rather, he shows us that ways of knowing influence ways of consuming, and as such salsa epistemology can also become capitalism *con salsa*. Most importantly, his song and video texts articulate what disadvantaged populations already know. The politics of the present moment have vastly different affective and financial claims on those that have money than on those that do not. For Pitbull and working class Cuban Americans, in a country frequently hostile toward Latina/os, being in the present moment is an action of rebellion, and making money without falling prey to a teleology that robs them of their happiness is always a radical act.

## Conclusion

### “An Epistemology of Resilience”

This is a *dale que tu puedes* / colonized knowledge / you can't stop the *flava* epistemology. It is a shake-your-booty / *resolviendo* / meditation epistemology. A *pachanguera* / *cafetera* / Juan Luis Guerra epistemology. This is an epistemology of resilience.

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored salsa as a framework through which Spanish Caribbean people interpret the world. I have argued that salsa exists in its well-known music and dance forms, but also as a literary aesthetic, a form of humor, and even an economic framework. The shape-shifting qualities of salsa make it so that it underlies many of the cultural phenomena that we associate with the Spanish Caribbean, as well as many of the day-to-day actions that Spanish Caribbean people take. Embodied playfulness is present in both the art forms, and the ways of life that these art forms seek to represent.

My motivation for this project was selfish: I wanted to understand why, in my personal life, I could never separate joy from politics. I wanted to unpack why my community—the Spanish Caribbean community in Miami—was always cracking jokes and dancing and blasting Power 96.5 when the world is really a very terrible place where terrible things happen everyday. I wanted to prove to myself that joy could be political, and that the political could be joyful.

In my research for this project, I placed my own experiences in the context of over one hundred years of Spanish Caribbean embodiment and playfulness in the face of hardship. What I discovered is that my experience with wanting to connect joy and politics is part of a

much longer genealogy of thinkers, artists, dancers, and regular folks who did the same thing. What I am calling salsa epistemology has existed in the Spanish Caribbean for generations.

In doing this work, I have tried to suggest that we can use Spanish Caribbean ways of knowing as the foundation for a coalitional politics based on embodied playfulness rather than one based on sour discontent. I suspect that many other communities have arrived to this conclusion independent of the Cuban and Puerto Rican genealogy that I outline. Among the communities that I speculate may have epistemologies similar to salsa are the Tibetan Buddhists, the Zydeco dancing community, the European phenomenologists, and the drag queens on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. There are also others, I'm sure.

Still, I think the Caribbean is a useful place to start when doing this work. From the utopian promise of the Cuban socialist republic, to the history of de-colonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon, to the difficult work of dealing with American occupation in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic—the Caribbean has a particular appeal for those of us interested in understanding how present-based politics and utopian joy come together. I hope that future explorations of this topic will maintain this cultural specificity and acknowledge that just because our humanity is shared does not mean that place ceases to matter. Keeping the importance of geography in mind, I also believe that salsa epistemology offers a starting point for the inter-Latina/o dialogues we have begun to see at Latina/o Studies conferences around the U.S. During a time of draconian immigration policies and predatory banking practices, the acknowledgment of embodied epistemologies is integral to facilitating dialogue between Latina/o groups—many of which have vastly unequal experiences with systemic violence based on skin color, economic standing, and immigration status. In doing so we can begin to enact a coalition politics that fights against the dominant sexual, racial, and



economic logic through the lens of embodied playfulness.

In closing, I want to turn toward a theorist whose work, though not explicitly mentioned in this dissertation, has haunted its creation: Jean-Luc Nancy. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy posits that literature offers a mode of “being-in-common,” which stands in opposition to “common being.” The former refers to a practice of both being and writing that concerns itself with linkages, overlaps, points of kinship, and (on a good day) maybe even love. Literature, in other words, offers the possibility for non-essentialized community. “Common being,” though never articulated so plainly, refers to the stuff of identity politics—the assumption that any aspect of one’s being can make one “common” with another. For Nancy, the *being-in-common-ness* of literature is an interruption to what he calls “myth,” defined basically as that shared sense of identity that allows communities to form based on essentialism. To be sure, accusations that identity-based civil rights movements are “essentialist” are as tired and irrelevant now as they ever were, and the privilege that undergirds them as unexamined now as it ever was. But Nancy’s push to move past essentialism is also rooted in something quite different—a desire to see literature as something more, something not yet, something that can inspire a politics based on perceived choice. Nancy wants to believe, like so many of us do, that “being” is an act, a verb, something we can choose to do in different ways at different times to produce a different politics. Literature, for Nancy, becomes both site and impetus for a radical notion of community that can be based on love or laughter or dance, rather than on biology.

As a literary scholar, I am of course very taken with Nancy’s formulation. What better than literature (defined expansively, as Nancy notes, to include television, music, and performance) to instigate new ways of being? This dissertation certainly stems from the

central assumption that alternate reading practices can also be alternate living practices. It maintains that what I call “salsa” tells us as much about culture as it does about how to “be” as social and political actors. I encourage those who read this work to write me and tell me if they have found this to be the case.

I will end then with an anecdote, which I believe is a microcosm of the dissertation’s central message. In 2012, when I was at the mid point of a very long, very tiring PhD program, I crowded onto a full bus on the University of California, Santa Barbara’s campus. I was running late to teach a class, and mildly annoyed by the carefree, booty-shortened, flip-flop wearing undergraduates that stood between me and a seat. As I settled in, I looked up to see a haggard-looking older gentleman standing across from me talking to himself. I am ashamed to say that I ignored him, annoyed as I was by the amount of space he was taking up on an already congested bus. It was only several minutes later when I looked up to see that this gentleman was staring at me. When our eyes met, I heard him say the following: “You can be as academic as you want, but the only thing that matters is how you love other people.” Seriously. I don’t know who that man was or why he said what he said, but I do know that his message was intended specifically for me. I can be as academic as I want, but the only thing that matters is how I love other people. For me, salsa epistemology is about loving other people. It is about a way of understanding the world that allows one to be better, so that one can love better, so that one can have the energy to get laws passed and stand up to injustice. That gentleman was right, and I hope that this dissertation goes some of the way toward realizing his vision.

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## Notes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> In this interview for the Smithsonian, Cruz also discusses other aspects of her dress, including her frequent use of the *bata cubana*—a traditional dress worn by Cuban women when dancing *rumba* on stage. Cruz suggests that she adopted this particular aspect of her dress in order to represent Cuban culture to foreign audiences. She says, “the bata was important, it always was since we wanted to show the world that we had, that our music was culture, that we have like, for example, the Mexicans who have their mariachi outfits, we also have the bata cubana” (Pérez). Cruz’s *bata cubana* therefore serves a different purpose than her wigs and high heels, for instance, inasmuch as she adopted it not just an aesthetic choice but also a form of cultural ambassadorship.

<sup>2</sup> Cruz’s persona is commonly adopted by Latina/o drag queens in Miami. Perhaps the most famous of these is Marytrini—a self proclaimed “transformista”—who notably impersonated Cruz in a drag performance in Havana’s Teatro America in 2014. The story was widely covered by local media, and video footage can be found on the website of Univision 23, Miami’s Spanish language television affiliate, at this address:  
<http://miami.univision.com/noticias/cuba/video/2014-11-25/maritrini-lleva-a-celia-cruz-cuba>

<sup>3</sup> I am reminded here of René Girard’s analysis of laughter and tears as forms of catharsis in “Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis.” Girard’s memorable line is worth quoting here: “Between tears and laughter,” therefore, the difference is not in nature but in degree” (815).

<sup>4</sup> Travel to the third Spanish Caribbean island, the Dominican Republic, would become common later, starting with the Balaguer presidency in the late 1960s, which

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followed the fall of the Trujillo dictatorship and U.S. occupation of the island. This dissertation does not explore Dominican cultural production, though future considerations on this topic should take the Dominican Republic into account.

<sup>5</sup> Dominican intellectual Pedro Henríquez Ureña also wrote in his 1925 *La utopía de América* of a version of the Americas that would be inclusive of diversity and inclined toward social justice.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the history of utopian thinking in the Caribbean, I would recommend the work of Bill Ashcroft. In “Critical Utopias” Ashcroft outlines how post-colonial nations turn toward utopian fiction as a form of critical hope. Find this article in *Textual Practice* 21.3 (2007).

<sup>7</sup> Fania Records had a near-monolithic control of salsa music production in New York in the 1970s. As Pacini Hernández outlines in *Oyo Como Va*, as the label signed nearly every salsa act in the city: Celia Cruz, Ray Barreto, Ruben Blades, Willie Colón, and Tito Puente (31).

<sup>8</sup> Marisol Berríos-Miranda discusses the conflict over the use of the name “salsa,” which has been attributed to Puerto Rican musicians, over the use of “Afro-Cuban music” that highlights its Cuban roots in “Con Sabor a Puerto Rico” in *Musical Migrations*. Implicit in this definition is a privileging of the Cuban and Puerto Rican influences in salsa (over those of other Latin Americans, such as Colombians and Venezuelans, who also have rich salsa legacies)

<sup>9</sup> For more on the emergence of salsa at the intersection of popular music and mass marketing, see Frances Aparicio’s *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Hanover: Wesleyan U P, 1998).

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<sup>10</sup> Famous Dominican musicians in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century would also record salsa songs, the most famous perhaps being Juan Luis Guerra, just as non-Dominicans would record merengue tracks. This fusion spoke to the geographic proximity of Dominicans and other Spanish Caribbean groups in New York neighborhoods such as Washington Heights, as well as the significant number of Dominicans living in Puerto Rico itself.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the emergence of mambo as a popular music form in Mexico City, see Chapter 35 “Mambo Number Five” in Ned Sublette’s *Cuba and Its Music*. For more on the Jewish influence on the popularization of mambo, see Josh Kun’s “Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddishe Mambos, or the Other History of Jews in America” (*Shofar* 23.4 (2005): 50-68).

<sup>12</sup> In *Musicalizando la raza: La racialización en Puerto Rico a través de la música*, Barbara Abadía-Rexach explores racist lyrics in Puerto Rican salsa songs (San Juan: Ediciones Puerto Rico, 2012). Lisa Sánchez González conducts a similar exercise in the last chapter of her *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York: New York U P, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> For a history of the Cuban dance traditions, including the evolution of son into mambo and salsa, see Yvonne Daniel’s “Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, edited by Susanna Sloat.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the history of Puerto Rican dance, see Alma Concepción’s “Dance in Puerto Rico: Embodied Meanings” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, edited by Susanna Sloat.

<sup>15</sup> Brenda Gottschild provides a thorough explanation of the tenets of Africanist dance in her work. She identifies them as: 1) embracing conflict and paradox, such as the seeming

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contradictions between spiritual wisdom and the movement of the physical body, 2) polyrhythm, by which different parts of the body move to different beats, 3) high-affect juxtaposition, such as a somber mood followed by a sexualized dance move, 4) ephedism, or youthful bodily movements regardless of the actual age of the dancer, 5) dancing with composure and calm, 6) continuity between the human and the spirit world, 7) an energy that allows one to dance past ones natural limits, 8) dancing in a circular formation where there are multiple performances going on at once, 9) improvisation, 10) communal trust, and 11) syncretic origins.<sup>15</sup> As a dance form, salsa embodies each of these traits. Its epistemological form—itsself based on the dialectic between the present and utopia—emerges in part out of a dance form that takes advantage of juxtaposition by mixing quick and slow steps, partnered dancing with individual improvisation, physical movement with a spiritual energy, and sometimes melancholy lyrics with upbeat dancing.

<sup>16</sup> Buckland argues that improvised dancing builds a shared repertoire of embodied knowledge among participants. Buckland is referencing Diana Taylor’s notion of the repertoire here—which is the body of knowledge that resides precisely in the body, including dance, sports, and ritual. Like nightclub dancing, salsa contains elements of improvisation that are visible despite its structured nature.

<sup>17</sup> Desmond defines embodied social practice as: “*Embodied*, meaning lived physically, not just musings on the ‘idea’ of dance; *social*, meaning embedded in specific material and ideological conditions of possibility; and *practice*, meaning a process in time and space, one of enactment, an articulation and materialization of meanings and relationships” (13).

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<sup>18</sup> A great number of Spanish Caribbean literary scholars focus on issues of queerness, and many of them will be named throughout the course of this dissertation. We should not make the mistake of believing Spanish Caribbean literary studies as a whole to be queer-friendly, however. The field is still largely producing heteronormative scholarship.

## **Chapter One**

<sup>19</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published as “The Political Implications of Playing Hopefully: A Negotiation of the Present and the Utopic in Queer Theory” in *The Un/Making of Latina/o Citizenship: Culture, Politics and Aesthetics*. Ed. Ellie D. Hernández and Eliza Rodriguez y Gibson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> For more on Jill Dolan’s “utopian performative” see Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. We might also link Muñoz to the field of Borderlands Performance Studies, as defined in the collection *Performing the U.S. Latina & Latino Borderlands* (Aldama, Arturo J., Chela Sandoval and Peter García, eds. 2012. Bloomington: Indiana University Press). This field’s interested in the “de-colonizing performatics” of Latina/os certainly coincides with Muñoz’s work.

<sup>21</sup> For more see Leo Bersani’s *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* and Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

<sup>22</sup> For more, see Judith Halberstam’s theorization of the same concept in *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. (2005. New York: New York University Press).

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<sup>23</sup> For an understanding of Anzaldúa's concept of mestiza consciousness, see her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987. San Francisco: Aunt Lute). For an explanation of Lorde's use of the erotic, see her book *Sister Outsider* (1984. Freedom: The Crossing Press). For more on Muñoz's use of disidentification, see his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

<sup>24</sup> Aztlán represents a reclaiming of indigenous land by Chicana/o (and later queer Chicana/o) artists and thinkers, that understands the region of the Southwestern United States as both geographical and mythical home to the Chicano people.

<sup>25</sup> This collection included the work of writers that have since been accepted into curriculum of many women and gender studies classrooms, such as: Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Cade Bambara, and Audre Lorde.

<sup>26</sup> Among the many U.S. Third World feminists texts that discuss this idea of internal decolonization is Audre Lorde's collection *Sister Outsider*. In her essay "Age, Race, Class and Sex," for example, Lorde reflects on internal decolonization when states that "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships" (123).

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that, as is often the case with historical movements, these movements are frequently not named until years after they have passed. As such, there is still heated debated about what, if anything, constitutes the third wave of the feminist movement.



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<sup>28</sup> For more information on third wave and punk rock feminisms, see Ednie Kaeh Garrison's "U.S. Feminism-Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave" (*Feminist Studies* 26.1 (2000): 141-170).

<sup>29</sup> While a history of the U.S. Third World feminism is useful, I should mention the importance of not performing an unintentional erasure of these writers by limiting them to a certain time period. Scholar Chela Sandoval warns against this kind of erasure by allies who are also engaged in decolonial work on Pg. 185, footnote 9, of *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

<sup>30</sup> I am thinking here of Rocky Gamez, who we could call a U.S. Third World feminist writer, and who used humor in her short stories to deal with serious issues of queerness in the Latina/o community. Read some of her work in *Tortilleras: Hispanic and U.S. Latina Lesbian Expression*. I am also thinking of the recent publication of Rigoberto González' *Butterfly Boy: Memories of a Chicano Mariposa*, which I believe embodies many of the philosophies of third wave feminism, and which relies almost entirely on dramatic narrative, and rarely on humor, to prove its point.

<sup>31</sup> The rift that I am referring to deals with the moment in the early 1990s in which queer theory began to get incorporated into the academy through women's studies classrooms. This move can be correlated with the large-scale success of such classic queer theory texts as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). This shift meant that main source for theorization of queerness was no longer creative or activist work, but rather academic work done within universities.

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<sup>32</sup> Latina performance artists such as Monica Palacios and Alina Troyano can be viewed as part of this corpus, inasmuch as their use of humor does not work against hegemony, so much as alongside it, to posit alternate, utopic performances spaces where queerness and latinidad are normativized.

<sup>33</sup> Albert Sergio Laguna defines play in a different context in “Aquí Está Alvaro Guedes: Cuban Choteo and the Politics of Play” (*Latino Studies* 8.4). Laguna focuses on the Cuban style of humor referred to as “choteo” and its role in helping Cubans negotiate the experience of exile and displacement. He argues that the “activation of pleasure” through play is a form of social engagement, which can be found in Cuban culture at large (513). My definition of “play” with regard to Erika Lopez differs slightly from this, inasmuch as it takes María Lugones’ theorizations of “playfulness” as its base, which themselves argues for playfulness as a feminist praxis not necessarily rooted in pleasure, but rather rooted in border crossing or what Lugones would call “world-traveling.” There are nonetheless many instances where Lopez’s use of play as I define it intersects with Laguna’s understanding of play as the political activation of pleasure. This speaks to a larger Caribbean phenomenon of reacting to difficulty and trauma through lightheartedness, itself rife with political possibilities, which the rest of my dissertation understands through the lens of “salsa.”

<sup>34</sup> Humor studies has a long and rich history of understanding humor as performing a myriad of social functions: from Freud’s understanding of humor as an expression of the subconscious, to Henri Bergson’s meditations on the social functions of laughter. In more recent years, humor studies has turned away from universalizing theories of humor, such as the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories. While we can certainly read Lopez’s work through each of these lenses, I am more interested in the kind of hybrid work done in texts

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such as Paul Lewis's *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (1989. Albany: State University of New York Press). Particularly useful to our discussion of *Flaming Iguanas* is chapter 3, where Lewis discusses the use of humor in coming of age narratives.

<sup>35</sup> Many have argued that graphic novels do actually engage in activist work through their inclusion of marginalized characters—often in the form of the non-human, such as superheroes or mutants. Still, I argue that Lopez's activist work in *Flaming Iguanas* takes on feminist activism in a much more direct manner than other graphic novels, by using a Latina protagonist and exploring her identity issues. It should also be noted that Lopez' novel does not represent the traditional definition of a graphic novel, in that it does not have a sequential series of illustrations to further the story. Rather, it blurs the line between a graphic novel and a novel with graphics. For more information on the activist potential of graphic novels, see the *MELUS* special issue entitled "Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative (32.3).

<sup>36</sup> For more on Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque see his *Rabelais and His World*.

## Chapter Two

<sup>37</sup> For more on this persecution, see chapter three.

<sup>38</sup> In *Cuba and the Fall: Christian Text and Queer Narrative in the Fiction of José Lezama Lima and Reinaldo Arenas*, González conducts an in depth analysis of sexuality and homosexuality, particularly as seen in Lezama's novel *Paradiso*. While this is the most extensive engagement with Lezama's queer prose to date, González is not interested in Lezama's engagement with queer theory. In fact, González varied allusions to and

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engagement with canonical Western literature might stand in opposition to queer theory's interest in privileging non-normative voices while also giving voice to queer sexual experiences. González does the latter, but the former is not a part of his project. In *El primitivo implorante: el "sistema poético del mundo" de José Lezama Lima*, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé conducts a provocative analysis of homosexuality in Lezama's *Paradiso*, eventually linking his Freudian readings of Lezama to the latter's poetic system. While an analysis of *Paradiso* is beyond the scope of this chapter, Cruz-Malavé's text would be useful place from which to start such an analysis.

<sup>39</sup> Lezama married a woman in 1964, when he was 54 years old. Although he and María Luisa Bautista were companions in the later part of his life, he was known to have relationships with men throughout his lifetime.

<sup>40</sup> For a history of homosexuality in 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuba, see Emilio Bejel's *Gay Cuban Nation*; Victor Fowler's *La maldición: Una historia del placer como conquista*; or Ian Lumsden's *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality*. This chapter does not perform such a historical account, but rather uses 20<sup>th</sup> century Cuban queerness as a starting point for understanding how Spanish Caribbean epistemologies can impact decolonial movements in the present.

<sup>41</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

<sup>42</sup> Lezama attended five conferences, at which he would give the lectures that make up *La expresión americana* in January of 1957.

<sup>43</sup> The reference to Curtius is actually incorrect here, as Lezama attributed the term "tecnica de la ficción" to Ernest Robert Curtius, when it was in fact taken from a section of Curtius' *Literature europea* in which he was quoting Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*.

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For more see Enrico María Santí's "Lezama, Vitier y la Crítica de la Razón Reminiscente." I do what to point out that this misattribution does not discount the ideas expressed through Lezama's theorization of the "technique of fiction," however. As Juan Pablo Lupi suggests in *Reading Anew*, Lezama's misquotes and creative readings are in fact an important part of his oeuvre.

<sup>44</sup> I refer to New Criticism here as a school of literary analysis concerned with how the form of a text impacts or displays its contents. The New Critics did not engage with extra-literary facts, such as social or historical context, choosing instead to look within the text itself for meaning.

<sup>45</sup> Lezama has also long been criticized for being an elitist more concerned with reciting facts about classical civilizations than addressing existing social ills. He also forms part of a canon of almost exclusively male writers making up the Cuban intellectual elite of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that a male intellectual interacting mostly with male intellectuals produced this theory is indicative of the paradoxes of Latin American queer theory itself. This field concerns itself with queering the normative, without normativizing the queer. Reading a queer author whose work has become canonized is therefore as tricky as it is necessary. Lezama, whose work occupies the boundary of the queer and the normative, offers us a way to think about how social action interacts with utopian literary projects in the context of the Americas.

<sup>46</sup> For a summary of the multiple registers of "causality" in Lezama's work, see Juan Pablo Lupi's *Reading Anew* Pgs. 70-71. Note also that the reading I have just performed of Lezama's text takes seriously Juan Pablo Lupi's critique that what they are *about* may not be the most important aspect of the texts. Lupi's attention to Lezama's rhetorical exercises in

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*Reading Anew: José Lezama Lima's Rhetorical Investigations* pushes to do more than simply translate Lezama into another more intelligible theoretical language. It asks us what Lezama's untranslatability may say about his ideas. Indeed, the difficulty of Lezama's prose is not an impediment to understanding his ideas, but rather form part of his ideas.

<sup>47</sup> Monique Kaup's *Neobaroque in the Americas: Alternative Modernities in Literature, Visual Art, and Film* looks at the role of the neobaroque and baroque movements as a form of critique and decolonization. In this sense, Lezama's theorization of the baroque in particular fits into a genealogy of thinkers—many of whom Kaup highlights—that took up the neobaroque for its subversive potential.

<sup>48</sup> In his early writing, Lezama did so through his discussion of “insularismo,” insularism, as a central concept of Cuban artistic production. Lezama defines *insularismo* not as one would think—as a inward-looking philosophy that reflects back upon itself—but rather as an outward-looking mode of creativity. Juan Pablo Lupi has argued that insularity represents only a starting point for Lezama's theoretical work, and notes that the term was in fact abandoned by Lezama after the 1940s. The ideas presented in Lezama's discussion of insularity in “Coloquio con Juan Ramon Jiménez” would in fact evolve into his *sistema poético* in later writings. Still, I think there is something important about Lezama's assertion that “en una cultura de litoral, interesará más el sentimiento de lontananza que el de paisaje propio” [In a coastal culture, the sentiment of distance will be more interesting than the landscape itself] (48). This is important to Lezama because he uses it to describe how Cuba can be both geographically isolated from the nations around it, and yet engaged in the conversations of the intellectual and artistic elite in Europe and the Americas. For him, a coastal nation will be necessarily invested in what happens at its horizons. Beyond just being

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influenced by the outside world, however, he argues that Cuba also has an influence far beyond its shores. He goes on to use the metaphor of the “resaca,” undertow:

“La resaca [...] es quizás el primer elemento de sensibilidad insular que ofrecemos los cubanos dentro del símbolo de nuestro sentimiento de lontananza. La resaca no es otra cosa que el aporte que las islas pueden dar a las corrientes marinas [The undertow [...] is maybe the first element of an insular awareness that we Cubans offer as part of our sentiment of distance. The undertow is nothing other than the contribution that the islands make toward the marine currents] (50).” Like an undertow in the ocean, Cuba engages in a push and pull with the ideas of writers in other nations. This metaphor can be useful to us when discussing the diasporic implications of a queer theory emerging out of salsa epistemology—i.e. how such a queer theory can be rooted in the Caribbean even as it is applicable elsewhere.

### **Chapter Three**

<sup>49</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was published as “Traveling Queer Subjects: Homosexuality in the Cuban Diaspora” in *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 45.3 (2011).

<sup>50</sup> For an in-depth analysis of José Martí’s writings on masculinity and sexuality, see chapter one in Emilio Bejel’s *Gay Cuban Nation*. For a description of the Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP) see José B. Alvarez IV’s “The Dialectics of Homoeroticism in Cuban Narrative.” To research the current Cuban government’s stance on homosexuality, see the webpage for the Centro Nacional de Educación Sexual (CENESEX).

<sup>51</sup> I use the term diaspora in the same sense that Ambrosio Fornet uses it in his essay “The Cuban Literary Diaspora and Its Contexts: A Glossary.” *Boundary 2*. 29.3 (2002): 91-103. It is meant to refer to the dispersion of Cubans on and off the island, without the charged

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connotations of the terms “exile” and “emigrant.” At the same time, however, I must acknowledge that the literature written in the diaspora is, in large part, literature written in political exile. This is a theme that Gustavo Pérez-Firmat comments on in article “The Spell of the Hyphen,” which posits that Cuban American literature differs from other Latina/o literatures precisely because it has been written by political exiles and their children. I choose to use both the terms “diaspora” and “exile” in this piece, with the understanding that the Cuban diaspora has been largely composed of political exiles, even if not entirely.

<sup>52</sup> Other recent studies that have taken up the role of sex or eroticism to Cuban cultural production include Eduardo Gonzalez’s *Cuba and the Fall* and Ricardo L. Ortiz’s *Cultural Erotics in Cuban America*. This chapter differs from the prior two in that where Gonzalez looks primarily at the paratextual links between queer Cuban writers and other traditions and Ortiz looks at how eroticism is integral to the experience of diaspora, this chapter asks instead what social justice implications a study of queer sex might have to both this tradition and its diaspora.

<sup>53</sup> For more on how the U.S. immigration policy banning the entrance of homosexual immigrants was selectively enforced in the case of Cuban refugees, see Susana Peña’s “Obvious Gays” and the State Gaze: Cuban Gay Visibility and U.S. Immigration Policy during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift.

<sup>54</sup> Cabrera Infante, Guillermo. “Who Killed Calvert Casey.” *Mea Cuba*. Trans. Kenneth Hall. New York: Farrar Straux Giroux, 1994.

<sup>55</sup> As chapter one explores, this is a sense of immediacy that Gloria Anzaldúa theorized as the “arrebato” (earthquake).



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<sup>56</sup> For more information on the Unidades Militares para la Ayuda de Producción (UMAP) labor camps and on Casey's own reactions to the persecution of homosexuals in Cuba, see the chapter on Casey in Guillermo Cabrera Infante's *Mea Cuba*.

<sup>57</sup> Although the gender of the narrator is never explicitly stated, it is generally acknowledged that Casey wrote the piece in response to an incident that occurred between him and his real life lover, Gianni. Casey also acknowledges the homosexual theme of the piece in a letter to Guillermo Cabrera Infante. For more information see Pérez-Firmat's "Bilingual Blues, Bilingual Bliss: El Caso Casey."

<sup>58</sup> Sonia Saldivar-Hull critiques Kristeva's universalism in "Feminism on the Border: From Gender Politics to Geopolitics." I agree with Saldivar-Hull's assertion that Kristeva universalizes womanhood in a way that privileges White subjects. I do, however, find Kristeva's theorization of where inside and outside meet—particularly as it relates to gay male sexuality—to be a useful tool for discussing how abjection and gay politics meet.

<sup>59</sup> This project is in many ways related to the work Juana Maria Rodriguez does in her essay, "Translating Queer Caribbean Localities in Sirena Selena vestida de pena," which looks at how language shapes queer Caribbean identity.

<sup>60</sup> For more information on the reception of Rivera-Valdés' book in Cuba, see chapter 12 in Emilio Bejel's *Gay Cuban Nation*, where he explains that the author was only the second Cuban American to receive this prize in more than 35 years. For more on the crucial role that the Casa de las Americas prize plays in popularizing works written by non-hegemonic groups, see José David Saldívar's *The Dialectics of our America: Genealogy, Cultural Critique, and Literary History*.

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<sup>61</sup> There are exceptions to this lesbian invisibility in Cuban literary history, but very few. The most popular Cuban lesbian writers historically have actually been Cuban American writers such as Achy Obejas and Carmelita Tropicana.

<sup>62</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

<sup>63</sup> Emilio Bejel refers to this scene as a “lesbian utopia” in *Gay Cuban Nation* (233). For Bejel, the existence of a lesbian utopia in this story is important because it contrasts against the childhood utopias that exist in the book’s other stories, and is presumably the text’s only consciously created utopia. I share in Bejel’s contention that the final sex scene in the story presents the reader with a new type of subversive space not before seen in the book. I also agree that this space comes about as a blending of “idealistic willfulness” and “structural determinism”—that is to say, it comes about when Martirio blends her desire to feel at home with the structures (cultures) that have bound her (233). Unlike Bejel, however, I see the space existing in both the present and utopia, and doing the critical work of both.

<sup>64</sup> Luce Irigaray articulates a similar notion of language and sexuality as reciprocal in her description of the masculine and feminine logic. According to Irigaray in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, whereas male pleasure and language is singular, female pleasure and language comes from “*at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what it touched” (26).<sup>8</sup> This view of woman as multiple, as constantly in touch with herself, is reflected in the way Martirio’s languages rub up against one another.

<sup>65</sup> As Susana Peña argues in her essay “Obvious Gays,” oftentimes a subject’s identity is constructed by a governing body—an institution that relies upon a “selective gaze” to determine who is classified as gay, transgressive, or other (508). For these protagonists and

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other homosexual subjects in exile, this is certainly the case. Though they are able to negotiate their identities through disidentificatory spaces, the fact remains that under the gaze of society they are doubly other, both exile and homosexual at once. As Muñoz states, disidentification “is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects” (5).

<sup>66</sup> It is important to note here that the real-life Casey is not able to create a lasting disidentificatory space either. As Pérez-Firmat has commented, this final statement—“I have entered the Kingdom of Heaven and taken proud possession of it. This is my private claim, my heritage, my fief. I am NOT leaving”—is ironic (193). Casey, of course, commits suicide shortly after writing the story. For the author himself, then, this disidentificatory space is only fanciful. The real-life Casey acknowledges that the only way to escape the constraints of the dominant culture and political persecution is suicide. Louis A. Pérez Jr.’s contention that Cubans equate suicide with martyrdom also adds an interesting dimension to Casey’s suicide. If we follow Pérez’s argument, Casey’s suicide might represent the ultimate sacrifice to his culture, and the ultimate move to reconcile with his motherland, Cuba. For more on the representation of suicide in Cuban society see Louis A. Pérez Jr.’s *To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society*.

<sup>67</sup> Starting in the 1990s, writing and films dealing with homosexual issues began to appear more frequently in Cuba, under the unspoken approval of the Cuban government. This produced such well-known texts as Senel Paz’s 1991 story “El lobo, el bosque, y el hombre nuevo,” and its internationally acclaimed 1993 film adaptation, *Fresa y chocolate*. Additionally, during the 90s the Cuban government showed an increasing acceptance of homosexual texts written in the diaspora, as evidenced by Sonia Rivera-Valdés becoming

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only the second Cuban outside Cuba to be awarded the Casa de Las Americas literary prize in 1997 for *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda*. For more information on homosexual works released in Cuba during the 1990s, see chapter 10 in Emilio Bejel's *Gay Cuban Nation*.

## Chapter Four

<sup>68</sup> For more on the use of choteo in Cuban American comedy, see chapter five of José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*.

<sup>69</sup> It is difficult to understate the rift that existed between the Cuban American population and the native Black and White populations of Miami in the late 1970s. In 1980, for instance, a polemical ordinance was passed that mandated only English be used for government business in Miami-Dade County. Throughout the 1980s there continued to be relatively little interaction between Cubans and non-Cubans in Miami, with the local newspaper, The Miami Herald, going so far to publish a series of reports entitled "Cuban Miami: A Guide for Non-Cubans" in 1986. Joan Didion outlines the atmosphere during this time well in her book *Miami*.

<sup>70</sup> *Que Pasa* was unlike other public television shows that appealed to minority audiences, in part because of its sitcom format. Still, one might draw links here to *Say Brother*, the television Black public affairs program that aired on Boston public television from 1968-70. *Say Brother* did much to give voice to the Black community in Boston through the public affairs format, and evolved into a program that could "examine black discontent and showcase black critique" (Heitner 412). *Que Pasa* was less controversial than *Say Brother* because of its comedic format, but the voice that it gave to a community is in

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many ways quite similar. For more information see Devorah Heitner's "*Say Brother Envisions New Principles of Blackness in Boston.*"

<sup>71</sup> The production histories of *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* and *All in the Family* are quite different, with *All in the Family* being produced for the CBS Television network and *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* being produced on a much lower budget for PBS. The impact of these production conditions on each show's form of cultural critique requires more investigation. Future work done on this topic would require a more in depth industry analysis than this chapter offers, with special attention to what John Thornton Caldwell calls the "forms of local cultural negotiation and expression" that take place when film and television are made (2). Caldwell speaks at length in *Production Culture* about the importance of pairing narrative analysis of media texts with industry analysis. I take this critique seriously, and have tried to gesture toward an understanding of *¿Qué Pasa, U.S.A.?* as a fringe text produced outside of the main media production hubs of Los Angeles and New York.

<sup>72</sup> Mañach was also concerned, however, that *choteo* was responsible for the nation's social ills, from overreliance on the United States to gender bending. While Mañach's concern over what he problematically terms "social ills" is particular to Cuban intellectuals during this time period, the power that he attributes to *choteo* is an important form of critique.

<sup>73</sup> José Esteban Muñoz studies the *chusma* typology in depth in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* when he defines it as "a technique for the middle class to distance itself from the working class; it may be a barely veiled racial slur suggesting that one is too black; it sometimes connotes gender nonconformity" (182).

<sup>74</sup> In "On the Edge: Blacks and Hispanics in Miami since 1959" Raymond A. Mohl

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argues that the 1989 riots were spurred in part by the almost 200 daily Nicaraguan exiles that were pouring into the City in late 1988, many settling in the historically Black neighborhoods of Overtown and Liberty City (38).

<sup>75</sup> It should be noted that there was already a significant Cuban population in South Florida prior to 1959, but this group was located mostly in Tampa, where a Cuban cigar industry had blossomed. The history of ethnic strife between Cubans, Blacks, and Whites in South Florida can therefore be traced back to Tampa in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where Jim Crow laws and social norms dictated that Cubans held a liminal position between the Black and White populations, with darker skinned Cubans often being barred from entering certain establishments, while lighter-skinned Cubans enjoyed some of the privileges of Whiteness.

<sup>76</sup> The racial strife that the Peñas encounter in several episodes is rooted in a history of Miami that often discounts the importance of Black residents to its success. We might point here to the fact that Black residents signed the charter to create the city of Miami in 1896 because there were not enough White residents to reach the necessary number of signatures. Miami was also home to the first Black judge in the South since reconstruction and the first permanent Black police officers in the South, though both were only allowed to have jurisdiction over Black residents. Not surprisingly, the more controversial history has been better documented, including the four major Black riots of the 1980s that were sparked by police shootings. For more information see *Miami Now! Immigration, Ethnicity, and Social Change*.

<sup>77</sup> Although the exodus of anti-Castro Cubans to Miami has been well-documented, less understood is the fact that between 1970-80 Dade County's grew by 47%, exceeded

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only by Atlanta. For more information see Marvin Dunn and Alex Stepick III's "Blacks in Miami."

<sup>78</sup> For more information on the conflict of language in Miami, including the controversial English-Only referendum that passed in 1980, see Max J. Castro's "The Politics of Language in Miami" in the collection *Miami Now!*

<sup>79</sup> I am reminded here to chapter 4 of Joan Didion's *Miami*, which starts with a description of the neighborhoods the author was told to avoid during her research on the city. She writes, "If I hit a red light as I was about to enter I-95 I should not stop by look both ways, and accelerate. I should not drive through Liberty City or walk around Overtown. If I had occasion to drive through what was called 'the black Grove,' those several dozen blocks of project housing which separated the expensive greenery of Coral Gables from the expensive greenery of Coconut Grove, I should rethink my route [...]" (39). As a resident of Miami myself, I remember being given this exact same advice as a teenager learning to drive. Years later, I now recognize that what these neighborhoods have in common is that their residents are Black. Didion's narrative of how to avoid Black neighborhoods, and therefore Black people, is crucial to understanding Juana Peña's shock over her son's contact with a Black classmate.

<sup>80</sup> For more on the historical legacy of Black men in the U.S. being painted as sexual miscreants, see Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*.

<sup>81</sup> For more information on the treatment of race in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba see Tomás Fernández Robaina's *El Negro en Cuba: 1902-1958*. (Havana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1994).

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<sup>82</sup> At its height, this colorblind narrative culminated in the 1910 Morúa Law, which prevented the establishment of political parties based on race. For more information see Melina Pappademos, *Blask Political Activism and the Cuban Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>83</sup> For more information on “colorblindness” as a discourse that obscures racial tensions by refusing to acknowledge them, see Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists*.

<sup>84</sup> For more on the use of Stuart Hall’s theory of the floating signifier in a Latin American context, see Maritza Quiñones Rivera’s “From Trigueñita to Afro Puerto Rican: Intersections of the Racialized, Gendered, ad Sexualized Body in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Mainland” [*Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2006, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 162–182].

## **Chapter Five**

<sup>85</sup> “Time of Our Lives” team of writers is: Armando C. Pérez, Lukasz Gottwald, Henry Walter, Robin Weisse, Shaffer Smith, Stephan Taft, and Michael "Freakin" Everett

<sup>86</sup> In understanding Miami as a nexus of U.S. and Latin American cultures, I am indebted here to the kind of work that scholars like Jorge Duany have done on diasporic Caribbean populations in other U.S. cities. Of particular interest are the “vaiven” (comings and goings) between Puerto Rico and New York in “Nation on the Move: The Construction of Cultural Identities in Puerto Rico and the Diaspora” (*American Ethnologist*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Feb., 2000), pp. 5-30) and his studies on the Dominican population in Washington Heights in “Constructing Racial Identity: Ethnicity, Color, and Class among Dominicans in the



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United States and Puerto Rico” (Latin American Perspectives, Vol. 25, No. 3, Race and National Identity in the Americas (May, 1998), pp. 147-172).

<sup>87</sup> For more on the economic shifts that occurred in the Cuban American community starting in the 1960s see Alejandro Portes’ “The Social Origins of the Cuban Enclave Economy of Miami.”

<sup>88</sup> For more on Cubans’ access to loans see Andrea O’Reilly Herrera’s *Cuba: Idea of a Nation Displaced*. As O’Reilly Herrera describes, less wealthy Cuban exiles often did not have money to use as collateral for loans, which meant they relied on loans given out on the basis of their “character” by Cuban or Latin American banks.

<sup>89</sup> While Cubans fair fairly well compared to other Latina/o groups, some Spanish Caribbean groups fair far worse. Dominicans have the highest percentage for any Latina/o group, with 26.3% of people in poverty, and Puerto Ricans are not far behind.

<sup>90</sup> This is not an engagement with psychoanalytic criticism. I am speaking to “want” specifically in relation to commodity objects.

<sup>91</sup> Jennifere DeVere Brody suggests as much in her recent talks and presentations on the political possibilities of precarity, particularly as seen in live performance. This work is as yet unpublished, though some of Brody’s past lectures are searchable online.

<sup>92</sup> Pitbull generally eclipses a discussion of race in his lyrics, though he has at other times discussed how his skin color has contributed to his success. In an interview for the HBO series “The Latino List” Pitbull acknowledges that while his light skin initially denied him entry into the Southern rap circuit dominated by Black artists, once he started to tour around the South “The white and the blue eyes played to my advantage because it allowed me to get in, guards down.” Here he acknowledges that while audiences may have been less

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receptive to a Latino (or black) rapper, his light skin allowed him to catch them with their “guards down.” Pitbull goes on to say how his rapping in Spanish and English confused both the expectations of the rap genre and of the racial assumptions that went along with it. He concludes his comment by saying of not only his skin type and eye color, but also of his Latinness: “I don’t care it works out as an asset. More than a defect.” While Pitbull is likely drawing attention to his Cuban background as an asset, the way this sentence is constructed provides a (perhaps unintended) confession of how his light skin and blue eyes exploit the racial hierarchies that neoliberal capitalism relies upon.

<sup>93</sup> Theorizations of pleasure co-existing with critique in popular music are, unfortunately, infrequent. George Yúdice does take up the topic, however, in *Expediency of Culture*. He argues that Funk, a music and dance form emerging out of Afro-Brazilian populations, has “been a way of dealing with racism and social exclusion, and at the same time a way of taking pleasure, something that is often missing in the social movements and accounts thereof by most social scientists who write about them” (109). Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter, there is a link to be made between Latina/o hip hop’s appeal to pleasure and a similar move in Afro-Brazilian funk.

<sup>94</sup> In many ways, Pitbull’s evolution is similar to the city of Miami’s own evolution. Pitbull starts out in his early rap career referring to himself as “Mr. 305”—a reference to Miami’s area code. During this time period he raps frequently about Miami and uses the city’s iconography in his music videos and promotional materials. In his later work Pitbull refers to himself as “Mr. Worldwide,” however, and while he still references his upbringing in Miami, his music videos and lyrics begin to take on a more international subtext. The artist goes effectively from the local to the global, in a way akin to George Yúdice’s

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characterization of the city of Miami itself in *Expediency of Culture*, when the theorist argues that Miami is becoming less tied to its Cuban identity as it moves toward a more transnational idea of Latina/o heritage. Pitbull likewise goes from Mr. 305 to Mr. Worldwide by crafting an individual persona made up of the discourses and images of a city, and marketing this persona globally.

<sup>95</sup> Hernández highlights the way that Latina bodies in South Florida are condemned because of their performance of over-the-top femininity. For more see “‘Miss You Look Like a Bratz Doll’: On Chonga Girls and Sexual-Aesthetic Excess.”

<sup>96</sup> “‘Feel This Moment’” was written by a team made up of: Nasri Atweh, Chantal Kreviazuk, Adam Messinger, Nolan Lambroza, Armando Pérez, Christina Aguilera, Urales Vargas, Morten Harket, Paul Waaktaar-Savoy, Magne Furuholmen. The video was directed by David Rousseau.

<sup>97</sup> It should be noted that there is a history in hip hop of rapping about money. Pitbull is not exceptional in his choice of topic, so much as he is unusual in his treatment of it. This genre-wide focus on money is not specific to the United States either, with artists in the genre *reggaeton*, a Latin American form of hip hop derived from Jamaican dance hall rhythms, often rapping about money. As Nora Gámez Torres notes, Cuban *reggaeton* is increasingly “deeply linked to the emergent values of a Cuban underclass and the rising ideology of consumerism in the country” (228).

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