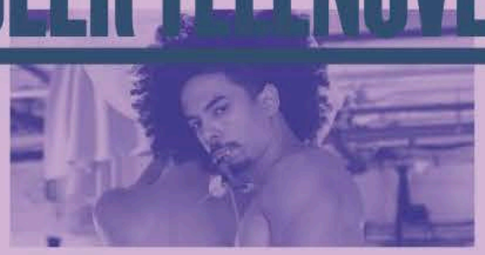
DISIDENTIFICATION AND THE QUEER TELENOVELA



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MIGUEL GUTIERREZ'S *This Bridge Called My Ass* is many things: a triptych, a noise show, an operatic drama, a telenovela. The work is ironic, dramatic, and funny, stocked with tongue-in-cheek jokes (sometimes untranslated). It turns towards comedy to dislodge expectations of the oft-created tragic Latinx story and to confront the audience's expectations about sex and drama. And it is a large production, which I had to crane my neck to see holistically: six performers, multiple segments, and a variety of sound and dialogue.

Last, but not least, the work is *hot*. Throughout the second section the entirely Latinx cast, in various states of undress, navigates found objects with frenzied movement, portraying an intense intimacy with things like gloves, speakers, and wires. Tongues and asses come out as cast members exchange touches and weight, feeling into each other with improvised movement. And this electrical energy is directed, like their comedic attentions, at the audience as well—*This Bridge's* performers are clearly and ironically aware of their audience: frequently, the cast engages with audience members, as though daring them to become part of the project. At one point during the piece, a cast member looks directly at me as they lick an electrical wire.

Miguel Gutierrez, *This Bridge Called My Ass*, photo by Ian Douglas.

In the introduction to José Estebon Muñoz's seminal text *Disidentifications*, Muñoz describes encountering Marga Gomez's performance, *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay* (1992). Like Gutierrez's, Gomez's performance is rife with queer Latinx identifiers. Both artists play with homo-exclusionary structures—Gomez, the talk show; Gutierrez, the telenovela—and turn them upside down, so that they are tight with queer tension and desire, identities that Muñoz notes as sites "of struggle where fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted definitions" (p. 6).

To *dis*identify, then, is to swim through that clash to find and reimagine how one, as a minoritarian subject, is both pulled into identity and able to push against it. Or, in Gomez's case, out of her disidentification with white heteronormativity emerges an imaginative "queer *life*-world, one in which the 'pain and hardship' of queer existence within a homophobic public sphere are not elided, one in which the 'mysteries' of our sexuality are not reined in by sanitized understandings of lesbian and gay identity" (p. 34).

In *This Bridge*, Gutierrez's cast members both situate themselves within and subvert the canons of the telenovela and improvisational dancing—sites of majoritarian power (the first, heteronormative, the second, white). For the white or straight spectator, then, *This Bridge* is a minoritarian performance, which, to again quote Muñoz:

> **transports us across symbolic space, inserting us in a coterminous time when we witness new formations within the present and the future ... the stage and the street, like the shop floor, are venues for performances that allow the spectator access to minoritarian lifeworlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present. James's workerist theory allows us to think of the minoritarian performer as a worker and the performance of queer world-making as a mode of labor (José Estebon Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 56)**

But we are not allowed full access: disidentifying with telenovelas is not for white people (no, not even us white queers!). The imposition of whiteness onto telenovela's characters is already played out in the colonialist construction of Latinx identity. There is no need for white watchers to disidentify, when their identification is already the norm; they do not need to peer through the violent structures of racism to find some aspect of character to grasp on to. Gutierrez's play with language and translation throughout the piece underlines this point. During the first segment, Spanish tongue-twisters are chanted by the cast members; during the second, Latin American music blasts from speakers, and the third and final segment is made up of a collage of telenovela dialogue. These sonic choices are inclusionary to some and exclusionary to others: Gutierrez uses untranslated text, especially untranslated humor, to invite his queer Latinx audience, *specifically*, to engage with the project fully.

In her essay "Why My Novel Uses Untranslated Chinese," Esmé Weijun Wang says she is "making a commitment to the possibility of being unintelligible" (the essay is on *Literary Hub*). This unintelligibility is a technology of her book, just as Gutierrez's unintelligibility in *This Bridge* is a technology of his project: both create a new set of references in excluding references pointed at majoritarian people.

The title *This Bridge* gestures to a larger text being cited by the work: *This Bridge Called My Back* (ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa), a collection of radical feminist essays first published in 1981. Made up of poems, letters, and both personal and critical essays, the book informs the multiplicity and multimodality of the performance as much as does its Latinx politics. And both struggle with the meaning making of traditional narratives. In the anthology, "Third World" women of color feminists grapple with white feminism—is there power in disidentifying with a power such as whiteness? And in Gutierrez's project, the turns towards telenovela and improvisation push against the traditional narrative of drama and

dance. But whereas the book's intent is didactic, Gutierrez's *This Bridge* is fluid and funny.

And yet both engage their audiences, and both embroil themselves in the complex politics of being alive. In "I Come With No Illusions," a 1979 letter (written in Columbus, Ohio!) featured in *This Bridge Called My Back*, Mirtha Quintanales writes:

> **Perhaps one of the greatest lessons I have learned is that in fact "human nature," bound as it is to "culture," implies variability and difference. Yes, we all need to eat and sleep, keep ourselves warm, protect ourselves from harm, be nurtured into maturity; touch and be touched, etc. But, how we choose to meet these needs varies and changes from time to time, place to place and is dependent both on history and the particular set of environmental circumstances contextual to our lives. What both puzzles me and distresses me is the degree to which we seem to be "culture bound." As if "setting the cultural mold" implied never quite being able to break free from it. At least not completely. This seems to be particularly true in the most private activities of our lives — how we express and share feeling in the context of our intimate interpersonal relationships. The wonder of it! (p. 147, 4th edition)**

I think about this wonder—that of expressing and sharing intimate cultural feeling—in the first segment of the piece, when cast members recite tongue twisters while hanging clothes and fabrics about the set. Pinning and unpinning, the actions reflect a kind of making and unmaking of the set, making and unmaking the audience's expectation at the same time. Their movements are remarkable; they improvise continuously for over an hour, strenuously pushing their bodies over objects, the floor, the walls, and each other. And, in the midst of that movement, I see a cleave from cultural objectivity, a turn towards interconnectivity, disidentification with the straight and white references they dance in and away from. I think, in particular, of the stretched fabric, held together by clothespins, floating above the set, and how it resonates with the touch between performers. I think about tension—the performers tenuously connected to their words, themselves, the set, each other, and the audience—us.

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