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Tiffany Ana López

> You can take the girl out of the South Bronx—but you would have to cut my heart out to make me forget.
>
> —Migdalia Cruz[1]

Migdalia Cruz is a Nuyorican playwright from the South Bronx who studied under the mentorship of Maria Irene Fornes at the International Arts Relations (INTAR) Hispanic Playwright's Lab in New York City during the early to mid-1980s. The author of more than thirty plays, Cruz is one of the few among the current generation of Latina dramatists able to secure a series of grants and fellowships enabling her to work as a full-time professional playwright. Her plays have been commissioned nationwide by such established production houses as The Brooklyn Academy of Music, Playwright's Horizons, Cornerstone Theatre Company, INTAR, the W.O.W. Cafe, Theater for a New Audience, Arena Stage, and The Working Theater. A 1991 finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, Cruz has also received critical recognition as an NEA and McKnight Playwrighting Fellow and a TCG/PEW National Artist in Residence. In 1995, Latino Chicago Theatre Company produced a season of her work that included *Fur, Cigarettes and Moby Dick,* and *Lolita de Lares* (on Lolita Lebron).

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[1] Artist's statement preceding *The Have-Little,* in *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color,* ed. Kathy A. Perkins and Roberta Uno (New York: Routledge, 1996), 107.

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Published in several literary anthologies and texts for actors,[2] her dramatic writing represents a variety of genres with such wide-ranging works as *Frida: The Story of Frida Kahlo* (a musical), *Telling Tales* (a collection of monologues), and *The Have-Little* (realist drama). Cruz's willingness to experiment with different types of aesthetic forms and thematic content stems from her five years with Fornes at INTAR writing alongside other prominent voices in US Latina/o drama, including Cherríe Moraga, Caridad Svich, Carmen Rivera, and Nilo Cruz. In interviews, she credits her experiences in the lab, most especially through Moraga's political boldness and Fornes's inimitable commentary, for playing the largest role in her development as a playwright. Of her time with Fornes, Cruz says, "She was very tough on me. I had been writing things that didn't really have any meaning. I was thinking this is what I should be writing, or this is how writing sounds, or this is how you sound intelligent. Instead, she made me look inward and think about how people talk, what people say, who are the people I know best to write about."[3]

Fornes, a Cuban-born playwright who has never made reference to her ethnicity as significant to the reading of her work, began the lab with the intent of fostering new voices that would revitalize the American theatre across its various genres: avant-garde, musical, realist. While she actively cultivated a space for the development of US Latina/o playwrights, at the same time Fornes shunned the nomenclature of identity politics which in the past had helped make so many minority writers visible to the mainstream. She resists the use of categories because, in her words, "just as you go to McDonald's and expect a certain kind of meal, you come to expect a certain kind of writing from a chosen category of writers."[4] Rather than ideologically or politically validate her students' work, Fornes demands that they take themselves seriously as dramatists by focusing on workshop exercises that stress formalism and aesthetics above all else. Most importantly, she concentrates on giving writers the tools they need to direct their own dramatic writing more forcefully. By doing so, she artistically confirms their existence not merely as Latina playwrights but as playwrights, period. Though the lab was short-lived (it disbanded in the early 1990s), it occupies a historic role in that it mentored a generation of writers and helped define Latina drama as a distinct arts movement. In a recent essay, Jorge Huerta's observations illustrate the lab's resonances. He writes, "plays by Cruz and Moraga are written in a 'Fornesian' style, a cinematic montage of visual images, multiple settings, brief scenes, and monologues juxtaposed with longer dialogues and situations."[5] Notably, during their

[2] Cruz's publications include: *Miriam's Flowers*, in *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women*, ed. Linda Feyder (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1992), 51–84; *Dreams of Home*, in *The Best American Short Plays 1990–92*, ed. Howard Stein and Glenn Young (New Jersey: The Fireside Theatre, 1992), 23–47; *Sand* from *Telling Tales* in *Telling Tales: New One Act Plays*, ed. Eric Lane (Penguin: New York, 1993), 1–16; *The Have-Little*, in *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*, 106–26; *Fur*, in *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/o Theatre and Performance*, ed. Caridad Svich and Teresa Marrero (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000); and *Lucy Loves Me*, in *Latinas on Stage: Criticism and Practice*, ed. Alicia Arrizón and Lillian Manzor Coats (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 2000).

[3] Midgalia Cruz interviewed by the author, Pacoima, California, 1992. Subsequent quotations are taken from this interview. For a published interview with the author, see my essay "Black Opium: An Interview with Migdalia Cruz," in *Latinas on Stage: Criticism and Practice*.

[4] Maria Irene Fornes interviewed by the author, 8 March 1994. Subsequent quotations are taken from this interview.

[5] Jorge Huerta, "Negotiating Borders in Three Latino Plays," in *Of Borders and Thresholds: Theatre History, Practice and Theory*, ed. Michal Kobialka (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 157.

time together at the lab these three figures wrote the plays that drew the most critical attention to their work as representative of Latina dramatic writing: Moraga with *Giving Up the Ghost* (1984), Fornes with *Conduct of Life* (1985), and Cruz with *The Have-Little* (1986).

While scholars have paid fairly substantial critical attention to the works of Moraga and Fornes,[6] only recently have academics begun to study Cruz's plays.[7] On one hand, this can be read as symptomatic of the attention to Puerto Rican literature in general. As Juan Flores describes it, "Even the writing of Puerto Ricans living in the United States, mostly in English and all expressive of life in this country, has remained marginal to any literary canon, mainstream or otherwise."[8] The two book-length

[6] Fornes's work has been extensively discussed in essays by theatre scholars Jill Dolan, Stacy Wolf, W. B. Worthen, and Deborah Geis, among others. These works include: Gayle Austin, "The Madwoman in the Spotlight: Plays of Maria Irene Fornes," in *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, ed. Lynda Hart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 76–85; Jill Dolan, *Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1988), 101–8; Deborah R. Geis, "Wordscapes of the Body: Performative Language as *Gestus* in Maria Irene Fornes's Plays," in *Postmodern Theatric[k]s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995), 117–34; Stacy Wolf, "Re/presenting Gender, Re/presenting Violence: Feminism, Form and the Plays of Maria Irene Fornes," in *Theatre Studies* 37 (1992): 17–31; W. B. Worthen, "*Still playing games*: Ideology and Performance in the Theater of Maria Irene Fornes," in *Feminine Focus*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford University Press), 167–85.

Diane Moroff's *Fornes: Theater in the Present Tense* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996) offers the first book-length study of Fornes's playwrighting. Moraga's work represents a cornerstone in the development of contemporary Chicana theory and, as such, has been written about extensively in Chicana/o studies by Alvina Quintana, Ramon Saldivar, and Maria Herrera-Sobek with the work of Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano providing the foundational writing for the field's inquiries into Moraga's work. For a most recent discussion of the significance of Moraga's writing to an understanding of US Latina drama, see Alicia Arrizón's *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[7] Recent scholarship on the role of Migdalia Cruz's work within US Latina/o theatre include David Román's essay, "Latino Performance and Identity," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 22:2 (Fall 1997): 151–67; Jorge Huerta's "Negotiating Borders in Three Latino Plays," in *Of Borders and Thresholds*, 154–83; and Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's references to her work throughout *José, Can You See?: Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999).

[8] In "Puerto Rican Literature in the United States: Stages and Perspectives," Juan Flores addresses the paradoxical position of Puerto Rican writers in the United States:

> After nearly a century of intense economic and political association, endless official pledges of cultural kinship, and the wholesale importation of nearly half the Puerto Rican people to the United States, Puerto Rican literature still draws a blank among American readers and students of literature. Major writers and authors are unknown and, with a handful of exceptions, untranslated; English-language and bilingual anthologies are few and unsystematic, and there is still not a single introduction to the literature's history available in English. . . . Among the "ethnic" or "minority" literatures, it [Puerto Rican literature] has probably drawn the least critical interest and the fewest readers.

From *Redefining American Literary History*, ed. A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990), 210–18. Since the publication of Flores's essay in 1988, three edited anthologies of Puerto Rican literature have been published: *Reclaiming Medusa: Short Stories by Contemporary Puerto Rican Women*, ed. Diana Vélez (San Francisco: Sisters/Aunt Lute, 1988); *Puerto Rican Writers at Home in the USA*, ed. Faythe Turner (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing, 1991); and *Boricuas*, ed. Roberto Santiago (New York: Ballantine, 1995). *Ollantay Theater Magazine*, a bilingual journal begun in 1993 which features the critical writing of academics in conjunction with playwrights and practitioners, regularly publishes on Nuyorican drama. Two anthologies devoted to Puerto Rican drama are also available, both edited by John Antush: *Nuestro New York: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Plays* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994) and *Recent Puerto Rican Theater: Five Plays From New York* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1991).

works on Latina dramatic writing, Yolanda Broyles Gónzalez's *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (1994) and Alicia Arrizón's *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (1999), focus predominantly on Chicanas. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas's definitive volume of critical essays, *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America* (1994), is exceptional in its placement of Puerto Rican theatre within the comparative contexts of Latin American and US Latino performance. Significantly, it is scholars bringing together issues of performance and queer studies who have consistently placed Puerto Rican dramatists within multifaceted frameworks. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez's *José, Can You See?: Latinos On and Off Broadway* (1999) is the most recent example of the tremendous power of such theoretical interweavings.[9] Yet, overall, fractures in the critical body of writing on Puerto Rican dramatists are compounded by the extremely problematic lack of mainstage productions of Latina/o drama. Rarely will a Latina/o play be considered for publication unless it has been produced by a major theatre company and received wide critical acclaim. This problem impacts the possibilities for wider circulation of a work among critics and scholars unable to attend original productions.[10]

Many readers of Cruz's plays, particularly those within the Puerto Rican community, have found her work difficult to address not because of the cultural specificity of her project but because of her chosen mode of representation. Certainly in film and television the kinds of characters that Cruz writes about—barrio families of poverty and violence, street people, drug addicts—have been made into stereotypes. However, much like Puerto Rican installation artist and MacArthur Fellow Pepón Osorio, Cruz positions her work in direct response to the narrow representations of Latinos in television and popular films like *Colors* and *Carlito's Way*.[11] In her words, "From what

[9] See Sandoval-Sánchez's *José, Can You See?* for his extensive bibliography.

[10] Only in 1998 did Theatre Communications Group (TCG) release its first "single-author" volumes of US Latino drama: *Life, Death and Revolutionary Comedy* by the comedy troupe Culture Clash whose work of the last fifteen years has undeniably crossed over into popular culture with great critical acclaim, and José Rivera, *Marisol and Other Plays*. While TCG has published two major anthologies on US Latina/o theatre—*On New Ground: Contemporary Hispanic-American Plays* (1987), ed. M. Elizabeth Osborn, and the forthcoming *Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/o Theatre and Performance*, ed. Caridad Svich and Teresa Marrero, this leading publisher of American theatre has yet to produce a volume devoted solely to the work of any US Latina dramatist.

Beacon press is scheduled to publish *Carmelita Tropicana: Performing Between Cultures*, a compilation of plays, essays, and short stories by Carmelita Tropicana (Alina Troyano). Until recently, Maria Irene Fornes was the only Latina dramatist whose plays were published by a large publisher of theatre (Johns Hopkins University Press's PAJ Publications: *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Maria Irene Fornes: Plays*, and *Promenade and Other Plays*). Moraga chooses to publish her work with a small independent press (South End Press).

[11] For a discussion of the history of Hollywood's stereotypic representations of Latinas, see *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, ed. Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Ana M. López, "Are All Latins from Manhattan? Hollywood, Ethnography, and Cultural Colonialism," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester Friedman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 404–24; and Rosa Linda Fregoso, *The Bronze Screen: Chicana and Chicano Film Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). For a related discussion of performance and the negotiation of identity by a Puerto Rican male artist responding to the dominant culture's representations of Latino masculinity, see my essay, "Imaging Community: Video in the Installation Work of Pepón Osorio," *Art Journal* (Winter 1995): 56–64, and the updated reprint in *Space, Site and Intervention: Issues in Installation and Site-Specific Art*, ed. Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999).

you see on TV, the drug dealer's mother just says '¡Ay, m'ijo!' and that's the character. I think the Puerto Rican drug dealer's mother is probably a really interesting woman and must be going through an awful time. In writing about those things, I find hope. Unless you look at something, you can't define it. And until you define it, you can't fix it." Despite her introspective commentary, many Latinos have difficulty with Cruz's work, seeing it as perpetuating the narrow and stereotypic roles that the mainstream continues to reserve for Latinos. In a personal interview, Cruz describes a given complaint about her writing:

> I was doing a play at INTAR and a Puerto Rican woman working in the office said what a wonderful writer she thought I was *but* . . . she asked, "Why are you always writing about junkies and pregnant teens? Our community has moved beyond that." I said, "Well, there are lawyers and doctors, but I don't know any lawyers or doctors. If that's where I came from I would write about that. These are the people I find interesting and poetic and these are the people I love." I was taken aback by her understanding that what I should be writing about as a Puerto Rican would be so exclusive.

In *José, Can You See?*, Sandoval-Sánchez describes the specific borders Latina/o dramatists are expected to cross when entering the more generalized landscape of American theatre: "In mainstream productions the act must be cleaned up when the curtain rises. Middle-class Anglo-American audiences expect to be mesmerized with the exoticism of magic realism and to be entertained with rags-to-riches stories or sagas of assimilation and success."[12] But as Cruz's anecdote illustrates, members of the Latino community also put pressure on Latina/o playwrights to generate plays with socially uplifting themes and positive role models.

Like her mentor Fornes, Cruz challenges the conventional boundaries of representation in both mainstream and Latino theatres. Her commitment to writing about characters some might describe as belonging to a Latino underworld stems from her growing up female in the South Bronx during the 1960s. The neighborhood of her childhood was a barrio community populated mostly by poor and working-class African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Though the neighborhood bound together around issues of class, other inter- and intracultural differences led to numerous unsettling divisions. The climate of social crisis during the 1960s, along with the economic depression experienced by the majority of those living in the neighborhood, fueled the atmosphere of violence that characterizes Cruz's work:

> My best friend at the age of 8 was raped and murdered and thrown off the roof of the apartment house we lived in. My next best friend was pregnant at age 13 and dead from an overdose at 15. My second to next best friend became a cop. And I started to write stuff down, hoping—if not to make sense of it, then to at least pay respect to the memory of it, of us, of a small time in history when all of us grew up too soon.[13]

In order to register the full impact of these experiences, Cruz turned to dramatic writing as a way to resist reading the violence experienced by members of her community, especially her female friends, as a series of isolated events devoid of any positive outcome for the future. As someone who made it out of the South Bronx, Cruz

[12] Sandoval-Sánchez, *José, Can You See?*, 119.

[13] Artistic statement by Migdalia Cruz preceding *The Have-Little*, in *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*, 106–7.

sees her responsibility as a playwright to tell stories about that life and to do so in a manner that indelibly inscribes on the eyes of her audience the narrative performed.

The four Cruz plays I have chosen for discussion in this essay all treat the subject of violence against children. In *Sand* (1990), a young girl falls to her death as she tries to escape her rapist; in *The Have-Little*, a male junkie overdoses after impregnating an adolescent girl in desperate need of love and acceptance; in *Miriam's Flowers* (1988), a sister mourns the tragic death of her brother by carving flowers into her arms with razor blades; during Cruz's work on *Rushing Waters* (1993), two cast members were shot and killed. I argue that the actual root of these plays is not the acts of violence themselves but the process of storytelling. In each of these works, acts of reading, writing, and performance—as enacted by a character within the play, an actress on stage, or the playwright herself—become transformative. *Sand* provided Cruz with a means for making greater sense of the death of her childhood friend. The teenage mother Lillian in *The Have-Little* turns to her journal for the love and friendship otherwise missing from her life. In *Miriam's Flowers*, the title character literally writes on her body in a desperate expression of grief unacknowledged within the family and unaccompanied by any public ritual that might bring closure to the traumatic event. For *Rushing Waters*, the community theatre project she did with Cornerstone, Cruz performed the role of cultural scribe compiling the stories of violence that comprised a particular community's shared history. Significantly, throughout her work Cruz depicts storytelling and the physical expression of emotional struggle as crucial to personal healing and the future imagining of community by youth who inherit a legacy of urban poverty and violence. My readings thus concentrate on the ways in which Cruz writes about the body as part of a process of critical resignification, showing how bodies have been marked with one meaning in order to infuse them with a more empowering and human sign.

Genre and Representations of Violence

Critical readings of Latina drama tend to focus predominantly on issues and themes without full attention to questions of aesthetics, genre, and form. Often attention to race, class, and gender—usually with the presumption that Latina dramatic writing is inherently autobiographical—supersedes more complex forms of analysis. For example, Maida Watson's reading of Fornes's *Sarita* (1984), one of her very few plays to feature Latin/o American characters or the subject of immigration, positions her as representative of Cuban exile theatre.[14] Watson leaves entirely unaddressed Fornes's career-long commitment to the avant-garde and her most significant refusal of writing "as" a Cuban playwright, in the process allowing *Sarita* to stand for Fornes's entire oeuvre. As Cruz describes the dilemma for Latina writers working in the genre of realism: "People always think I've had this tragic childhood and that all of these horrible things I write about have happened. In real life, I had a great childhood; I just had a bad neighborhood."

Such shortsighted vision has, I believe, much to do with the limited ways in which readers have been taught to think—more accurately, not to think—about dramatic writing by Latinas. Even within the ostensibly carefully contextualized spaces of such

[14] Maida Watson, "The Search for Identity in the Theater of Three Cuban American Female Dramatists," *Bilingual Review / Revista Bilingue* 16:2–3 (May–December 1991): 188–96.

anthologies as *On New Ground: Contemporary Hispanic-American Plays* and *Shattering the Myth: Plays by Hispanic Women*, the term "Latina drama" stands unclarified. Neither of the editors' introductions provides a historical or literary discussion that explains what brings together such a diverse group of playwrights or what distinguishes the works of Latina playwrights within the larger tradition of American theatre. The reader is left to assume that Latina culture and aesthetics are self-evident and self-explanatory. The most important questions remain unanswered. Precisely how does Latina drama move to new ground? Exactly what myths do Latina dramatists shatter?

Certainly, there are those playwrights like Cherríe Moraga for whom an understanding of the autobiographical most fully defines the vocabulary of their plays. Moraga's autobiographical book of essays and poems, *Loving in the War Years*, indeed illuminates the cultural specificity of her portraits of the Chicano family and accompanying focus on issues of class, gender, and sexuality in her trilogy *Heroes and Saints and Other Plays*.[15] But placing these two collections in dialogue with one another also illustrates how as a playwright Moraga purposefully moves between different genres to expand her perspective on a given theme or set of concerns. Perhaps not so coincidentally, a number of writers whose work focuses on the topic of violence write across genres. Dorothy Allison's short story "Private Rituals" published in the anthology *High Risk* relates a much different perspective on a young girl's sexual feelings than that of the same character in the novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*.[16] Kathryn Harrison tells a story of father-daughter incest first in the novel *Thicker Than Water* and then as her own memoir in *The Kiss*. Gloria Anzaldúa's portraits of living along the Texas/Mexican border in *Borderlands/La Frontera* resurface in her children's stories *Friends From the Other Side* and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*. Cruz's autobiographical reflections on the murder of her childhood friend in the monologue *Sand* becomes the launching point for her multiple character play *The Have-Little*.

In many ways *Sand* provides the ideal foundation for understanding Cruz's ongoing engagement with questions of violence and representations of female identity. It illustrates the concise theatrical metaphors, graphic details, and centrality of female characters that distinguish Cruz's playwrighting overall. More specifically, this work exemplifies Cruz's response to larger critical conversations about the female body, such as those presented in the sourcebook *Writing the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. In their introduction, the editors write,

[15] See my essay on Moraga's writing of the female body as a direct response to representations of the Chicana body within the context of Chicano nationalism, "Performing Aztlán: The Female Body as Cultural Critique in the *Teatro* of Cherríe Moraga," in *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*, ed. Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 160–77.

[16] Lynda Hart's chapter, "Bearing (to) Witness: The Erotics of Power in *Bastard Out of Carolina*," in her book *Between the body and the flesh: performing sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), presents one of the most nuanced close readings of the relationship between Allison's "Private Rituals" and her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*. By placing these works in conversation, Hart shows the slippery divide between short story and the novel, fiction and autobiography, fantasy and reality, arguing that "nominations, which function as identity markers, appear to be revelatory, when in fact they are complex negotiations *between* the public/private divide. They do not reveal a 'secret'; rather, they present an appearance of openness, that is, they create an illusion of standing in contrast to—con(against)cealing—when in fact they seal *together* oppositional and hierarchical dualisms" (11).

> Indeed, there is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences. Historically, women have been determined by their bodies: their individual awakenings and actions, their pleasure and their pain compete with representations of the female body in larger social frameworks. When we ask, "What is a woman," we are really asking questions about ideology: about how discourse has contoured the category of "woman" and about what is at stake—politically, economically, and socially—in maintaining or dismissing that category.[17]

In interviews, Cruz has said that the only thing any of her female characters fully owns is her own body. The physical body is thus the site for understanding the issues of identity that charge Cruz's plays. Yet Cruz's engagement with the subject of violence thoroughly complicates identity issues and the category of "woman." Most importantly, Cruz's representations of the female body and Latina identity must be read alongside her utilization of dramatic form. For the genres Cruz employs for telling stories of violence are just as important as, and in some cases more important than, the subject of violence itself.

Significantly, Cruz's explorations of Latina identity in relationship to structures of violence begin with the monologue, a genre which positions the viewer as witness and gives the audience, in the words of Deborah Geis, "pseudoprivileged status as the character's confidants."[18] In her book, *Postmodern Theatric[k]s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*, Geis understands the monologue as providing a narrative vehicle for characters, and in certain instances playwrights, to struggle against silence and find release from the isolation of burdensome knowledge. In particular, Geis finds the monologue to be a most important genre for marginalized voices such as women and people of color because it yields a powerful "way of 'speaking' about the attempt to enter subjectivity."[19] Certainly, all of these elements pertain to a reading of Cruz's monologue *Sand*.[20] The narrator is a young girl who watches her best friend's fall to her death while trying to escape a rapist and then later views the neighborhood's ensuing acts of retribution. She begins her story by recalling their final conversation:

> She wasn't supposed to go on the roof. I tole her not to. But she wouldn't listen to me. She never listens to me. She's always the brave one.
>
> I cried for a long time after that. I cried for her and I cried for me, because I din't go with her. I din't know what was gonna happen. And now I'll always wonder what woulda happened if I'da gone.
>
> I was on the fire escape when they caught him.[21]

The narrator's multiple attempts to focus her story gradually invite the audience to bear witness to her friend's senseless death and her own survival of the trauma. Ensuing graphic descriptions of the events viscerally register what at first seems so emotionally removed for both the character and the playwright. Cruz says of her

[17] *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 1.

[18] Geis, "Wordscapes of the Body," 14.

[19] Ibid., 3.

[20] *Sand* is part of Cruz's monologue series *Telling Tales* originally performed at HOME for Contemporary Theatre & Art in May 1990 and more recently staged at the Axis Theatre, Maryland, March 1999.

[21] *Sand*, in Lane's *Telling Tales*, 1–16.

childhood encounters with the acts of violence dramatized in *Sand*, "Things like that weren't common, but there was something about it we all sort of accepted in some way." By consciously telling these stories to an audience gathered together to witness the dramatic event, Cruz's characters actively refuse to accept such violence as common. Within the realm of theatre, Cruz's narratives of barrio violence, rape, and murder resonate much differently than the all-too-familiar versions presented on the evening news where the Latina speaker is typically put in the object position specifically thwarted by the monologue format. As Geis describes it, "The speaker of the monologue tends to take on an 'authorial' or 'authoritative' role, especially if he or she plays the part of a narrator."[22]

Cruz uses the monologue to complicate a story and broaden perspective, as illustrated when *Sand*'s narrator describes how in a quest for immediate justice residents form a posse and chase down the male perpetrator, referred to only as "him." The group takes the offender to the playground where they throw sand in his face and bury him. The speaker's father ties his legs to the back of a 1958 Plymouth Valiant and drags him through the barrio streets. After being adequately displayed and destroyed, the body is tossed back into the sandbox as a warning against similar acts of violence. Cruz describes events in the most fundamental terms, slowing down and targeting details: "He tore her clothes off with his teeth. He ripped her open with his teeth. His teeth were yellow and sharp—like gold. Golden teeth. Now he had vomit and blood caked onto his teeth. They weren't so pretty like they used to be. They looked good now. Like they were supposed to look." Cruz thus magnifies the picture in order to shift focus. While *Sand*'s narrator admits a temporary sense of rectitude upon witnessing the brutal dismemberment of the rapist in retribution for the murder of her friend—"And I smiled. . . . That's when I thought there must be a God, because there was justice"—the monologue's closing lines underscore her final feelings of fear and bewilderment: "We keep away from the sandbox now. It's strange when people from an island are scared of sand."

This final sentence captures the impact of these events on the entire neighborhood. A quintessential signifier of a Puerto Rican identity rooted to the island, sand represents the physical and emotional corruption of a utopic space associated with the growing-up years. The place where children once learned to play is transformed into a site of burial. Cruz replaces plastic buckets and shovels with dried blood and a dead body. But she also uses this final scene and its most horrifying and grotesquely graphic descriptions to highlight the violent actions behind the construction of community in its struggles over power and boundaries that so often result in the literal policing of the female body. Significantly in *Sand*, violence has not been eradicated, but merely redirected. The conditions that led to the murder of the young girl are never addressed by the adults in the community. In the end, the young girl's rape brings the men together to punish another male member of the community, but it does not become a catalyst by which to change the conditions or climate of behaviors that led to the rape in the first place.

[22] Geis, "Wordscapes of the Body," 12–13.

In her play *The Have-Little*,[23] the *Sand* story becomes a point of departure from which Cruz concentrates on the effects of urban violence on a young adolescent girl's relationships that inevitably determine her sense of what it means to be a woman. The opening stage directions encapsulate the monologue, the principle narrator now named Lillian:

> *The sound of an elevated train. LILLIAN on the fire escape. Late afternoon. The sound of glass breaking on the ground and police sirens. The sound of a crowd screaming "Kill the son-of-a-bitch!" Silence. CARMEN appears at the window behind LILLIAN who sits on the fire escape. They talk out, not to each other, with feverish intensity.*[24]

The scene ends with Lillian reiterating *Sand*'s powerful closing lines: "We keep away from the sandbox now. It's strange when people from an island are scared of sand." Like its monologue counterpart, *The Have-Little* spotlights an adolescent perspective on the limited social roles dealt within a rigid gender dynamics. However, the play goes further by focusing on the many relationships that inform Lillian's sense of identity, making space for several characters to take center stage.

Here the development of Cruz's playwrighting closely resembles that of her contemporary Cherríe Moraga who says, "I did not come to the theater quickly. My plays grew out of that place where my poetry and autobiographical essays left off, a place where having told my own story as honestly as I was able, a space opened up inside me inviting entrance for the first time for fictional characters to speak their own stories."[25] As a multiple character play, *The Have-Little* allows Cruz to continue the process of witnessing her friend's death but in a way that promotes the development of her craft as a dramatist who engages with different genres, fleshes out multiple voices, and blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, testimony and what Lynda Hart calls "pseudotestimony," where time and events based in actual experiences are made to be more about a "memorial, a remembrance, constructed in retrospect, and, as such, a hybrid of fiction and autobiography."[26]

From the play's beginning, Cruz describes mother and daughter as talking together on stage, but "not to each other." The story Carmen tells to her daughter in the first half of *The Have-Little* foregrounds this mother's fears: "The Sun got lonely and wanted a companion. So God made the Moon. But the Sun was jealous of the Moon because it was white and clear. So it stopped loving the Moon and moved further and further away from it until they started coming out at opposite times and never saw each other again" (109). A creation myth, the tale clearly serves as a parable about intracultural difference, specifically a mother's anxieties over her daughter following a life different from her own, one that in the mother's eyes displaces the personal and social importance of the mother figure. Repeatedly, Lillian's mother actively discour-

[23] *The Have-Little* was Cruz's first play to be developed at INTAR, 1986–87; it underwent further evolution at Sundance in 1987 under the title *Lillian* and later premiered at INTAR Theater 29 May–30 June 1991, directed by Nilo Cruz.

[24] *The Have-Little* is published in Perkins and Uno, *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*, 106–26. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text.

[25] Moraga, in *Contemporary Plays by Women*, 231.

[26] Hart, "Bearing (to) Witness," 173–74.

ages her from study or any other attempt to change the course of her future: "When are you gonna learn? Huh? Nothing means nothing! School don't help if you're poor. It don't teach you how to live without, do it? It makes you want things you ain't never gonna get" (109). Throughout the play Carmen denigrates Lillian's efforts at school and insists that her future is resolutely fixed within the family cycle of poverty, "You're not smart—you're like your mother. You don't have to read to learn what you need to know. What you need to know isn't in books—it's in church" (111). Significantly, the roles for women in the church are limited to virgins, martyrs, saints—and mothers, the most revered role being the mother of sons, the Virgin Mary with Jesus. Like so many of Cruz's other female characters who live in a situation of poverty, all Lillian owns is her body, which she turns into a canvas for the projection of her hopes and dreams. While Lillian's best friend Michi's good grades provide her with a ticket out of the barrio, Lillian doesn't possess the same intellectual and emotional aptitude for higher education. However, if not a star student, Lillian can certainly be a mother. Given the restriction of most viable social roles for women in her community, motherhood offers Lillian one of the few outlets available for creative or emotional expression and a sense of participating in the future building of community.

To emphasize this point, Cruz carefully details the factors that lead to Lillian's deliberate pregnancy. Her parents are both preoccupied with their own addictions and economic crisis. Lillian does not receive adequate parenting in terms of emotional attention or practical guidance. Of her father, she says, "Sometimes he grabs me and cries on my shoulder. When I move away he keeps sobbing down my back" (110). Eventually, Lillian turns to a heroin-addicted junkie as her only source of solace. When breaking the news of her pregnancy to her mother, she stresses that he was, above all, "always my friend—it din't matter how dumb I was or how pretty. He loved me like I was" (118). Lillian views her pregnancy as the only way to break her own familial cycle: "It's my moon, but it ain't never gonna go away like yours did. It's gonna smell my hands and it's gonna know it's safe. It'll take all the badness outta me because it's good, like the baby Jesus" (118). Lillian desperately wants her child—a boy—to be able to bring personal salvation and deep social change. The play closes with the image of Lillian rocking her infant son in an empty apartment heated only by the flame of a stove. Through these images, Cruz warns that if adolescent girls have nothing but their bodies with which to express themselves—if they do not have guidance, mentoring, education—then sex, and ultimately motherhood, becomes the primary means by which they work through conflict.

Bodily Inscriptions

Miriam's Flowers is one of Cruz's most controversial and most widely staged works, with seven productions between 1988 and 1992.[27] This play continues her explorations of emerging Latina identity, focusing on tensions between the lessons of the barrio and the teachings of the church experienced by an adolescent girl whose search for

[27] Staged productions of *Miriam's Flowers* between 1988 and 1992 include: Mark Taper Forum, California, November 1988; Midwest PlayLabs, Minnesota, August 1989; Playwrights' Horizons, New York, June 1990; Frank Theatre, Minnesota, February 1991; Latino Chicago Theater, Illinois, September 1991; Old Red Lion, London, England, October 1991; Intersection for the Arts/LATA, California, November 1991.

emotional expression surfaces in what Kathy O'Dell calls a "contract with the skin."[28] This one-act play's thirty-seven scenes unravel like a film montage, frame by frame, cut by cut. Cruz foregrounds the question of violence with stage directions that have the lead character cutting into her arms with razor blades. *Miriam's Flowers* thus raises a number of questions for critics and practitioners: how might a director actually stage this play? Do Miriam's acts of scarification need to be represented realistically by, for example, having the actress burst blood packs or write on her arm in red ink? Must the wounds be shown at all? What is the significance of metaphor in this work? In what ways is Cruz complicating a vocabulary of "writing the body"? Ultimately, what kind of cultural critique is Cruz attempting with such a work?

A series of flashback scenes describes how Miriam's little brother Puli is hit by a subway train as he tries to retrieve from the tracks a ball thrown by his father Nando. Miriam's mother Delfina remains in complete denial of her son's death and refuses to talk about it with her daughter: "I ain't going to no funeral. Nobody dead. Nobody in this house is dead! You understand me? Nobody."[29] Miriam's anger grows as none of the adults around her provide any kind of emotional support or guidance. Nando's concerns are more about his fears of being left without a wife: "She's like a stick for me that I don't ever want to be without, like the ones people use when they're pulling themselves up mountains."[30] Miriam begins to express her anger sexually by dressing up in her mother's slip and deliberately provoking Nando. As with Lillian from *The Have-Little*, Miriam uses her sexuality as the primary means by which to work through conflict. After a judge awards their family $8,000 for Puli's death, Miriam "goes out into the street" wearing only a trenchcoat, offering her body to men in the neighborhood.

Miriam's descriptions of her violent and sexual behavior make explicit a most deliberate use of her body as an instrument of mourning: "I cut my pussy sometime wif a nail clipper. I just clip off little parts and then I pump and pump until I come so there's blood on my pillow—so I know somefin' fuckin' happened. He only got hurt once, but I hurt all the time for him."[31] In their traditional association with funerals and death, flowers signify an offering of mourning. Yet they also symbolize the loss of female childhood innocence, as in the deflowering of the virgin, which also has associations with blood.[32] After the neighborhood grocer Enrique refuses to sell Miriam razor blades, she offers him sex in trade. Like the other adults, Enrique finds himself unable to recognize her pain and grief. Soon he begins to have sex with Miriam and on her terms. Miriam demands that she carve Enrique's wife's name into

[28] Kathy O'Dell presents one of the most insightful critical discussions to date of self-mutilation in *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 95–97. This book on 1970s performance art is "centered around individual acts of bodily violence," what O'Dell calls "masochistic performance." The concerns of the group of artists in her study include "the mechanics of alienation in art and everyday life; the psychological influences of the domestic site on art and everyday life; the sensation of being both a human subject and an object; the function of metaphor in art; and, especially, the relationship between artist and audience" (2).

[29] Cruz, *Miriam's Flowers*, 54.

[30] Ibid., 73.

[31] Ibid., 64.

[32] Both Robert Mapplethorpe's and Georgia O'Keeffe's studies on flowers associate flowers with sexuality.

his arm, further illustrating that as much as her flowers signify mourning, they also serve as a border.

Significantly, none of the characters in the play ever fully acknowledges the physical existence of Miriam's wounds. How and why, then, does Cruz include such a disturbing element in her work? Read as part of Cruz's larger body of writing, *Miriam's Flowers* most directly engages questions of representation by interpreting literally the images of masochism within the Catholic church, one of the institutions most responsible for the restriction of women's, but especially Latinas', familial and social roles.[33] On stage, wounds serve as a dramatic symbol of mourning. But also, in the context of Catholicism, wounds provide the most theatrical signifier of one's closeness to God. In talking about the significance of ritual in her work, Cruz states,

> I was obsessed with the catholic church when I was a kid. The blood rituals and the eating of Christ's body and drinking his blood is part of every Sunday mass, which is a bizarre, strange, cannibalistic thing, that was kind of sexy, too. It was mysterious, so sacred and vulgar. The church is a weird place, but for me that was the first theatre. All of it was just such a spectacle.

Throughout *Miriam's Flowers*, Cruz conjoins references to the church with images of bodily wounding. Miriam goes to mass to visit the statue of Mary holding a crucified Jesus. She puts her hands on one of his wounds and cuts into her arm, rhetorically asking, "See? You remember how it is, now? To be alive?"[34] In the face of her mother's denial, Miriam puts her arm on the windowsill and slams down the window, dramatically announcing, "Love's never gonna find you, Ma. Not Christ neither."[35] Miriam's actions and words clarify that it is not the physical but the psychic trauma she perceives as so damaging: "I'm never gonna die—not from my wounds anyway. I never go in deep and I don't make them long. I make little points that add up to a picture, a flower picture. And sometimes they're so pretty they make me cry, and I like that, 'cause when I get those tears on my hands and on my arms, they sting, and then I know I'm alive, 'cause it hurts so bad."[36] Miriam's flowers externalize her feelings of rage and grief, but they also make visible her appeals to a higher power, like the crucified body of Christ or the Virgin with her tears of blood.

Cruz has said of such graphic images in her work, "The body is all you'll have if you strip a person of all their things. If you're looking at a naked body and you want to show mourning, you could cover the eyes or pull them out. It depends upon how much pain you're in. How do you make that theatrical?" Similarly, of a visit to her doctor, Miriam reports, "The doctor at the clinic said he never seen nothin' like it. He never known nobody who tore out their eyelashes like I do when I get bad dreams." Throughout this play, Cruz employs graphic images rooted in Catholicism and a much larger historical context of images of ritualized mourning. In the play's closing scene, Miriam engages in a final act of scarifying the dead. Her mother dies, drowned in the bathtub, Miriam by her side carving flowers on her arms:

[33] I am grateful to my colleague Kathleen McHugh for her conversation with me about the film *Stigmata*, which helped lead me to this point.

[34] Cruz, *Miriam's Flowers*, 67–68.

[35] Ibid., 76.

[36] Ibid., 71.

> You're gonna like you flowers, Mami. I'm trying to make them roses, but they ain't looking like roses. They look like tulips, but that's good 'cause it's almost spring and tulips always come up first. That's what it says in this book I got from the library about how to draw flowers and they give you a little story about each one. And like tulips start it all up again. You know, like after everything's been sleeping with snow on top of it, there comes cutting up from the middle of it, a tulip. And if you look at one, you see it really looks like a pair of lips, stretching up to heaven. . . .You're gonna open your eyes and the first thing you're gonna see are these flowers climbing way up your arm and you're gonna be so happy. They gonna make you feel like spring inside. And they'll remind you of me. . . . Now, they'll treat you like a saint.[37]

Stage directions describe Delfina as dripping wet, her dead body laid out on the family couch. This closing image provides a hopeful metaphor for healing if we read Miriam's gesture as an attempt to transform her mother into a "saint" with wounds that finally evidence her value beyond the role of a son's mother. However, Cruz leaves unanswered the question of Miriam's future; her family and community appear completely devoid of figures willing to nurture their youth. As illustrated in her next play *Rushing Waters*, without parenting and mentoring relationships, youth remain unable to see beyond any situation of crisis or to envision a hopeful future.

Beyond the Text: Theater as Ritual

Throughout her career, Cruz has worked with youth-oriented group theatre projects designed to introduce young people to the world of creative expression and a larger sense of commitment to community building beyond the walls of the street and stage. In 1992, Cruz was commissioned to write *Rushing Waters* for Cornerstone Theater Company, a grassroots organization devoted to developing theatre as a means of fostering dialogue in racially divided communities. Cornerstone began its five-year bridge project in Los Angeles in 1991 to instigate dialogue among various ethnic communities in the immediate Los Angeles area. Large grants and endowments enable Cornerstone to enter a community, work with its members for long periods of time, and teach them to use theatre both as a form of entertainment and a tool for social and political empowerment. The goal is to encourage groups of people who have historically remained at odds to talk and work together. The plays are put on in community spaces, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, senior citizen housing projects, and shopping malls. After a successful production run, Cornerstone then leaves behind a working theatre to be carried on by members who will continue building bridges through their theatre.

As part of the bridge project in Los Angeles, Cornerstone invited Cruz to write a play that would bring together many of the disparate racial groups in Pacoima, California. The resulting play, *Rushing Waters*, staged in February 1993, addresses the predominantly African American and Latino residents of Pacoima and their shared history, one which includes colonization, drug wars, race riots, family values, and multiculturalism. In this play, an interracial couple's biological children are taken away by spirit people of the nearby mountains called Rushing Waters, a "spirit place" that rescues children unhappy with their home life due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect. Throughout most of the play, the mother and father search for their children

[37] Ibid., 83–84.

whose spirit guides help redirect the adults' priorities as individuals, a couple, and parents. The children return when the parents learn to express their love for another, for their children, and ultimately for their entire community by adopting the unclaimed children left behind in the spirit place.

In many respects, however, the play's plot seems less important than its process of rehearsal. *Rushing Waters* instigated the actual community building that took place in mounting the show. As with her earlier works, Cruz intertwined thematic concerns with aesthetic considerations. She wrote the play as a musical with a cast of more than forty people, providing for a wide range of races, ages, and abilities so that as many people from the community as possible could participate in the project. The large cast remained in constant movement as people sang, danced, and performed the previously untold social history of Pacoima. The simply constructed set allowed the props to move fluidly with the actors, clearly giving way to visual metaphors that seamlessly bound stories of the past with those of the present. A completely mirrored back wall reflected the audience as they watched the actors, visually reminding viewers that *Rushing Waters* in its entirety represented the actors, crew members, parents, family, and friends gathered for the event. The play had a tremendous and immediate effect on the audience. The night I attended the production, the atmosphere was festive and people laughed, cried, and talked back throughout the event.

In the course of the project, Cruz worked with people who had never done theatre before and got sparring factions of the African American and Latino communities to, in her words, "actually act and sing and, in the end, I think, make peace with each other."[38] Parents who had never spoken to one another before began to talk about the issues affecting their neighborhoods; younger members of the community got seriously involved in the project, with several cast members later participating in five other community bridge theatre projects. By writing local concerns into the script and rehearsing local actors into the roles, Cornerstone and Cruz introduced a substantial group of youth to theatre as a form of ritual and a model of community building. For more than a month, cast members were put in a situation in which they had to get to know one another. During the period of rehearsal, two youths involved in the play were murdered. The first killing occurred during the first month of Cruz's residency in Pacoima: Efraín López, nineteen, high on PCP and armed with only a straw broom, was shot nine times by the same Los Angeles Police Department Foothills division that beat Rodney King in a housing project a few blocks from the performance space. The second occurred a few weeks before the play opened when Tiffany Dosher, twelve, was shot by a gang member upset over being denied entrance into a "teens only" dance held at the same performance space in the Boys and Girls Club of San Fernando Valley where the play ultimately premiered. Those involved in the production had to decide whether or not to go on with the play. They chose to continue to honor the memory of their friends, embracing theatre as a new way to address violence and racism in their community. In her preface to *Rushing Waters*, Cruz writes of her experience with this project and the potential of theatre as a means of reimagining community:

[38] Of this work, Cruz writes, "This experience remains my hardest and most heartfelt." From "Necessary Things," submitted to *Theater Magazine* for a special issue on utopian theater. Manuscript in the possession of the author.

> Death could not have come much closer to us, but in the doctored lights and make-shift set that was our theatre, we sang and cried and prayed for change. In the Rushing Waters of our tears we could not forget Efraín or Tiffany or any of the countless others lost to senseless violence. They became part of our collective histories—their souls tied to this play and this place like the lace of angels' wings.[39]

In looking at the trajectory of Cruz's early plays about youth in crisis, *Rushing Waters* clearly illustrates the powerful healing derived from mentoring relationships, the intellectual and emotional guidance so desperately sought by Latina/o youth both on and off the stage.

Throughout Cruz's plays, physical wounds externalize the psychic wounding that Latina/o characters must overcome if they are to rebuild and reimagine more tolerant and inclusive communities. Migdalia Cruz's strategic employment of violent images demands that the audience question a community's ability to heal when its members are systematically assaulted. A focus on Cruz's engagement with violence and her writing of the body is critically instructive because it clearly illustrates the shift from viewing identity as essential to seeing it as a constructed, and therefore contestable, site.

[39] From galley proof of *Rushing Waters*, with an introduction by Tony Kushner. Manuscript in the possession of the author. The publishing house originally contracted for this play refused to publish the work because Cruz writes of Charles Lindbergh as a Nazi sympathizer and Darryl Gates as a racist. Though Cruz has provided documents that defend these positions, the publishers refuse to print the manuscript unless Cruz alters her original text—which she refuses to do.