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Luis Alfaro

Paul Allatson

Summary

Emerging in Los Angeles in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a queer Chicano performance artist, playwright, and writer, Luis Alfaro quickly established himself as an influential contributor to wider cultural debates about the intersections between gender, sexual, ethno-racial, class, religious, and national affiliations in the United States. In his early career Alfaro was a key player in the solo performance movement, in which performance artists used their own bodies and lives as self performance: that is, as primary physical and lived matter for interrogating their identities within a broader political questioning of US multicultural discourses. That questioning coincided with the prominence of Chicana feminist, queer, and AIDS activisms in California, all of which framed Alfaro's early performances. Much of Alfaro's work from the 1990s thus survives as historically significant chronicles of Chicana/o queer lives on the US West Coast. Alfaro consolidated his reputation in that decade with such classic solo performances as *Downtown* and *Cuerpo Politizado*, in which his body functioned as the prop onto and over which he articulated his queer memory work in relation to the Chicana/o neighborhoods of Central and East Los Angeles in which he grew up. Those neighborhoods anchor Alfaro's career-long engagements with the US national imaginary as a Chicano queer cultural producer committed to community engagement and service and to telling the stories of Los Angeles' heterogeneous Chicana/o communities. Since the 1990s Alfaro has refined his creative and critical praxis in solo performance work and plays that raise broader questions about national identity and belonging in the United States. Many of these plays have written back to and adapted works from Western theatrical and literary traditions—for example, Greek tragedies, Aesop, Spanish Golden Age theater, and

Strindberg. The process of adaptation allows Alfaro to celebrate Chicanas/os and Latinas/os, and non-Latina/o immigrant communities, as cultural and ethno-racial epicenters of US national identity in the 21st century. Alfaro's post-2000 interventions into Western theatrical and literary traditions recast those traditions so that they register meaningfully, in audience terms, for Chicana/o and other communities of color grappling inevitably with historical discourses that demean immigrant and minority populations.

Keywords

Luis Alfaro, Chicanas/os, performance, theater, queer embodiment, Los Angeles, immigration, adaptation

Heading Chicano Queer Storytelling and Community

Service

Luis Alfaro—routinely introduced in promotional material, reviews, and the critical literature alike as the son of farm workers—is a Chicano performance artist, playwright, fiction writer, poet, theater director, arts administrator, and university educator. Alfaro is renowned for his activism and for mentoring younger generations of theatrical workers and at-risk youth—especially in relation to discussing Chicana/o cultural politics, raising AIDS awareness, critiquing the patriarchal family and its capacities for violence, and promoting minority and immigrant rights and life stories. Alfaro was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (Genius Award) in 1997. He has won numerous prizes for his work, including awards from PEN USA, the National Endowment of the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation MAP Fund, and the Kennedy Center's Fund for New American Plays. For ten years from the mid-1990s he was co-director of Mark Taper Forum's Latino Theatre Initiative in Los

Angeles, and he was funded by the Andrew S. Mellon Foundation as the Playwright-in-Residence at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival from 2013 until 2019.

Alfaro's performance and theater work, and published prose and poetry since the late 1980s, have been set for the most part in the places in which he grew up: the Chicana/o neighborhoods of Central and East Los Angeles, and California's agricultural Central Valley. Depending on where his work is being performed, his favored locations may extend to Mexican American or immigrant neighborhoods in other US cities. In Alfaro's work such locations are epicenters of Chicana/o community formation, and most pointedly, of community storytelling and memorialization. At the same time, Alfaro has foregrounded queerness as a primary self-identification in his performances and writings. Alfaro's queer identification appears in unstable, even conflicting relation to the other identifications that he explores, which may encompass class, race, ethnicity (most notably Chicana/o), gender, family, age, religion, and immigration and national "American" status. As Alfaro described his performance approach in 1998: "I call myself a gay Chicano. I create work that asks questions about identity and social power and addresses the intersection of nationality and sexuality. More than all that, I am trying to tell the story of my people, of what it means to live in a city like Los Angeles, to give voice to the stories that have not been heard."¹ That self-assessment has remained remarkably consistent over Alfaro's career, as the following statement from 2016 attests: "I was raised in downtown LA, Pico-Union, so that influences probably everything I still do. Even though I was raised in a really violent and really poor neighborhood, I was raised religiously. My father was Catholic and my mother Pentecostal. The thing that I keep circling back to in my work is this notion of service."²

This identity and geospatial focus, and the embrace of storytelling as Chicana/o community service, undergirds Alfaro's reputation as one of the most influential Latinas/os in contemporary US performance and theater circles. Alfaro's solo performance approach plots

his body in relation to sedimented layers of memory and identity in specific Chicana/o locales. This approach informs the argument made in 1999 by José Esteban Muñoz that Alfaro's work functions as "a site of theoretical production to enhance the body of queer theory discourse."³ In the case of the queer, urban-dwelling, and working class Alfaro, Muñoz suggests, the artist's performative understanding of social structures and his literal embodiment of queer theory help audiences "image [*sic*] a future queer world."⁴ Muñoz's reading of Alfaro's performative queer Chicano body characterizes Alfaro's solo performances in the 1990s, but it does not fully account for his collaborative performances, his more formal plays for the theater, or the multiple forms in which his outputs appear and circulate. His works span genres and forms, from performances, plays, poetry, prose, and short stories to spoken word recordings, video, and film. Since the 1990s, moreover, while queer issues continue to inform his work, Alfaro has more overtly questioned what it means to be American, and by extension, what America itself signifies, while continuing to be "a citizen artist" committed to community engagement, service, responsibility, and to excavating the life stories of California's Chicana/o barrios.⁶ To mention one notable example, beginning in the mid-2000s Alfaro has been adapting classical Greek tragedies and other works from the Western theatrical and literary canons. These plays register meaningfully, in audience terms, for Chicana/o and other communities of color in the 21st century, by foregrounding the United States' multiethnic national realities while questioning the so-called American Dream and exclusionary ideals of national identity. Alfaro's theatrical interventions into debates over American identity are particularly important given that they speak back to historical discourses that target immigrant and minority populations as both source and symptom of the United States' national ills.

Early Years and Self Performance

Luis Alfaro's solo works and collaborations in the late 1980s and 1990s established his national reputation as a queer Chicano cultural producer and community agitator. Michelle Habell-Pallán, for example, identifies Alfaro as “one of the first male solo performers to claim a Chicano, Queer, and Catholic subjectivity—using his body as a prop, a vehicle for expression.”⁷ Alfaro emerged as a performer at an important moment of heightened AIDS and queer activism in California, with the AIDS pandemic providing an historical backdrop to Alfaro's first decade of performances and related writings. Those works survive as a pivotal contribution to queer Latina/o community memorialization that Alfaro shares with such writers as Gil Cuadros.⁸

The late 1980s and early 1990s in Los Angeles coincided with what Meiling Cheng calls the heyday of “self performance.” This term refers to autobiographically modulated solo and small ensemble performances by artists such as Alfaro that were framed by new discussions about multiculturalism, as well as feminist, queer, and punk activisms and experimentations.¹⁰ Alfaro was one among many emergent West Coast performance artists whose ranks include Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Monica Palacios, Tim Miller, Joan Hotchkis, Danielle Brazell, Dan Kwong, Denise Uyehara, and Shishir Kurup.¹¹ Under the imprimatur of self performance, artists used their own bodies and lives as primary physical and lived matter for interrogating their own identities and the conflicts raised by competing identity models in the United States. Self performance was also characterized by an economic imperative—the adaptability of the performer to work alone, ergo cheaply—that may be read as a particular aesthetic of making do with limited resources, thus evoking in Alfaro's case the Mexican and Chicana/o aesthetic of *rasquachismo*.¹² In self performance simple clothing changes indicate shifts in character, including gender; slide and video projections replace constructed stage backdrops; monologues are a delivery norm; and performances consist of mobile and modular vignettes or skits that could be cut or remixed at will. These factors

preclude concrete archival records. They also challenge the idea of an original or definitive performance text, thus posing certain logistical and temporal challenges to critical discussions of the self performance movement. Noting this critical legacy, Cheng asserts that “As the artists are alive and changing, so their self performances keep evolving.”¹³ This dictum is particularly apposite in relation to Alfaro’s solo pieces and cast plays alike. In Alfaro’s case, moreover, the eschewal of a definitive “text” also derives from a fluid approach to writing: “Sometimes when I think I am writing a poem, the narrative informs me that it is a short story. Sometimes dialogue in a short story is really the beginning of a play.”¹⁴ Complicating matters, the mutability of Alfaro’s theater works is influenced, too, by his favoring of collaboration and mentoring in both the writing and the production processes. With that approach Alfaro has built from his theatrical apprenticeship: specifically, his mentorship under the director Scott Kelman; and his taking playwrighting workshops led by Maria Irene Fornes—the Cuban American playwright who did much to establish an experimental Latina/o theatrical tradition in the United States—and by Eduardo Machado, Mac Wellman, Tony Kushner, and Paula Vogel.¹⁵

Alfaro first came to Los Angeleno attention as a co-founder of Teatro Viva!, which David Román describes as a coalitionist “gay and lesbian arts organization founded in 1988 that served both as a support network for local Latino/a artists” and as a forum that used stage work and exhibitions to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS in Los Angeles’ Latina/o communities.¹⁶ Román coined the term “politics of affinity” to designate Alfaro’s performance embrace of “counter-hegemonic coalitions” and of dialogue between Chicana/o and non-Chicana/o identifications.¹⁷ This coalitional approach was evident in such performances as *Queer Rites* (1991) with Robin Podolsky, Sandra Golvin, and Doug Sadowick, which contrasted Jewish and Latina/o sexual, gender, and ethnic identifications. The politics of affinity also underwrote *Deep in the Crutch of My Latino Psyche* (1992),

produced with Monica Palacios and Alberto “Beto” Araiza—who also collaborated in Teatro Viva!. A series of humorous short skits that laid bare the Latina/o gay community’s heterogeneity, the performance ended with the performers being subject to an interrogation consisting of some fifty questions to which they could only respond by raising an arm, a prolonged, shared, and uncomfortable gestural moment that precluded neat readings of the performers’ identities.¹⁸ Similar playing with audience expectations of identities as stable categories underwrote Alfaro’s autobiographical solo performance *El juego de la jotería* (the title punning on the Spanish words for queer, *joto*, and the Mexican card game *lotería*) from 1995, in which he wrote the words queer/*joto* on his forehead and then smeared them into ineligibility, thereby drawing literal attention to the ways in which Chicana/o queer bodies are scripted in and as discourse.¹⁹ The politics of affinity took a different turn in a collaborative play from 1997, *A Play for Neighbors*, co-written and co-directed with Diane Rodríguez (of El Teatro Campesino fame). The play was of note for having a cast comprising Chicana/o residents of Los Angeles’ Boyle Heights, who were active participants in the play’s creation.²⁰ The play thereby exemplifies a community-based approach to theatrical production and writing that Alfaro continues to abide by. A clear evolution in creative focus characterized Alfaro’s works in this period: “I started as a poet, then in the avant-garde performance scene, both of which rely on the experimental, so coming to professional theatre felt like a natural progression with my activism.”²¹

As befits Alfaro’s moves from poetry to performance and then theater, a number of key performances (and related texts) from the 1990s that cemented Alfaro’s reputation have multiple, overlapping versions, again evidence of Alfaro’s interest in experimentation. The celebrated *Downtown*, for example, is a series of solo skits written in collaboration with Tom Dennison, and first performed in 1990, that also survives as a spoken-word CD from 1993 and as published poetry and prose works, entitled either “Downtown” or “Pico-Union.” In

turn, this series of skits overlaps closely with another set of vignettes, *Cuerpo Politizado*, which has also been published under that name. These works collectively attracted critical attention as embodied translations of queer theoretical positions that toyed with the signifying surfaces of, and identity messages emanating from, Alfaro's performing body. Speaking of *Cuerpo Politizado*, José Esteban Muñoz regarded Alfaro's body as the site of enacted queer theory and of queer memory work that targets normative and national modes of being "American." For Muñoz, Alfaro's "memory performance[s]" aimed to forestall the exile of queer Latinas/os from their families by presenting alternative queer refashionings of Latina/o families in response to the AIDS pandemic, and by "contesting affective normativities that include, but are not limited to, white supremacy, the cultural logics of misogyny and homophobia."²³

Such performances also achieved a cartographic rendering of Central and East Los Angeles as Alfaro took on the guises of multiple male and female characters and then plotted their place in the barrio around them. *Downtown* reproduces that barrio space and the people in it as framed by external hegemonic forces, exemplified by the recording of a police helicopter that opens the performance text, and as characterized by quotidian acts of violence, hence the repeated refrain—"A slap. A slug. A shove. A kick."—in both performance, CD, and print versions.²⁶ With *Downtown* and related works Alfaro enacts a complex vision of Central and East Los Angeles as an epicenter of Chicana/o stories about selfhood that modulate, contradict, and at times disavow each other. This rich heterodox vision is achieved through Alfaro's movements between contrasting nodes of representation: childhood memories, familial faultlines, queer desire and identity displacement, AIDS activism and memorialization, wavering Catholic faith, disputed gender conventions, factory and sweatshop exploitation on both sides of the US-Mexico border, and the fears and hopes of undocumented immigrants.²⁷ For example, the skit "Federal Building" draws parallels

between the politics of immigration and the threat of deportation, artist struggles against censorship, and AIDS activism. The vignette features an Alfaro who focuses audience attention on the disjunctions between his ethnic and sexual identities, in the process causing his audiences to question both. As Cheng has observed, “Wherever he travels, Alfaro brings this urban landscape, a geosocial and psychocultural hetero-locus, with him.”²⁸

Downtown is also of note for displaying Alfaro’s signature toying with gender scripts through non-normative drag. In one of the vignettes in *Downtown*, “Lupe,” about an undocumented worker in a clothing sweatshop, Alfaro dons a dress in order to represent the gender and class shift in character. For Román, this use of drag disrupts gay male notions of drag performance because it operates as “a political tactic to challenge the alienation of the oppressed by demonstrating the affinities between and among people living in the city.”²⁹ As noted above, most of the skits that featured in *Downtown* are repeated in *Cuerpo Politizado*, though the latter performance and published text arguably focus a little more sharply on the place of queer sons and daughters of color in relation to their families during the AIDS era. Emblematic here is the poetic skit, “Vistiendo en Drag” (Dressed in drag), in which the cross-dressed Alfaro appeared with his masculine “self” exposed, without wig or make up, his body literally bearing the marks of disputed gender norms, “like maps, bearing skin, with wrinkles, tracing history of experience.”³⁰ The skit’s Spanish ending also toys with translational ambiguities, the *feliz* in “Siempre feliz en mi falda” (always happy in my skirt) in some Chicana/o circles signifying “queer” as in “always queer in my skirt,” a punning translation of the English word “gay.”³¹

Both *Downtown* and *Cuerpo Politizado* close with the poetic monologue “Orphan of Aztlan,” whose title refers to the mythical Aztec homeland often located in the US southwest and appropriated by the Chicano Movement in the 1960s and 1970s as the symbolic site of a new Chicano “nation” beholden neither to Mexico nor to the United States. The vignette

signals Alfaro's critique of the masculinist and heteronormative credentials of that civil rights movement that were still being debated in the 1990s, most notably by Chicana feminists. Functioning as a Chicana/o queer anti-nationalist manifesto of sorts, "Orphan of Aztlán" targets various vectors of exclusion that, aside from Chicano Movement rhetoric, include homophobic Mexican culture and white-centric Anglo-American gay culture:

I am a queer Chicano.

A native in no land.

An orphan of Aztlán,

The *pochó* son of farmworker parents.

The Mexicans only want me

when they want me to

talk about Mexico.

But what about

Mexican Queers in L.A.?

The Queers only want me

when they need

to add color,

add spice,

like *salsa picante*,

on the side.³²

As the poem progresses Alfaro embraces the possibilities of newly "queered" identity constructions "at the rim of the New World." He acknowledges that his god is best represented by a Latina lesbian, notes his cultural and class affinities with the Guatemalan woman on the street corner selling tamales, "wearing a traditional skirt and a T-shirt that says

Can't Touch This,” and concludes by advocating for robust narratives that will literally “create these *espectáculos tan sabrosos* [such delicious spectacles] that we call our Queer Latino selves.”³³

“Orphan of Aztlán” exemplifies how Alfaro’s self performances often pivoted on the invention of new queer Chicana/o families forged through coalition, in contradistinction to the residual power of Chicano nationalism in the 1990s. Two films from that decade also iterated this approach. Alfaro featured in *Pochonovela*, a 1995 collaboration between the Cuban American performance artist Coco Fusco and the West Coast ensemble Chicano Secret Service. The film (or video in that era) was a send-up of the soap opera genre and featured a Chicana/o family rent by conflicts between an unyielding Chicano nationalist son and another son who, embracing the pathway of assimilation, had brought home a “white” girl to meet his mother, to her profound shock. Alfaro’s drag presence in the video “queers” the narrative; he appears as a television astrologer casting camp comment on the family’s travails. *Chicanismo*, an Emmy-nominated short film directed by Alfaro, originally commissioned for television in 1996 and released commercially in 1999, comprises skits that also make comedic and camp comments on Mexican assimilation and the contested legacies of the Chicano Movement, while insisting that Chicana/o stories are part of the United States’ ethno-national history.

Chicana/o Ambivalence in the American Dream

In a 2003 interview Luis Alfaro spoke about Chicana/o theater and its relation to a broader US imagination: “One of the ways I always respond when people say, ‘What is Chicano theatre?’ is to say, ‘It’s about the American experience.’ Chicano theatre is about how we came to our political consciousness. It is an American story. It is a story that persisted

through American history.”³⁴ Alfaro’s commitment to representing Chicana/o stories as American stories dates back to the early 1990s. His performances, plays, and other writings draw upon personal, familial, and local community histories and cultural references in order to engage with American Dream logics of inclusion and exclusion. A number of recurring themes or loci of attention stand out in Alfaro’s dialogue with the American Dream and its discursive limitations: the United States’ ongoing wars and their community legacies; religion, faith, and the place of queer Chicanas/os in the “family”; tensions between tradition and assimilation; the grind of precarious work and labor; farmworker activism; relations between Chicanas/os and other communities of color; and, notably, the importance of heeding women’s perspectives on life in the Chicana/o barrios of Los Angeles.

An early illustration of Alfaro’s inroads into the American Dream mythos is “Bitter Homes and Gardens,” a 1995 short story version of a performance from Alfaro’s days at Teatro Viva!. Typical, too, of Alfaro’s broader oeuvre in its foregrounding of Chicana perspectives, the melodramatic story plots the domestic space of a family in which parents and daughter are embittered by thwarted expectations of making it in the United States. The father’s alienation from America is credited to the white bosses at the printing press that employs him who hate Mexicans, and this leads him to make of the Chicana/o home a claustrophobic bulwark against the United States outside the family. In that closed space, his daughter, recipient of an operation that has left her back “straight as a line”—an allusion to the US-Mexico border that haunts the family—dreams in vain of climbing the socioeconomic ladder as a hostess in a kitsch-infused Las Vegas that does not accept her. The mother breaks down in her domestic prison/closet and ends up in an asylum where she discovers, literally, her clitoris, and vows to come out as someone with an uninhibited sexuality, like “the guys in the gay bars.”³⁵ The story (and earlier performance) demonstrate how Alfaro’s work often connects Chicana feminist and queer (Chicano) political aspirations.

Another example of these affinities is *Black Butterfly, Jaguar Girl, Piñata Woman and Other Superhero Girls, Like Me* (2000), a female-centered ensemble piece presented in prose and poetry that focuses on the aspirations and lived experiences of young Chicanas from East Los Angeles. The material is drawn from the work of the Chicana writers Alma Elene Cervantes, Sandra C. Muñoz, and Marisela Norte, and canvasses young womens' perspectives on familial abuse, teenage pregnancy, linguistic competition between English and Spanish, and the travails of adolescence. There is, as well, a didactic drive to this play; as the character Raquel states in the opening line, "Today, my teacher told us that we have to write about our life," an announcement to audiences that Chicana/o lives of East LA (Los Angeles) are, in fact, worthy of cultural representation.³⁶ Iterating that message, the play ends with a "Girl Manifesto" in which each character makes affirmations—"I am going to make people remember me"—against the negative narratives told about LA's Chicana/o barrios, and about young Chicanas in particular.³⁷

A play that continues Alfaro's memorializations of the AIDS pandemic is *Straight as a Line*, first performed in 1999. This multiple-scene, one-act comedy features a retired prostitute, known only as Mum, who arranges for her son Paulie, an ex-hustler dying with AIDS in New York, to return to live with her in Las Vegas. Suffused with a kitsch aesthetic that recalls "Bitter Homes and Gardens," the play is unusual in Alfaro's oeuvre in that the pair are British immigrants. The story of their dashed dreams and lost opportunities is thus as much a comment on American belonging as it is about how families manage loss to AIDS: Paulie dies—in a scene of considerable affect and irony—at the precise moment in which his mother has come to enjoy quiet moments of intimacy with him. In the 2000 staging of *Straight as a Line* directed by Jon Lawrence Rivera at the Off-Broadway Primary Stages theater in New York, the "British" and ethnic contours of the play were transformed by the casting of Asian actors. The casting iterates how Alfaro's work makes broad points about

migrant experiences in the United States, his attentions to Chicana/o experiences making him “acutely sensitive to the many layers of satisfying self-deception in the casual American formula ‘a nation of immigrants,’ which, to everyone of the second generation or beyond, means ‘all those other people.’”³⁸

Body of Faith (2003) is an ensemble piece, featuring between eight and nineteen LGBTQ actors, that explores the multiethnic realities of queer interrelations while grappling with conflicts of faith and American belonging, and hopes for redemption, drawn from the actors’ own experiences. Evoking the solo performances that typified Alfaro’s career in the 1990s, *Body of Faith* consists of monological vignettes, presented with a vaudeville-style aesthetic on a stage with minimal props and screens that frame the actors’ bodies as they change costumes and, by implication, the identities ascribed to them. Another notable ensemble piece, which premiered at the Playwrights’ Arena in Hollywood, is *Hero* (2007), a situation comedy of sorts whose main character, the ostensible hero of the play’s title, is a returned serviceman from the Iraq War who has been discharged after breaking his arm upon falling from a water truck. In its premiere *Hero* comprised two alternating casts, one Chicana/o, the other Asian; the play refrained from elaborating on the ethnicities of either staged option. The casts were simply, effectively introduced to audiences as American families. The play focuses on the familial conflict between Hero and his anti-war brother, whose family home is located in the vast lower middle-class belt stretching across LA’s south and east. That fraternal conflict is complicated by the presence of Uncle, a crusty Vietnam War veteran, the play thereby demonstrating that for working-class US communities the unaddressed legacies and domestic repercussions of the United States’ armed conflicts since World War II are replicated in each generation.³⁹

This Golden State Part One: Delano (2015), which was commissioned by the Magic Theatre in San Francisco and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, is the first play in a planned

trilogy that charts the “American” life of a Chicana/o family over generations. The play approaches questions of American belonging by returning its main characters, Elias, a Pentecostal pastor, and his wife Esther to Delano in California’s Central Valley (the epicenter of the United Farm Workers Union and its antecedents). There the couple encounter a dysfunctional congregation that has lost touch with Mexican traditions, including crucial culinary knowledge. The congregation is riven by familial breakdown and has been abandoned by the broader spaces of American promise. In focusing on religion as a key to understanding American identity politics, Alfaro explicitly draws from his own family history, his father being a charismatic Catholic, his mother a Pentecostal. This attention to faith and identity also animates the earlier solo performance, *St Jude* (2013). This tribute to Alfaro’s dying father functions as a memorialization of growing up with farmworker parents in California’s Central Valley (before the move to Los Angeles), that specific cartography relayed through slide projections of sites found along Highway 99. Told in verse form, with Alfaro reading from a heavy script that is bound like a Bible, and with audience members reading selected text, the play’s anecdotes center on Alfaro’s diabetic father and his declining health. But the anecdotes also stretch out in time and place to encompass Alfaro’s teenage years as a runaway drug addict, and his veteran relatives who returned broken and damaged from Vietnam.⁴⁰ While told with tenderness and affection, the narrative of the Chicana/o family staged in *St Jude* aligns with Alfaro’s longstanding unromanticized critiques of the American Dream and his recognition of the ambivalences by which Chicanas/os relate to, and regard, the nation-state that contains them.

Adaptations and the Chicanoization of the Theatrical

Canon

Since the early 2000s an important trend in Luis Alfaro's playwriting has involved works that adapt, write back to, and transculturate texts from the classical roots of Western performance and theater, and from the Western literary canon more generally. Having arguably the biggest cultural and critical impact is a trilogy of plays that Chicanoizes classical Greek tragedies and myths: *Electricidad: A Chicano Take on the Tragedy of Electra* (2003); *Oedipus, el Rey* (2010); and *Bruja*, which morphed into *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles* (2012–2013). Paralleling those works are other adaptations. *Alleluia, The Road* (2013) is a pilgrimage along Highway 99 in California's Central Valley that is based on the Swedish modernist August Strindberg's play *The Great Highway*. *Painting in Red* (2014) is an adaptation of *The Painter of His Own Dishonor* by the Spanish Golden Age playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca. The children's play *Aesop in Rancho Cucamonga* (2013) reworks the ancient Greek fabulist, while Alfaro's co-written screenplay for the film *From Prada to Nada* (2011, directed by Angel Gracia) is a comedic revision of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* transported to Los Angeles' Boyle Heights.

Adaptations allow Alfaro to privilege, on the formal theatrical stage, minority and immigrant life stories that have local historical and cultural resonances for audiences who may not, in fact, be regular theater goers. *Aesop in Rancho Cucamonga*, for example, is a community-focused work specifically written for the local children of Rancho Cucamonga in San Bernadino County east of Los Angeles. Alfaro translates Aesop's fables into what was his young audience's first experience of hearing the places and names of their own neighborhood on stage.⁴¹ Similarly, *Painting in Red* adapts the marital intrigues and disappointments of the Calderón de la Barca original text into a cartographic rendering of Southern Californian space replete with local references to Central Los Angeles and the counties of Los Angeles and Ventura.⁴² Adaptations provide a framework in which Alfaro continues his interest in addressing controversial issues—familial dysfunction and violence;

cholo (gang) culture and its codes; the travails of undocumented immigrants—while making pointed commentary about the Chicana/o family as an embattled bulwark against the powerful rhetoric of the American Dream. Adaptations, finally, allow Alfaro to intervene into Western canons in order to challenge and critique their ethnocentric edges and to expand the performative possibilities of Chicana/o and Mexican representation in the United States. That intervention also places Alfaro’s work into a tradition of writing back established by Chicana playwrights, a pivotal example being Cherríe Moraga’s 1994 retelling of the Medea myth, “The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea.”⁴³

Alfaro’s trilogy that writes back to classical Greek tragedies and myths has been staged in cities across the United States and received by critics as a sophisticated intervention into the ethnic terrains and possibilities of contemporary American theater. Alfaro is drawn to classical Greek plays because they provide him with proven structures and forms and access to a tradition of canonical cultural power in the West. Ancient Greek plays also appeal to Alfaro because they deal with the quotidian ethical and moral conundrums that he recognizes in the stories emanating from participants in the local community support programs with which he is involved. During Alfaro’s work with California’s “‘youth authority programs’ for young felons,” to name an example, he met a young *chola* who had murdered her mother. That sad tale of family breakdown and vengeance evoked the story of Electra, and thus led directly to *Electricidad* and its explorations of female gang culture.⁴⁴ Similarly, Alfaro claims to have met a Chicano version of Oedipus “through a gang prevention organization called Homeboy industries,” hence the translation of the Oedipus story, *Oedipus, el Rey*, into a narrative about recidivism among Californian *cholos* that moves between Central Los Angeles and the North Kern State Prison in Delano.⁴⁶ As Alfaro muses in relation to *Oedipus, el Rey*: “Why is it important to revisit the ancient Greeks? For me the Greeks offer morality

tales, theatre teaches us ways to learn how to live our lives. . . . The ensemble represents the [Chicana/o] community I love.”⁴⁷

The first work in Alfaro’s Greek trilogy, *Electricidad*, is based on Sophocles’ *Electra*, but it also draws on variants of the Electra myth by Aeschylus (*Libation Bearers*; *Oresteia*) and Euripides (*Electra*; *Iphigenia in Tauris*). In Alfaro’s version, *Electricidad* is mourning her dead father, Agamenón “El Auggie,” former head of the East Side Locos, murdered by his wife Clemencia (Sophocles’ Clytemnestra), a *veterana* in the local *chola* culture of Boyle Heights. *Electricidad* has installed Agamenón’s corpse in the front yard of the family home, La Casa de Atridas. Her sister Ifigenia (La Ifi) is a born-again *chola* who tries unsuccessfully to dissuade *Electricidad* from avenging her father’s murder and perpetuating gang violence in the barrio. As befits a reworking of a Greek play, *Las vecinas* (neighbors), “*mujeres* from the hood,” form the chorus that comments on unfolding events, while ensuring that audiences appreciate the tensions between patriarchal and matriarchal gang traditions and the complex factors behind *cholo* alienation from the America that surrounds the barrio.⁴⁸ For Helen Moritz, Alfaro’s chorus occupies the critical center of his adaptation: “they tell the comunidad what we are to understand as the canonical history of the *cholo* culture which is the context of the play and in which Agamenón was a *rey* or king. Their explanation is sociological: the cholos are gang members drawn from the disaffected and dispossessed members of the community who nonetheless provide protection in a culture that mistrusts the police.”⁴⁹ In the end, despite the embodied presence of alternatives to gang culture in characters such as Ifigenia, at *Electricidad*’s urging her brother Orestes kills Clemencia, only to go mad in the process. As the chorus’s final ambivalent comments make clear, the cycle of violence has crossed generational lines, *Electricidad*’s dream of vengeance has been satisfied, but at great familial loss, and barrio life has returned to a tentative, calm normality in which,

given the lack of faith in American juridical institutions, vendetta justice will continue to prevail.

In *Oedipus, el Rey*, a reworking of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* that focuses on the theme of criminal recidivism, the chorus has become a line "of heavily tattooed Latino inmates," as befits the play's inclusion of scenes set in North Kern State Prison.⁵⁰ In this version, Oedipus, a recently released ex-prisoner, kills his father Laius in a road-rage incident and ends up sleeping with and marrying his mother Jocasta, thereby fulfilling the ancient prophecy. When the truth of their relationship is revealed, Jocasta agrees to blind Oedipus, he stabs her, and he returns to prison. As with *Electricidad*, the play mines the moral quandary posed by belief in fate, that in the barrio there is no possibility of redemption or escape from daily patterns of violence. That message is iterated by the many moments in which Oedipus, reveling in his new role as a king and a god, disputes the existence of other God(s) and faith-based options, and, in a crucial scene after his marriage to Jocasta, rips apart the Christian Bible.

Bruja, which evolved into *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles*, adapts Euripides' version of the Medea myth to track a family of Mexican immigrants who make enormous sacrifices in order to cross the US-Mexico border, only to find their family unit fracturing under the weight of assimilatory pressures and disparate experiences of immigrant success. The setting of the play also shifts depending on its staging: Boyle Heights in the Californian versions; the Mexican-dominant Pilsen neighborhood in its Chicago version. Typifying Alfaro's favoring of melodramatic plots, the play features Medea, a seamstress who agrees to move to the United States at the behest of her partner Hason, father of her son Acan, along with their servant Tita, who functions as a one-person chorus. After surviving a dangerous and nightmarish border crossing, Hason's path to assimilation leads him to embark on an affair with another Mexican immigrant, a real estate magnate called Armida who has employed him as a day laborer. As the play progresses, Medea's husband and son become increasingly

enthralled by the American Dream and its material promises, while she feels increasingly estranged or exiled from that mythos, too scared to leave her little house. As with the original Medea story, the play ends with Medea killing Armida and her son, in what amounts to a dystopian rejection of the immigrant narrative of making it in the United States.

Of note in Alfaro's Greek trilogy is their evocation of Chicana/o and Mexican immigrant and working-class neighborhoods, achieved through the provision of numerous local and popular cultural references—from street names and local sites, fast food and supermarket chains to low riders and items of religious kitsch—and Alfaro's close attention to the codes, dress, tattoos, and even gestures that signify *cholo* culture. The character of Tiresias in *Oedipus, el Rey*, for example, is described as “*cholo* cool wearing black shades.”⁵¹ Alfaro's uses of language are also pertinent here, *Mojada* in particular explicitly foregrounding Spanglish and code-switching between English and Spanish, without translation, as befits the quotidian linguistic complexities of the communities Alfaro is portraying.⁵² As Melinda Powers argues in her analysis of *Electricidad*, “Alfaro's comic pop references punctuate and challenge the class divisions and stereotypes that contribute to the marginalization of working class Latinos.”⁵³ At the same time, those references resonate for Chicana/o audiences who recognize their worlds on the stage and appreciate that their stories are American stories that merit theatrical representation.

In the early 21st century those representations matter. As a playwright Luis Alfaro occupies a place in the United States' national and regional theater circuits that ensures one of his plays is germinating, or being collaboratively constructed, rehearsed, or staged somewhere in the country at any given moment. This level of national exposure highlights how Alfaro's story continues to be exceptional, in that his level of success is seldom accorded to other Chicana/o cultural producers, despite the size and socioeconomic and cultural clout of the United States' Mexican-origin populations. Alfaro's theatrical works

since 9/11 coincide with one of the most virulent anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant epochs in US history. That claim takes literally the import of the current US President's pronouncements before and during the 2016 presidential election campaign that the United States had "become an annex of Mexico's prison system," which sends to the United States "criminal aliens" who are murderers and rapists, hence the need for a definitive border wall.⁵⁴ Trump's anti-Mexican electoral rhetoric, moreover, emerged in a historical climate in which debates over immigration from the Latin American, primarily Mexican, south had been transformed by the events of 9/11, after which immigration and terrorism became synonyms across the conservative wings of US politics and for substantial sections of the US population.

Against that historical backdrop Alfaro's oeuvre is at once culturally and politically charged and prescient. His plays foreground Mexican and Chicana/o narratives of being American that require audiences to rethink what America itself signifies. The political import of Alfaro's theatrical interventions into US national debates over Mexicans and their American place has been noted by theater critics. As Jayson Morrison says in his review of *Mojada*: "The [play's] young couples stand in for a much larger exploited class in the shadows of the US economy whose reality greatly contrasts with the kind of political rhetoric that casts Latino immigrants as criminals and parasites."⁵⁵ For Priscilla Frank *Mojada* is an allegory about the hardship of immigration per se, and thus presents a counternarrative against the idea of an "invasion" of the United States from the Mexican south.⁵⁶ Indeed, undergirding Alfaro's theater projects since 9/11 is a critical and creative intention—which builds on his solo performances in the 1990s—that asks Alfaro's audiences to grapple with and reassess the queer and non-queer life stories emanating from the Chicana/o barrios of Central and East Los Angeles, as well as California's Central Valley. For Alfaro, that reassessment is required for two reasons. It assists in dispelling the idea that Mexican

immigrants are somehow antithetical to the US national imagined community, and it lays bare the limitations of American Dream rhetoric and associated debates over who belongs and who does not in the United States.

Discussion of the Literature

Most of the published critical responses to Luis Alfaro's performances, plays, and writings deal with his work from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. Notwithstanding theater critics in the mainstream print and online press across the United States who review his work with enthusiasm, Alfaro's performance and theater pieces since the mid-2000s have not attracted the sustained academic attention that they merit given his national reputation in the United States.

Many of the early critical studies of Alfaro's work focused on his toying with sociocultural representations and conventions of gender, sexuality, and economies of desire. The first detailed critical response to Alfaro came from David Román in 1995, for whom Alfaro's performances personify the struggle between "the kinship systems of his Latino family and of an imagined gay community."⁵⁷ Discussing *Downtown*, Román notes that Alfaro occupies a marginal position that shifts between emphasizing his ethnicity or sexuality, along the way destabilizing both.⁵⁸ Alfaro's aim, Román argues, is to "perform the links between oppressions" while pointing "to the possible counter-hegemonic responses to oppression."⁵⁹ David William Foster identified how in performances such as *Cuerpo Politizado* Alfaro's cross-dressed body served as the vehicle through which he could parody gender and sexual stereotypes, thus drawing attention to their sociocultural and ideological construction.⁶⁰ Alfaro's approach to drag, Foster argued, was particularly salient in the artist's project to queer masculinist models of Chicano identity while sending up notions of

“idealized femininity” emanating from Anglo-American culture, especially as mediated via Hollywood.⁶¹ Similarly, for Daniel Enrique Pérez, Alfaro’s 1990s performances challenged queer drag culture and normative Chicana/o subjectivity alike, thus opening up the staged space in which diverse identifications could flourish. Pérez, too, regarded Alfaro’s body as the key to this performance praxis, given that the body “functions as a vehicle to transport images, stories, messages, and characters that do not subscribe to norms associated with either heteronormative codes or normative codes of Anglo or Chicano/Latino culture.”⁶² For Antonio Prieto [Stambaugh] Alfaro’s work in the 1990s enacted an “epidermic cartography” that enabled him to trouble how identity markers are read on the skin, thereby questioning processes of surveillance and stereotyping of Latino queer subjects.⁶³

Noting Alfaro’s commitment to exploring the quotidian realities of Chicanas in the face of misogyny from within the Chicana/o community and racism directed at Chicanas/os, Tiffany López identified Alfaro’s unflinching depictions of violence within the Chicana/o family as a hallmark of his work in the 1990s. Drawing comparisons between Alfaro and such Chicana playwrights as Cherrie Moraga, López argued that Alfaro was not simply operating in affinity with Chicana feminism; his early performance and theater work were indebted to that movement and its axes of critical attention.⁶⁴ For Michelle Habell-Pallán, Alfaro joined Chicanas as a “surrogate” feminist in articulating a post-nationalist understanding of Chicana/o identity in response to political projects against sexism and homophobia.⁶⁵ Habell-Pallán designated Alfaro’s performances as “memory plays” anchored in Alfaro’s experiences of growing up in Los Angeles.⁶⁶ José Esteban Muñoz regarded Luis Alfaro’s performing body as a practical manifestation of queer theory by which “memory performance,” typified by *Cuerpo Politizado*, attempts to work against queer Latina/o alienation from the Latina/o family by constructing new queered versions of those families in a broader campaign against homophobia, racism, and misogyny.⁶⁷ Paul Allatson regarded

Alfaro's 1990s work as pivoting on the notion of simulation, by which Alfaro drew audience "attention to the conflicts of signification played on and over his own body," in the process highlighting "the quotidian complexities of inhabiting the interstices of two national (U.S. and Mexican) and cultural (Anglo- and Latin American) histories of antagonism, exchange, and change."⁶⁸ Meiling Cheng, too, identified in Alfaro's work tensions between competing value systems—based on religion, sexuality, family, ethnicity—that inevitably elicit in Alfaro's performances a transgressive approach to the very notion of selfhood that recognizes the impossibility of finding solace in identity certainties.⁶⁹

Among the few sustained responses to Alfaro's theatrical adaptations are two essays on *Electricidad*. Helen Moritz argues that the play's complex representation of Chicana/o gang culture homes in on the tensions between patriarchal and matriarchal forces in that culture, while also proposing the possibility that the violent Chicana/o family can be reimagined as a site of redemption.⁷⁰ Melinda Powers suggests that the play's location in Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, and its metatheatrical evocations of that barrio through the use of Spanglish, *cholo* dress styles, and myriad local cultural references, allow Alfaro to transculturate Sophocles' murder-as-revenge plot into a morality tale about *cholo* gang violence. Alfaro's reworking of this play, which draws on the Mexican performance traditions of *carpa* and *tanda*, enacts a syncretic and hybrid Chicanoization of a classic Athenian drama in order to challenge received stereotypes about *cholo* culture.⁷¹ For Powers the play's "syncretism of culture"—as with all of Alfaro's adaptations—makes "provocative" points by moving Chicana/o-centric barrio experiences from the representational margins into the imaginative center of debates over national belonging and alienation in the United States.⁷²

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