

Performance

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"Performance" and "Latina/o" gained popularity as critical keywords designating objects of study and critical optics for the analysis and theorization of Latina/o life and culture in the United States during the 1990s. The coincidence between the gradual eclipsing of "Hispanic" by "Latina/o"—as the umbrella designator for interethnic and pan-ethnic social interactions, imaginaries, and coalitions of Latin American-descent populations in the United States—and the rise of performance—as a cultural unit and as a theoretical approach to identity as iterative effort rather than stable truth—led to the emergence of *latinidad* as a term that more accurately renders the dynamic, processual nature of the ethno-national range and crossings "Latina/o" as a concept sought to encompass. This shift to performance and *latinidad* also avoids the settler-colonialist assumptions behind the privileging of Spanish or Hispanic as the primary unifying feature of Latin American-descent populations by extending the repertoires of cultural practice central to Latina/o studies beyond those centered on linguistic genealogies, especially writing, and moving beyond Spanish European heritage and colonial history into an engagement with the plurality of the region and its traveled histories, including African, Asian, and Indigenous routes and communities. Moreover, this shift, a critical performative feat in and of itself, also anchored an increasingly comparative and inter-Latina/o focus for Latina/o studies, which, while maintaining the significant legacy and current value of

the varying ethno-national specificities within Latina/o culture (Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Dominican, and so on), sought to understand the promises and frictions of constituting an amalgamated ethno-racial category within the national and international spheres. Performance offers an object of study and an analytic for understating *latinidad*.

"Performance," as a keyword in critical cultural analysis, can refer to presentational aesthetics and their execution in formal artistic practice (such as music, theater, dance, and performance art). Scholarly attention to theater has perhaps been the most influential to early conversations about Latinas/os. Especially significant have been the historical accounts authored by Nicolás Kanellos since the 1970s, but especially his 1990 historical survey; thematic and formal analysis of Chicano drama by Jorge Huerta (1982, 2000) and Jon Rossini (2008); feminist critique of Chicano theater by Yolanda Broyles-González (1994) and Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (2001); Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's critical examination of humor and *rasquachismo* in the *carpa* tradition in the Southwest United States (1989); and Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's critical engagement with Latina/o representation on Broadway as well as on community stages across the United States (1999). Emergent from the scholarship on Latina/o theater is the formulation of a public culture built in relation to dominant (to varying degrees) institutions and cultural traditions: from the historical assumptions of Broadway's whiteness to Latina/o culture's patriarchal and heteronormative orientations. Also evidenced in this scholarship are long traditions of artistic practice drawing from the cultural specificities of Latina/o experience and resulting in a discernable cultural formation specific to *latinidad*.

Performance can also approximate other communicative acts that deploy embodied aesthetic frameworks (such as ritual, festivity, and political rallies) as well as

quotidian practices that recur to or can be analyzed as activating performance codes and conventions in social exchange (as in speech, dress, and gesture). In its most basic definition, "performance" concerns communicative events that present aesthetically framed and rehearsed behavior with varying degrees of intention before an audience, be it human or nonhuman, real or imagined. Key to this version of performance was the scholarship of theorist and theater director Richard Schechner, who expanded the criteria of cultural practice we could understand as performance by applying the aesthetic analytics previously focused on formal theater and casting an anthropological frame on performance as a social arrangement that organizes performers and audiences alike. Schechner pinpointed intention as the key component in rehearsal and presentation, which together structure all performance as "twice behaved behavior" (1985). Also influential, especially in the approach to quotidian performances, was the work of communication scholar and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood, who saw in performance repertoires embodied alternatives to what he labeled the "scriptocentrism" of Western culture (2002).

In all three of the frameworks outlined above (artistic, cultural, quotidian), performance constitutes an object of study; it is a discernible cultural unit with established scholarly engagements from academic disciplines in the humanities and humanistic social sciences. All three frameworks allow for approaches to Latina/o cultural and social life that attend to the role of aesthetic communication in the formulation of *latinidad*. Thus, performance serves as a key object of study in the development of Latina/o studies as an academic field. Along with language, literature, and the visual arts, performance—from artistic to cultural to quotidian—offers a catalogue of traits that evidences Latina/o culture, much the way that theater does, relative to the

nationalist construct of US American culture. As theater and performance scholar David Román (1997) observed, "Latino performance—from its earliest manifestations in the religious and secular cultural rituals of the indigenous people of the Southwest to the incorporation of many of these rituals into the nascent theater conventions of the mid-nineteenth century—has primarily functioned to rehearse and enact various Latino cultural beliefs and customs" (152).

In their foundational studies of Mexican American folklore, Tejano scholars Américo Paredes (1958, 1995b) and Jovita González (1997, 2006) found in the performance cultures of the *corrido* and *vaquero* customs, respectively, a bordered, often contrapuntal position to the narrative of US American exceptionalism. Performance confirms and extends the definitional model of "beliefs and customs" into a relational subaltern position to serve as an agentive platform/tactic for articulating a minoritarian position and intervention relative to a majoritarian Anglo-American culture. Both scholars transformed the direction of the field of folklore studies from a tradition in which Mexican culture had been documented within a paternalistic or intentionally objectifying framework in terms of what literary scholar Ramón Saldivar (2006) has aptly characterized as the interrelated paradigms and agendas of "entertainment" and "colonization" (33). Their inaugural venture into Mexican American performance culture founded what could be identified as the Texas school of performance studies, grounded in folklore studies and using an anthropological methodology. Their approach was taken up and expanded in the important ethnographic works of anthropologists José E. Limón (1992, 1994) on subaltern aesthetics and Richard Flores (1995) on performance practices of gifting, among others, which furthered the critical optics for approximating the creative force of marginalized communities, especially in the Texas region. This scholarship

became foundational for a new generation of scholars in Latina/o studies for whom performance similarly offered a grounding of the political promise of *latinidad*.

In other Latina/o ethno-national contexts, musical and dance performance have played similarly central roles in the definition of and affirmative claim to a Latina/o cultural position and legacy relative to US American national culture. Bomba, salsa, and hip-hop, for example, have been central to the development of a Puerto Rican cultural studies that attends to the history and politico-economic coordinates of diaspora. Juan Flores (2000) and Frances R. Aparicio (1998), both scholars who have focused on Puerto Rican popular music and its relationship to Latina/o culture, have developed key entry points into an analysis of performance that invests in both the mobile, transnational nature of cultural forms and the contextual specificities of the practice in local communities. Juan Flores introduced a healthy dose of suspicion over the rubric of *latinidad*, evidenced by the differential regard with which performance practices and their attendant labor are approached in a mainstream where musical genres and practices come to be regarded simplistically as amalgamated commodities of *latinidad*, by warning against the potential loss of critical politico-economic specificity and history. He ultimately invites an analysis that prioritizes ethno-national specificity. In contrast, Frances R. Aparicio (2003a) understands the critiques of *latinidad* as both a top-down homogenizing amalgamation of Latina/o difference and as bottom-up shallow utopias of cohesion that ignore tension. Nonetheless, she insists on the increased significance of *latinidad* and labors to introduce a more complex and grounded approach that attends to both “convergences and divergences” of *latinidad*.

It is no coincidence that the scene that prompts Aparicio (2007) to “(re)construct” *latinidad* in light of its dynamic incorporation of Latina/o difference is a concert

she attended with a heterogeneous group of Latinas/os with differing ethno-national, racial, class, migratory, and educational backgrounds. In the shared experience of a Latina/o concert, she argues, a version of *latinidad* emerges in which ethno-national specificity is not simply substituted; rather, this specificity can complement it, exceed it, or challenge it in promising ways. In this scene, *interlatinidad* emerges as a paradigm oriented toward the dynamics of performance and animated in its assembled audience. This is an important move for the analysis of *latinidad* and one that orients analysis away from the close reading and decoding of meaning of specific performance phenomena and toward an engagement with it as social phenomena. Scholars in Latina/o dance studies have followed this approach. In my work, I look at movement-based performance practices that assemble Latina/o queer collectives into proto-political and at times explicitly political units resulting from the “convivencias diarias” or quotidian social interactions facilitated by performance (Rivera-Servera 2012). In her study of salsa dancing in Los Angeles, Cindy García (2013) turns her ethnographic eye not just to the specificities of choreography and technique but also to the quotidian negotiations undertaken by club patrons in getting to, affording, and experiencing the economic and social hierarchies of salsa networks.

Other scholars have advanced significant theorizations of Latina/o culture by focusing on the constitution of a Latina/o audience in popular cultural dynamics, especially fan cultures since the 1999 Latin music explosion. For example, in an important study of the fan cultures and the collective mourning of Tejano pop star Selena Quintanilla, which is much like Aparicio's engagement with the heterogeneous assembly of fans before the homogenously packaged sign of *latinidad*, Deborah Paredez (2009) demonstrates how popular performance may open up the space for the emergence of

Latina/o publics. Similarly, Laura G. Gutiérrez (2010) pursues the assumptions of these publics to transnational scales where *mexicanidad*, like *latinidad*, circulates as feminist and queer texts and animates social networks.

Ultimately, the most commonly deployed approach to Latina/o performance has focused on the labor of the performer as agentive cultural force. The work of queer feminist Chicana scholar Alicia Arrizón has been foundational here. Focusing on the tactics of performance as intervention, Arrizón (1999) launched both an archival and contemporary critical project seeking to outline ways Latina feminist and queer positions resulted from the creative critical actions enacted by performers in the public sphere. Scholars such as Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2011) and Deborah Vargas (2012) have followed suit, attending to cross-dressing/transloca and voice performances, respectively, to identify alternatively queer and feminist genealogies of practice attentive to the dynamism of *latinidad* as/in performance.

The analytical frameworks developed to understand the vast range of communication and cultural practices we classify as performance have been similarly influential in developing understandings of the iterative nature of subjectivity under the rubric of performativity. Here performance anchors an anti-essentialist position that advances a cultural theory reliant on the rehearsed, repeated enactments of conventions, be they gender, race, or others. Performance unsettles the assumed certainty of cultural and social coordinates by highlighting them as effects of performative enactment and thus dependent on continuous repetition to sustain their force and apparent constancy. Originally developed out of the speech act theories of J. L. Austin as adapted to the theorization of gender by feminist queer studies scholar Judith Butler and sexuality by queer literary scholar and theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, performativity has journeyed from a primarily discursive orientation into

an increasingly embodied one. The introduced and often productive (but not reproductive) uncertainty of the performative has opened avenues for a range of minoritarian critiques that rely on the gaps created by the iterative model to identify alternatives to the previously assumed incorruptibility of social truths.

Feminist and queer approaches to Latina/o performance have tended to interrelate performance and performativity. José Esteban Muñoz is the most widely cited scholar of Latina/o queer performance studies in the field. Beginning with his work on disidentification, or the strategic distancing and engagement with dominant cultural forms by minoritarian performers (1999), and extending to his understanding of the utopian politics of performance as always in the horizon (2009), Muñoz modeled an approach that pursued the formal practices of Latina/o performance art or the quotidian aesthetics of queer subjects as discernible cultural units worthy of analysis and capable of political intervention but also as points of departure for the understanding and theorization of performativity and its governing of both discursive and embodied orientations to and interventions in the world, as lived and as imagined. The work of feminist and queer theorist Juana María Rodríguez (2003, 2014b) follows a similar trajectory in pursuing Latina/o queer practices as performative discursive formations that in their repetition at once outline the emergence of *latinidad* as a discursive field and pursue its iterative constitution as a queer openness with promising destabilizing features.

In sum, performance—in its various approximations as cultural unit of analysis or discursive iterative formation; as formal aesthetic practice or social convention; as assertive of or challenging to *latinidad*—has become foundational to Latina/o cultural studies and allied disciplines concerned with and invested in the ways *latinidad* emerges from social interaction, communicative exchanges, aesthetic expression, and political action.