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Essay

Undocumented and Queer: Carlos Manuel's *La Vida Loca*.

The stage lights slowly begin to illuminate a handsome, muscular, Latino, gay man who dances feverishly to the song “Livin’ La Vida Loca.” Carlos, the protagonist, confesses his enjoyment for the song’s rhythm but not of the heteronormative lyrics sang in English by the until-recently closeted Latino Pop icon, Ricky Martin. Instead, Carlos highlights the queer meaning of the phrase “La Vida Loca/The Crazy Life” as he sets up his story as a gay, undocumented Mexican man who survives homophobia and racism in the U.S. by finally embracing all aspects of his identity in order to identify himself as Chicano and gay.

Given the most recent wave of anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and homophobic laws passed by the state of Arizona (with the imminent threat of this also happening in other states), *La Vida Loca* by Carlos Manuel could not be more timely. Although it was written in 2005, the issues of undocumented migration and queer rights resonate loudly. As of today, there is a minimal number of theatrical productions that highlight the undocumented and queer subject especially within the Chicana/o and Latina/o communities. Carlos Manuel is one of the few playwrights and actors that has represented such a subject on stage. He was originally born in Mexico and crossed the U.S. border as an undocumented teenager with several members of his immediate and extended family. Upon crossing, they first arrived in Los Angeles and later settled in Stockton, California where most of them worked in the agricultural fields. Carlos Manuel went to high school for two years (where he learned English and fell in love with theater and performance). He also attended Santa Clara University as an undergraduate and completed an MA in Directing at the University of New Mexico. Later he received his MFA in Playwriting at Arizona State University where he worked closely with Guillermo Reyes, another queer Latino playwright and director who has been a pioneer in bringing similar characters to life. Carlos Manuel has written several solo-performance shows and *La Vida Loca* has been presented in various versions (partially or in its entirety) at national and international academic and community venues. This show’s full title is *La Vida Loca: an Apolitical, In-Your-Face, Homo-Erotic Odyssey of a Mexican Immigrant*. The only word in the subtitle that does not agree with its meaning

is “apolitical” which is used sarcastically since the show is political and controversial as it highlights issues of xenophobia, assimilation, ethnicity, and queer Latino identities on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. The protagonist’s journey resembles the playwright’s life as it begins with him as an undocumented child crossing the border along with his family. The story follows Carlos throughout his adolescence and college years as he confronts several types of discrimination, from within his own ethnic group and from mainstream society, before he accepts himself completely as a Chicano queer. The central question remains: how does an undocumented, queer, Mexican/Chicano immigrant challenge Mexican, Chicano, and U.S. nationalisms while accepting his civic, ethnic and sexual identities? Carlos’ ultimate challenge is to get to know and accept himself as he is and in order for this protagonist to become a *comfortably queer Chicano*, he must first learn to navigate, survive and ultimately challenge his community’s and his internalized racism, and homophobia.

A Mexican, undocumented queer subject is often pressured to privilege one aspect of his identity at a time (ethnic, civic, or sexual) and continually struggles to negotiate and integrate them all. Elsewhere, I have proposed the concept of creating a *queer zone of comfort* for Latina/o subjects as notions of self, home, family, and community are articulated within a racist, xenophobic, and homophobic society.¹ Mary Louise Pratt describes a *contact zone* as “...the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 6). Although my term “queer zone of comfort” resonates with Pratt’s *contact zone* I offer an alternate theoretical dimension: “This *queer zone of comfort* is created and inhabited by a Chicana/o and Latina/o queer subject after negotiating her/his identity conflicts. It is a cultural territory where the subjects is empowered by his [her] sexual, ethnic, and cultural citizenship to create an ideological intervention through a politics of identity and difference” (Urquijo-Ruiz 148). In addition, I argue that “[the *queer zone of comfort* is a safe space and a discursive location from where *queers of color* can decidedly contribute to the liberation and transformation of their respective communities. In order to fully inhabit it, these subjects must create familial and familiar unbreakable bonds with other members of their community who support social change for the betterment of the groups” (Urquijo-

Ruiz 148). In order for this queer subject to acknowledge and flaunt this new queer of color identity, s/he will need to feel incorporated into all of his/her communities equally; bigotry directed at him/her, must be undertaken in all its forms.

Creating Home: A Chicana/Latino Queer Theoretical Framework

Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have theorized the concept of home for Chicana/o and Latina/o and other queers of color. Due to the prevalent homophobia encountered daily by such subjects, many have had to leave their families and their own communities in order to create their own safe and comfortable places. Moraga incites Chicana/o queers to “make familia from scratch...” (*Ghost* 58) wherever they go as a survival tactic. Anzaldúa presents a similar concept when she discusses the meaning of *homophobia* as “the [f]ear of going home...and not being taken in... [the fear] of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza* for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged” (*Borderlands* 20). Often, when Chicana/o and Latina/o queer subjects exile themselves in order to survive, an important aspect of this journey is to look within her/him and begin such self-acceptance. The new familial ties should be extended to other individuals who embrace all identity aspects be it sexual, civil or ethnic. Anzaldúa urges queers of color or the *jotería*² to carry home with them or to make a home wherever they are. She states: “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (*Borderlands* 22).

Frequently, queers of color who move away from their families and communities are considered “sell-outs” or “traitors” by their communities. However Anzaldúa and Latino Theater critic Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez maintain that the *jotería* should fight back against any discrimination. Anzaldúa indicates, “I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture. I fear no betrayal on my part...” (*Borderlands* 21). Sandoval-Sánchez, when writing on the subject of Puerto Rican queer identity and AIDS within the context of nationalism, echoes Anzaldúa’s words regarding *home*: “I do not need any nationalist and patriotic dogma telling me how to live my life, where to die and be buried. [...] For a fact, I know, that I am not ‘home-less.’ Home is where I am, within me. For me, to ‘cruzar el charco’ meant once and for all that home was going to be portable, on the other side, at a crossroads, in the borderlands” (Up in the air, 205). It is this strength and struggle against oppressive internal

forces (within the community and/or the individual) that must be maintained when facing any type of prejudice. *La Vida Loca* begins with the protagonist as an adolescent, undocumented, Mexican immigrant, and once he enters college, he becomes the “ultimate *vendido*/sell out.” He accepts his “queerness” before he accepts being “Mexican” until he is finally able to acknowledge the complexities of his identity and begins to feel “right at home” or *comfortably queer*. In the end, Carlos is finally able to call himself Chicano (seeing himself as an activist) and gay encouraging other members of his communities to fight for immigrant and queer rights.

This solo performance is presented in nine levels as “the game of life” in the form of a video-game. Carlos must pass each level before he moves on to the next in order to succeed and “write [his] name on the number one spot” (*La Vida Loca*)³. The show also contains several “Spanish language lessons” where Carlos teaches the audience phrases or words with double or triple entendres such as “la vida loca” meaning “the gay life,” “bicicleta” meaning bisexual, “pendejo” meaning “stupid, pubic hair, or idiot” and finally “vendido” meaning “a sell-out-white-wash-Michael Bolton-macaroni and cheese-peanut butter-and-jelly-sandwich-no rhythm-and-an-ultimate-white-boy-wannabe *pendejo*” (*La Vida Loca*). As many performance shows, *La Vida Loca* also incorporates images and recorded music as well as the actor’s body and, at times, strenuous physical activity. Through his strenuous corporeal movements, language (especially his “accent”), and body (including one tattoo in each arm), Carlos demonstrates to the audience the marks of survival and “otherness” as a Chicano queer who has now incorporated himself into mainstream U.S. society.

Although the show begins with the undocumented, dangerous, once-failed, once-successful border-crossing of Mexican immigrants who will later find work in the agricultural fields of northern California, not much time is spent on the undocumented aspect of Carlos’ identity. The protagonist and his family’s social class are not necessarily discussed in detail either. Furthermore, Carlos never mentions his biological father (who seems to be absent from the family structure) and instead says a quick line about his mother later having a “brand-new French-American husband” (*La Vida Loca*). At the end of the show Carlos also states that he is now an American citizen but the audience never finds out any details about this important right of passage for someone who was once an undocumented immigrant. Instead,

the show concentrates primarily on Carlos' ethnic and queer identity and how he becomes *comfortably queer* after much struggle.

During one of his trips to visit his family in Mexico, the protagonist, who at the time has not come out to himself or family members, is hanging out with a group of wannabe macho boys who began to tease Tito, an effeminate, openly-queer young boy in the barrio. Tito is not afraid to insult the young machitos' masculinity by saying that one of them had sex with him and his penis was too small to please Tito. In this same scene, a frightened Carlos highlights the gruesome event later where Tito is brutally gay-bashed, murdered, and found gagged with his own penis. This violence foreshadows Carlos' own gay-bashing at Santa Clara University:

Now my body is on the ground. Hit by hit and blow by blow, my body feels the strong dry impacts from the four strangers. The first blow to my face is so strong that I feel warm liquid running down my face, *sangre en mi cara*, blood on my hands, pain all over me...I don't even know how I ended up in the hospital...37 stitches! 37 stitches! It took 37 stitches to fix the damage! (*La Vida Loca*).

The irony here is that Carlos' university was supposed to be where he always felt the safest and the last place where he would ever expect this to happen to him. This irony does not escape the protagonist who states:

When I crossed the border, I ran in the dark valleys of *la frontera*. I hid from *migra* officers and I risked my life, along with my *familia* so we could live in this country. I was in a strange land, a scary land, a land where people shoot to kill...And yet, nothing happened to me... And here I was, in a 'safe place...' a private catholic university where I was spending my days and nights receiving an education. A place I considered home. A place my *familia* considered my best chance for a better future. And yet, I, Carlos, was severely beaten. And not because I was a foreigner, or an illegal immigrant, or a minority who was ruining the country's economy, no! I was beaten because I am gay (*La Vida Loca*).

This part of the monologue highlights the importance of the protagonist's multifaceted subjectivity as an undocumented

Mexican immigrant, where homophobes see him only and specifically as a queer target of their hate. Anyone, including Carlos, would have expected to be victimized being an immigrant first and gay second.

Being a Pendejo (The case with Edward James Olmos)

Putting the gay-bashing behind him, Carlos continues his education at Santa Clara where he goes to extremes to deny or disidentify with his Mexican identity while acknowledging, embracing and flaunting his queerness. José Esteban Muñoz states that “[d]isidentification is meant to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (*Disidentifications* 4). In his “disidentification” with his ethnicity in order to try to “blend in” the protagonist dyes his hair blond and wears blue contact lenses to appear white. At this point, Carlos truly believes he is fitting in and considers the nationalist, heteronormative, Chicano student organization known as “MEChA⁴” and its members known as “MEChistas” his worst enemies he states “They were so radical, so political, so angry, and so loud, that they immediately reminded me of one thing: Me!!! So we immediately clashed. MEChA became the number one *guerilla* group against me, and I became their number one *vendido*” (*La Vida Loca*).

Carlos finally begins to accept his ethnic identity when he is able to talk with Chicano actor Edward James Olmos whom he had admired for a long time after watching him play the role of the Pachuco in the iconic Chicano play *Zoot Suit*. Olmos had been invited to his university to do a presentation and noticed Carlos who at that time was denying his ethnic identity. He told the protagonist to stop being a *pendejo* and to “be out, be proud, be brown” (*La Vida Loca*). By this time, Carlos had fallen in love with anything related to theater and the stage even learning the art of performing as a drag queen. So he was quick to listen to his idol and dispose of his *vendido/pendejo* persona. The performance ends with the new, *comfortably queer* Carlos proclaiming that: “We are that voice you hear day in and day out; that voice that reminds you WE ARE US, WE ARE HERE! And we are NOT going away” (*La Vida Loca*).

Conclusion

For Gloria Anzaldúa, as for others, it becomes important to not have to answer to anyone about her sexuality and to create her own zone of comfort as a Chicana queer by negotiating her identity and creating that space where she can exist as both: Chicana and queer. The Chicana/o queer subject then must become aware of the various attacks on her/his selfhood and confront all obstacles with the freedom to be openly queer. It is imperative that this subject become empowered through her/his new familial ties and home surroundings in order to confront homophobia and racism. The performances and narratives of many queers of color, like Carlos Manuel's, center-stage the abandonment and exclusion from their communities because they are impeded from existing without any aspect of their identity being denied, particularly their sexual identity. It takes courage to come out as a Chicana/o queer in a community and a Nation that are culturally and ethnically nationalist, where queerness can be considered a sin, a pathological degeneration, or as scandalous and repulsive behavior. Yet the Chicana/o community also demands a selfless subject who will put her/his *Raza*/people first. One must first serve one's community and then the self in order to be considered a fruitful member of the group. But as Moraga has stated in "Queer Aztlán," the Chicana/o community needs to embrace its *jotería* in order to continue moving forwards in the fight against a racist and imperialist nation (*Queer Aztlán* 147).

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Notes

- Urquijo-Ruiz, Rita. "Comfortably Queer: The Chicano Gay Subject in Dan Guerrero's *¡Gaytino!*" Here, I borrow my description of *queer zone of comfort* from this article. A different version of this essay on *¡Gaytino!* will also be published in my forthcoming book entitled *Wild Tongues: Transnational Mexican Popular Culture* (University of Texas Press).
- 2 Anzaldúa and Moraga use the term *jotería* to make reference to Chicana/o and, here I add, U. S. Latina/o queers. This term has been reclaimed by these communities in a similar way that the term "queer" has been reclaimed by the gay and lesbian liberation movement of the 90's.
 - 3 Since I worked from an earlier draft, I am not including page numbers on any of the quotations from this text.
 - 4 The acronym stands for "Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán/Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán."