

HONORING RASQUACHISMO IN EL TEATRO

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ABSTRACT

Supremacist, hierarchical and European ideology has dominated the field of theatrical study and performance, dictating process, learning, and purpose. Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekov, and Sophocles are often implemented in university theater programs as essential points of study and professional training without hesitation. Although these white men were part of the development of the traditional theater that is commonly accepted, they are not the only contributors to the art form. The notion that theater only “exists” once white men have explored it has led to a narrowing of the understanding and appreciation of work in the field. The exclusionary process of colonized theater must be challenged as this structure only serves to assign validity, resources, and viability to a narrow subset of the art form (Elliot and Dias 2018). This narrowing of the field is often only performatively combated; although theatrical training programs insist that they are expanding their programming, limited diverse theatrical contributions are showcased in educational settings (Ybarra 2018).

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AESTHETICS: RASQUACHISMO AS DECOLONIZATION

Supremacist, hierarchical and European ideology has dominated the field of theatrical study and performance, dictating process, learning, and purpose. Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekov, and Sophocles are often implemented in university theater programs as essential points of study and professional training without hesitation. Although these white men were part of the development of the traditional theater that is commonly accepted, they are not the only contributors to the art form. The notion that theater only “exists” once white men have explored it has led to a narrowing of the understanding and appreciation of work in the field. The exclusionary process of colonized theater must be challenged as this structure only serves to assign validity, resources, and viability to a narrow subset of the art form (Elliot and Dias 2018). This narrowing of the field is often only performatively combated; although theatrical training programs insist that they are expanding their programming, limited diverse theatrical contributions are showcased in educational settings (Ybarra 2018).

In stark resistance to this colonized idea is the implementation and success of the rasquache aesthetic that frames this testimonio. With roots in indigeneity, rasquachismo honors a collective and fosters purpose; it is necessary to defend and honor this aesthetic in el teatro to foster creativity, collective creation, and intentional purpose in the production of theatrical work. This testimonio investigates the experience of resisting typical modes of theatrical creation through maintaining rasquachismo and facilitating new opportunities for Chicanx/Latinx theatrical work via community programming outside the university’s walls. Further, it must be noted that this testimonio is just that, a personal declaration of experience, process, and interpretation framed by the lens of a Chicana navigating exclusionary and colonized practices in educational theater in a university setting.

EMBODYING RASQUACHISMO IN PROCESS

Rasquache is a term of Mesoamerican Nahuatl origin which initially had a negative connotation in Mexico associated with poor taste. Through a classist lens, rasquachismo was (potentially still is) deemed as lower class, impoverished, and uneducated (Ybarra-Frausto 1991). During the Chicano (historical spelling) Movement of the 1960s, the term was embraced and reinvigorated, giving life to an empowering, intentional aesthetic (Broyles-González 1998). Although rasquachismo embodies an underdog perspective, it is an intentional proclamation and purposefully exists in the margins (Ybarra-Frausto 1991).

Rasquachismo in el teatro was widely utilized in the Chicano Movement by El Teatro Campesino to establish the framework of accessibility of the work for the people, collective creation, and keeping message prioritized ahead of technical elements with the specific purpose of connecting with the marginalized and exploited farmworkers of the 1960s (Valdez 2013). Rasquachismo invites one to be rasquache and embody a consciousness to subvert ruling paradigms (Ybarra-Frausto 1991). There is focus on the artistry, identity, and the motivation to create that which was not present before (Ybarra-Frausto 1991). Rasquachismo honors comunidad, dismantles the colonized ideals of hierarchy, and is intentional in purpose. In the theatrical sphere, the rasquache

aesthetic is in direct contrast to colonized Western norms that value a specific hierarchy within the creative team, has specific expectations of audience, and focuses on the final product.

TESTIMONIO DE ARTE

This testimonio includes the personal perspective of implementing the rasquache aesthetic at the university level, defying colonization through the mentality of purpose over product in a Chicana/Latina Theatre Series that served la comunidad de la frontera, El Paso, Texas, for six years (2013-2018). The process embodied in this Series focused on the tenets of intentional programming, dismantling of the hierarchy, community access, and rasquache design. This Series did not have dedicated university funding, existed outside of the scheduled Department season of shows, and was an intentional choice to connect with the comunidad; all in direct contrast to traditionally expected and accepted theatrical programming.

Creative work by excluded and underrepresented artists must intentionally be at the forefront of programming choices, excluded voices deserve space and production; it is long overdue. The theatrical programming offered by the home institution of higher learning was not reflective of the community nor was it purposeful. As the institution is located en la frontera, the borderland of the United States and Mexico, it was necessary to combat this deficiency of programming. Work by underrepresented artists was not enveloped in season programming in a community that is 84% Hispanic (terminology utilized by the institution) (UTEP), therefore, an annual theater series was generated. In partnership with a colega, the Chicana/Latina Theatre Series was activated to promote culturally connected work for the Paso del Norte region.

The Chicana/Latina Series decentered the role of the director and validated the multiple centers of knowledge mentality reflective of decolonized practices (Jimenez Estrada 2012). It was an invitation to share; employing a rejection of the rewards of hierarchy (Sanchez Saltveit 2020) the team did not focus on a leader but rather, a collective. To honor the lives and experiences of those involved in The Series, rehearsals functioned as decolonized models. Instead of setting a strict, predetermined schedule, schedules were created around availability and were limited and efficient—bucking traditional industry standards and honoring more indigenous practices of respecting the lives of artmakers (Bonnell 2020). We acknowledged that this work was only a portion of the lives of the people involved; they had several other responsibilities as people and we had no right to demand of their time.

Further, as there was no direct funding, the team incorporated the rasquache aesthetic to create the world of the play. Fabric from another show became el rio, plastic bags transformed into las nubes, palos became swords, and often old Halloween costumes and personal wardrobe items found their way into the shows. Utilizing and reusing resources can often be confused with lower quality; that perception is inaccurate and clouded by the colonized model of theater making—a mentality that items have limited life and unchecked consumption somehow equates to value. Rasquachismo challenges that notion and embraces the ingenuity of reuse. Additionally, rasquachismo design creates the opportunity for freedom. This libertad in creation stems from knowing that costumes, props, set, sound, etc. do not have to be exact; they are merely there to enhance the purpose of the

piece. With reduced focus on the spectacle of the production, dedicated focus is on the connection to the story and the message.

Included in this invitation of embracing *rasquachismo* was the acknowledgment that the product was not the goal, it was the purpose of taking work to the *comunidad*. Energy was not spent on long, arduous rehearsals and meetings, but rather on communicating, sharing, and creating. The theatrical pieces created and/or produced through this series prioritized the purpose or message of the production. From inequality (*Colitas de Rana*) and education (*Just Like Us*) to immigration (*¡Bocón!*), these pieces had a direct purpose for the community for which they were to serve; intention was at the core of programming in the Chicana/Latina Series. The Series was not housed at one specific location. Rather, each May it would travel to community centers, activist centers, and libraries. Creating partnerships with local entities created opportunities for theater makers to exercise flexibility, adaptability, and a recognition of members of their *comunidad*. The key to this process was the admission by donation policy and the rejection of having the audience come to the art. Community members that may have never felt welcome at the university could find a renewed sense of comfort when culturally connected work was presented in a space that was near their home and they could decide if and what they wanted to contribute. The purpose was to take work to the people and ensure that the people could access the work. This reiterated Valdez's concept of "Theatre is a creator of community, and community is the creator of theatre" (2022, 141). The theater cannot and should not stand alone; *comunidad* is more than necessary, it is essential.

DEFIANT SUCCESS.

Each year, the Series grew in audience size and reception. The thousands of dollars raised through donations were dedicated to student scholarships and the thousands of community members that connected with the work were welcomed and honored in spaces they decided to navigate. Due in part to the success of such work, the theatrical programming at the home institution has shifted focus to increased Chicana/Latina work either in theme or playwright. Productions since 2018 have included: *Real Women Have Curves*, *A Christmas Carol en la Frontera*, *Monsters We Create*, *ReUnión rEvolución Radio*, *Into the Beautiful North* (National Endowment for the Arts funded project), *Cenicienta*, *Zoot Suit*, and *Heroes and Saints*. It is important to acknowledge that entities outside of the university's walls such as the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival have awarded *ReUnión rEvolución Radio*, and *Cenicienta* with regional and national awards for innovation and dismantling of hierarchical and supremacist models.

FEARS, FACING FORWARD

Although here have been successes and new developments within this specific context, there is a reality that must be addressed. Theater is deeply entrenched in colonized models. Hierarchies, supremacist models, a focus on the consumerism of creation and product, and the expectation of the audience bowing to the theater have been and still are very present in educational theater training programs. To continually combat these colonized models is exhausting and overwhelming. Resistance takes an energy that is personally and mentally draining.

As a Chicana in higher education, I am aware of my position and vulnerability. While navigating the academic sphere, I am often reminded of my otherness and the fact that the work that I champion challenges the colonized model and creates tension for those that are tied to antiquated and exclusionary practices. I resonate with Kidd, et. al (2018) in naming that opinions about representation in theater by artists of the global majority can be deemed emotional, insignificant, and threatening. The continued justification and mental exhaustion of educating my peers previously intensified my imposter syndrome. Yet, if I have been forced to navigate my passion (theater) which has diminished the contributions of so many for so long, it is necessary to continually challenge supremacist models and defend a creative process that honors comunidad, la colectiva, and innovative creation, especially while working with the next generation of theater makers. I still struggle with imposter syndrome, but through maintaining the purpose of my work in rasquache tenets I know that even if I may not get to see a fully decolonized model of teatro, my students just might.

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Adriana Domínguez (she/ella) is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at UT-El Paso and focuses on excluded and underrepresented groups in the performing arts. Recent projects include Heroes & Saints, Zoot Suit, Real Women Have Curves, Lengua, and Cenicienta which received the Directors' Choice Award at the Region VI Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in 2022. Adriana is honored to live in El Paso, a vibrant community that knows no borders.

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