Nothing is more lethal than family quarrels. Not only do they breed fury, grief and unforgiving righteousness, as anyone who has studied history or drama knows (Where do we begin? Euripides, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega?), family quarrels breed or mirror national and international ones. And artists -- who, if they are worth anything, tell all without flinching or fawning -- are often accused of betraying the family's, the race's or the nation's honor; telling secrets that render them less than implacably noble in their triumph or suffering.

This gets especially murky when the artist belongs to a group that has been the butt of some of history's meanest tricks: mauld by countries, ideologies, by a race or a sex with greater power; debased here, despised there; exiled or exterminated; pleading or fighting for its cause; craving sympathy, power and respect.

The case that stirred me recently is that of "Revoltillo" ("Broken Eggs"), a play by the Cuban-American playwright and filmmaker Eduardo Machado. Gilberto Zaldivar's New York-based company, Repertorio Espanol, is taking the play to Cuba later this month. Since this is their first visit, and cultural exchanges between the two countries have been rare, there is controversy among some Cuban-Americans here.

"The usual bomb threats," a reporter said wearily. But plenty of verbal protests, too, and the nature of these was depressingly familiar to me, as an African-American and a woman. "Broken Eggs" is anti-American and anti-Cuban-American, go the complaints. There is homosexuality and divorce. The family is unhappy and neurotic.

I know and like Eduardo Machado. I got to know him because I admired his work. But artists I have never met and whose work I don't necessarily like are attacked for the same reasons: told wrongly and naively that they must embody the virtues, but only the virtues, of their people.

Why? Because their people's political and social status is constantly being challenged or attacked. So the group voice declares, "They have always thought we're ignorant, pathologically damaged by what we've gone through." Or:
"This is true, but it's shameful. They have no right to judge."
Or: "They'll never understand, and they'll use it against us."

What I saw in "Broken Eggs" was a stage filled with complicated people who cannot simplify the memories or consequences of their past in Cuba and their present in America. Nor can they pretend, for more than a few minutes at a time, that there aren't complications when people linked by blood and upbringing are divided by temperament, age, belief, love that stifles or love that doesn't suffice. I defy anyone who has ever belonged to a family, a people or a nation to say otherwise.

The talk in the play ricochets from the private to the political. Manuela, the grandmother, despises Castro and only Castro. Her daughter's generation recalls the excitement of Batista's overthrow -- remember how sexy we thought Fidel was, says one character -- and still resents the restrictions of its upbringing (the father with a string of whores who wanted a pure wife and daughter; the mother who prepared her daughter for marriage but taught her that the only man really worth loving was her father).

The third generation grew up in America. Here, a son can be openly homosexual, one daughter can marry a man who is not Cuban, and the other can describe her role in the family with the detachment of a clinical psychologist. "When you're born the third child," Mimi observes, "the marriage is already half apart, and being born into a family that's half over, half apart is a disturbing thing to live with."

Then her mother, Sonia, must try to explain: "We had just gotten to the U.S. ... We lived behind a hamburger stand between two furniture stores, away from everything we knew, afraid of everything around us. We were alone, no one spoke Spanish. Half of the people thought we were Communist, the other half traitors to the cause; 3,000 miles away from our real lives."

It's a rich play, with an undertow of sorrow and rushes of anger and humor. The director, Rene Buch, modulates the emotional chord changes beautifully. The cast, led by Miriam Colon Valle, is a first-rate ensemble.

The night I saw "Broken Eggs," the mostly Latino audience laughed, whooped and clapped, clearly exhilarated the way you are when things that have been kept silent or said only in private are said aloud.

Artists get trapped between the anxieties of their group and the constrictions of the outside world. It is common for Latino, black, Asian, gay and female writers (what a gloomy roll call in this context) to be told by some of their own that they should not wash dirty linen in public and that they
should follow a certain esthetic. It is just as common for them to be told by certain North American whites what that public wants from them and what esthetic they should, therefore, follow.

Writers get trapped in these patterns of mistrust and abuse. But it is better to be accused of disloyalty by one's so-called family than to be truly disloyal and tell lies that simplify history and imagination. (By these lights it seems only fitting that Machado's just-completed film is called "Exiles in New York.")

People complain that identity politics and political correctness encourage us to believe that the only work that speaks to us is work by and about people like us. And it is easy to feel, quite arrogantly, that we have settler's claims on certain material.

Put a diverse audience in a theater to see a play set in a particular ethnic, racial or sexual world, and it's clear that the audience members closest to that world feel that outsiders have no right to invade it with their responses. (I've been on both sides of this one: given and received those contemptuous or belligerent stares.)

The problem didn't begin here, though. It began with the homogeneity that passed so long for universality in the arts. Only in the last 30-something years have audiences been given more than the most occasional chance to see themselves and the world through people and circumstances once thought hopelessly alien. And a brief survey of theater repertories around the country shows that plays that are non-white and to a great extent non-Protestant are still not a significant part of theater fare.

I have been reading a fair amount of literature about and from Latin America recently: assorted poems and essays; Wendy Gimbel's "Havana Dreams," about three generations of ambitious, thwarted Cuban women; and Eduardo Galeano's "Memories of Fire," a three-volume collage-chronicle of Latin American history from the 15th century to modern times.

We need to know as much as we can about one another, we exiles, immigrants and citizens. Read these words by the Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, from the Borzoi Anthology of Latin American Literature:

Let poetry be like a key
That opens a thousand doors.
A leaf falls, something flies overhead;
Let as much as the eyes see be created,
And the soul of the listener tremble.

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