

Caught Between Expectations: Producing, Performing, and Writing Black/African, Latino, and American Aesthetics¹

Anita Gonzalez

My father, Cambell Gonzalez, the son of Pedro Paulo Gonzalez, a tobacco roller born in Cuba, tells me frequently that he is not a Hispanic. He claims that I am the Hispanic family member, perhaps because I speak fluent Spanish and have actively sought out forums to express my Hispanic heritage. Within this culturally plural American landscape, how did I become Hispanic while my father considers himself to be a Black man from the South. My father has chosen to name himself according to the way he constructs his life—as a Black man—however this construction is partly determined by the outside world where “Dad” lives, works and socializes. When I asked him to explain to me why he chose to emphasize his African-American rather than his Cuban or West Indian heritage, he sang a song to me that was popular when he was a child.

Just because you play a ukulele
And say “aloha” now and then
And wear a what cha call it
Round your neck

You ain’t fooling your old friend

You may straighten your hair with cocoa butter
Till its shiny as can be
They may call you Hawaiian on Broadway
But you just a plain nigger (Negro) to me.

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I begin with this story to point out how identity is only partially determined by your ethnic heritage. It is also determined by the social structures that surround you. When we speak of “white privilege” in America, part of what we address is the dominant culture’s ability to determine the frame of reference for societal interactions. This is cultural agency, the ability to shape and control images that govern our public life.

When I direct theater, create dances, or write academic papers I project myself through the material, but I also shape the material for the audience, responding somewhat to expectations of what I will produce. I believe that most “minority” group members make these types of negotiations as they shape and form themselves for public presentation. Dorrine Kondo, in her book *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*, examines the discourse of identity and describes the process of trying to integrate differing conceptions of the self into meaningful constructions of identity.² The title distills into two words, “crafting selves,” several concepts that I find applicable to identity construction through performance. First, crafting implies an active, conscious, and ongoing process of molding and shaping the artistic product to match the mental image of self. Second, the self is viewed as a non-static entity in constant evolution. Finally, the concept implies cultural agency, yet leaves room for the integration of pre-existing cultural constructs.

In the 1960s, activists responsible for the cultural revolutionary movements (Black, Gay, Women’s, and American Indian) fought for self-determination and the right to establish cultural symbols and institutions.³ Each civil rights effort mobilized cultural symbols—clenched fists, warrior headbands, parted fingers shaped like a “V”—in an effort to establish and popularize its political agenda. These activist movements legitimized membership in American sub-cultural constituencies. Later decades have shown that these rights are relative and that economic advancement involves tempering attitudes of self-determination so that they complement existing (power) structures. Autonomy without political efficacy is not economically viable.

In my work, I try to forge projects that push the boundaries of my presumed ethnic or cultural location while holding onto what I believe is the central core of my lived experiences. Buying and selling of artistic or scholarly work is part of survival, but also a part of crafting self. Each project deepens, enhances, or clarifies an ideological perspective, a temporal identity location, and an artistic perspective. At the same time, my writing and performance projects locate me within a community that could be a certain ethnic group, a conglomerate of friends and associates, or a work or scholarly community. Sometimes I do work for

community affirmation. But even when I do this work, each member of my prospective audience may have a different set of expectations or beliefs about what I will do, and how I should do it. The questions that I try to answer for myself is which audience do I want to reach and how, or should, I change my product for each audience? I want to craft myself, but not lose myself in this process. So, like most members of “minority” cultures, I adapt, I adjust, I finagle, I educate; all in an effort to give myself voice while continuing to survive through my work.

I decided that I would organize this paper around some of the identity positions that I take or have taken to present my performance work. They happen to correspond to the ethnicity months. By now I have grown accustomed to producers and arts presenters who believe that innovative programming means booking my work to fit into prescribed “cultural” programs based upon the months of the year. Arts programmers and curators, looking for an uncomplicated solution to the complicated and increasing politicized calls for diversity often propose to include non-western or alternative arts events as “seasoning” within a year-long program of mainstream works. Repeatedly, the result is a season organized around “Latino Awareness month,” “Black History month” (frequently combined with Martin Luther King’s Birthday), “Women’s History month,” and “Earth Day.” It may be that re-envisioning institutionalized programs from an alternative perspective is a time-consuming project, or that presenters do not know enough about the panorama of non-western performance to curate within alternative formats. Or perhaps, more abstractly, it is ultimately easier to envision ethnicity as finite, and identity as unchangeable, and easier to sell a familiar image of ethnicity to a media-saturated audience. Cognizant of these considerations, producers too often opt to present culturally specific art forms within prescribed programming slots.

In a course that I have taught called “Ethnicity and Identity in Performance,” I have the students, as a first exercise, perform a single ethnic identity for the first two weeks. This means that a white student from, say, Milwaukee would only be allowed to sing Norwegian folk songs or dance Norwegian dances for her first few performance projects. Usually students respond to the exercise with protests like: “I don’t really know my ethnic background” (My response is to ask them to investigate it), “I’m a mixture of several different ethnicities” (I encourage them to choose one), and even “I don’t really connect to my ethnic heritage” (What if you didn’t have the privilege of electing not to!) Students quickly learn the frustration that arises when they are relegated to performing only their ethnic identity.

As the course progresses, students begin to appreciate the privilege of performing the varied aspects of their identity and, to adopt multiple strategies to perform themselves. Readings from diverse cultural literature show several common strategies that minority playwrights use to write their experiences. Examples of performance approaches include: 1) the immigrant family couch drama (*Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry or *The House of Ramon Iglesias* by Jose Rivera), 2) the Brechtian exaggerated stereotype collage (*The Colored Museum* by George C. Wolfe or *Los Vendidos* by Luis Valdez), and 3) the post-modern monologue (*My Father and the Wars* Robbie McCauley or *Warrior for Gringostroika* Guillermo Gomez Pena). Each of these plays examines the specific experiences of distinct ethnic groups, yet common strategies are used across cultural groups to interpret or “perform” the non-mainstream cultural experience. My own dance theater performance work negotiates representational strategies in a similar way.

I begin with discussion of my dance work *Totem*, a performance that was featured on a PBS national broadcast during Black History Month in 1997 and 1998.⁴ The project was conceived as solo performance work and used Native American imagery to celebrate my Black family heritage (the South Carolina side). My collaborator for this project was a Connecticut-born White woman, a visual



“Hymn to Demeter.” Director: Anita Gonzalez; with Juana Maria Garza Maldonado, Elsa del Carme Malpica Muñoz, Tiya Giraud. Photo: Kimberly Bush

artist named Kimberly Bush. We developed the work during a 1989 residency at the Centrum Foundation in Washington State. During our month stay in the Pacific Northwest, we researched text and studied designs and motifs at Inuit totem pole sites. We presented the work in several theater venues before Demetria Royals and Louise Diamond in 1995 and filmed several of the dances for the television production *Conjure Women*. Because the film makers conceived of the broadcast project as a profile of African-American artists, and publicized the film as such, the project diminished Kimberly's input in the creation of the artistic work. She was paid by the producers for her creative work, but was not profiled in the film.

Another project called *Hola Ola* was developed over a three year period with women of Jamaican, Honduran, African American, and Cuba-American descent. It was a musical comedy production written collaboratively by Dolores Prida and me, which told the story of a community of Caribbean immigrant women in New York City. Hattie Gossett and Tiye Giraud, two African-American artists wrote additional text and lyrics. Because the artists spoke French, Creole, Spanish, Garifuna, Patois, and English, producers wondered whether they should promote the project as African American or Latin American. They felt that prospective audiences needed to be able to identify the piece as belonging to a particular "genre" before they would come to the event. Part of the intent of the project was to begin a dialogue about the commonality of the immigrant experience across racial and ethnic boundaries, and particularly to foreground the cultural displacement experienced by multi-lingual, multi-racial Caribbean transnationals. Ultimately, however, the Tribeca Performing Arts Center programmed the event during Black History Month as part of a series titled "Revelations: A Festival of African-American Contributions."⁵

Two performance works that I developed have been marketed as Latin American cultural productions: *Hymn to Demeter* and *Yanga*. *Hymn to Demeter* used African-American music and dance motifs combined with folklore from the eastern coast of Mexico, to tell the story of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. Once again, Kimberly Bush and I collaborated in adapting the myth for the stage. The project was developed in Mexico as a cultural exchange event and featured Mexican actors and folkloric dancers. *The Village Voice* described it as a "vest pocket carnival . . . saturated with Third World culture, featuring playful costumes and charming Mexican folk dancing."⁶ *Hymn to Demeter* actually worked outside of American cultural constructions because it was an "International Exchange Project" and because it referenced classical Greek culture.

Yanga, on the other hand, was a dance narrative about a marooned slave community in Mexico. The work depicted the clash of Spanish and indigenous



Still from *Yanga*. Director: Anita Gonzalez; with Lamime Thiam, Serafin Aponte, Ron McBee.
Photo: Julie Lemberger

cultures through the eyes of a West African leader named Yanga, who organized a group of escaped slaves into a town called San Lorenzo de los Negros. This production ran during Latin American history month as part of a series about Latin American contemporary art. Performers included a Senegalese dancer (Lamime Thiam), a Mexican choreographer/dancer (Serafin Aponte), an English immigrant (Terry Allworthy) and three African American composer/musicians (Cooper Moore, Yekk Muzik, and Ron McBee) with experience in Afro-Mexican musical forms.

My academic writing and research has also been in the area of Afro-Mexico. I find this subject fascinating because Mexican imaginations of a mixed-race heritage contrast with North American representations of distinct racial identities. Both countries contain racially mixed and culturally plural communities, but the two countries define their racial make-up differently. North Americans work within an ideology that constructs Blacks, Whites, Indians, Mexicans, and Asians, as separate cultural groups while Mexican nationalist rhetoric portrays the *mexicano* as a product of *mestizaje* or racial mixing.⁷ My research has shown that popular imaginations of race influence the type of work that professional artists choose to exhibit/perform.

In a recent seminar event at "651 an Arts Center at the BAM Majestic Theater" in New York City (June 1998) scholars met in a public forum to discuss African Diaspora identity in Mexico. Presenters who organized the event were concerned because few Mexican people appeared interested in attending the event. Most Mexicans assume that there are no Blacks in Mexico and that the once-populous African population has been subsumed by or integrated into a predominant *mestizo* culture. On the other hand, United States and Caribbean people of African descent attended the seminar and were anxious to acknowledge and affirm the influence of African cultures on Meso-America. This latter group of participants sought recognition of the commonalities of the African experience within the Americas and sought acknowledgment of the historical reality of disenfranchisement. Both groups arrived at the seminar with an intellectual stance based upon preconceived notions about identity, heritage, and the importance of historical memory.

Perhaps ethnic reality is a conglomerate stance that negates the borders of each positional argument yet combines aspects of each. Our ethnic identity may be an uncomfortable combination of divisions and coalitions, imagined locations, and physical categorizations defined by historical truths. Forums for the exchange of dialogue about ethnicity, like the event that took place at the 651 Seminar, make

it possible to question preconceived notions of ethnic and racial categories. Such forums create a space for discussion of alternative “multi-cultural” identities.

This presentation has examined ethnicity as identity and the negotiations that I make as a director, scholar, and writer to interpret my own ethnic locations for others. It has also examined the way that I craft or define myself within, and despite, presumed ethnic influences. We have all heard that race is a cultural construct, but whenever possible most people try to make it a personal choice. Choosing an affiliation carries with it the power of self-definition, and self-definition points to the ability to move up the social ladder. The real issue is not our decision to foreground identity, but whether or not we have the power to implement our own notions of self.

Notes

1. This article was developed from an American Theatre of Higher Education conference panel organized by Professor Mary Karen Dahl of the University of Kansas in which scholars of various ethnic backgrounds theorized about the viability of using identity as a location for writing and critiquing performance practice. The essay articulates my deliberations about the topic.

2. Dorrine Kondo, *Crafting Ourselves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990).

3. Like the American Theatre of Higher Education conference

4. The documentary film *Conjure Women* includes a twenty minute section about *Totem. Conjure Women*, a film by Diamond/Royals Production funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Black Programming Consortium for Public Movies, was shown in recurring schedules on Public Broadcasting Service affiliates nationwide during February and March in both 1997 and 1998.

5. I wish to acknowledge that considerations of availability and scheduling also influence a play’s placement within a production season. Content is one of various aspects that producers balance when deciding where and when to program a work. The Tribeca Performing Arts Center was innovative in its decision to include the production in its season at all.

6. August 3, 1993.

7. The concept of *mestizaje* assumes a mixture of indigenous Native American peoples with Spanish Creole settlers. African and Chinese Mexicans are not usually considered a part of the racial mix. The concept assumes an inevitable erasure of most indigenous elements and an incorporation of sub-cultural ethnic communities into a unified modern Mexican society. See *The Forging of the Cosmic Race: A Reinterpretation of Colonial Mexico* by Colin M MacLachlan and Jaime E. Rodriguez (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980).