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From *West Side Story* to *Hamlet*, *Prince of Cuba*: Shakespeare and Latinidad in the United States

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IN THIS SHORT PAPER I hope to introduce a brief history of Shakespeare and Latinidad¹ and the questions that this rapidly growing field raises for theater making, as well as for performance analysis. I use the umbrella term of "Latino Shakespeares" to describe a textual adaptation or a performance in which Shakespearean plays, plots, or characters are *made Latino*. Latino Shakespeares are booming; there have been over forty Latino Shakespearean productions in the United States, most of which were produced in the last ten years, and a quarter of which occurred in the last two years. They range geographically across the country, from regional to repertory theaters, from Shakespeare festivals to universities. Examples include productions such as Edit Villarreal's 1991 *The Language of Flowers*, a *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation set during Day of the Dead festivities; Yale Repertory's 2002 all-male, all-Latino *The Taming of the Shrew*; the 2004 Los Angeles musical *Zoot Suit Romeo and Juliet*; the 2009 bilingual Broadway revival of *West Side Story* in which the Sharks sang and spoke in Spanish and the Jets in English; Oregon Shakespeare's 2011 *Measure for Measure* set in a border town with a mariachi band as the Chorus; and the 2014 post-apocalyptic *Henry IV* adaptation entitled *El Henry* funded through La Jolla Playhouse and staged in the streets of San Diego.

Latino Shakespeares did not surface through the agitprop Teatro Campesino from the 1960s or with the birth of contemporary Latino theater in the 1980s, but rather resulted from two concurrent but distinct genealogies. They were developed both by Latino directors and playwrights who adapted Shakespeare for Latino audiences, and as outreach initiatives by white practitioners (who are Jewish,

gay, Anglo but foreign-born, or a combination of the three) who sought to tell their stories of acculturation through a different ethnic group. Latino Shakespeares vary in the quantity and usage of the English and Spanish languages, in the ratio of Latino and non-Latino actors and directors, and in their dramaturgical strategies for conveying *Latinidad*. Latino Shakespeares destabilize the binaries that classify productions as concept or traditional, Shakespearean or Latino, adaptation or translation. These productions are not “intercultural,” or demonstrative of cultural exchange, but “intra-cultural,” indicative of current American culture and Shakespeare’s position in it. Thus they should be understood as a new development in American theater.

The intersection of American Shakespeare production and Latino culture can be traced back to September 1957 to two unrelated theatrical events in New York. That month, Joseph Papp of the New York Shakespeare Festival (now the Public Theater) mounted his first Mobile Theater production in an effort to bring Shakespeare to the people of the diverse boroughs and many neighborhoods of New York. Nearby, *West Side Story* opened in the well-established Broadway theater district. *West Side Story* changed the trajectory of musical theater, but not just that: it would become the most significant theatrical construction of *Latinidad* on Broadway and film for the next fifty years. The musical offers a highly contested depiction of Latinos set in opposition to a gang of border whites² and is mediated through an ethnicized adaptation of a Shakespearean play, shifting Shakespeare’s households that are “both alike in dignity” to ethnically different ones.

The multiple legacies of *West Side Story* to the “Latino-ization” of Shakespeare cannot be overstated. It is the subtext, intertext and übertext with which Latino Shakespeares continue to be in fraught dialogue today. Reverberations of *West Side Story* are numerous, but here I will address two of them, both of which suggest that one value of Latino Shakespeares lies in their aptness to move outside racial categories still largely conceived of as binary and remarked for the most part visually.

The first is what I term “The *West Side Story* Effect.” It involves the re-inscribing of Shakespearean representations of difference of various kinds—class, locale, familial—as a cultural-linguistic difference. This is seen now not just in Latinoized productions and adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* or limited to Latino Shakespeares, but in non-Latino *Romeo and Juliets* and other Shakespearean productions.

The second has to do with the trajectory of *West Side Story*, which moved from monolingual in its original inception and initial revivals, to bilingual in 2009, to semi-bilingual from 2009–12 when the Broadway run and subsequent touring production removed much of the Spanish to cater to monolingual English-speaking audiences. This path elevates the role of aurality in depicting a cultural division. Casting white actors as Jets and Latino actors as Sharks was not sufficient for conveying ethnicity to today's audiences; the Spanish language was incorporated and then changed as the show moved geographically to various cities with different cast members, audience expectations, and demographics. *West Side Story*'s legacy, clearly evidenced in Latino Shakespeares, is that white skin color is not a reliable marker of whiteness nor is it the theatrical counterpoint to Latinidad—monolingualism is.

The influx of Latino Shakespeares signals the growing desire to represent Latinidad onstage in productions and theaters not historically designated for Latinos or Latino Theater, and it also signals an ongoing reevaluation of American whiteness that is constructed through opposition to an auditory, rather than a visual, Other. Although casting choices and elements of the *mise-en-scène* contribute to cultural construction, dramaturgically, the Spanish voice (or the Spanish language) is a key signifier used to convey Latino culture. Spanish is used to overcome the challenge of recognizing an “authentic” Latino body onstage. The liminal figure of a Latino presents a way of imagining a visually diverse group of people whose heritage ranges from California to Texas, Puerto Rico to Cuba, Spain, Argentina, and so forth. Because Spanish dialects, accents, and slang vary just as widely, frequently the musical soundscape is used to specify a particular Latino culture where other auditory markers do not.

In twenty-first century Latino Shakespeares, oftentimes bilingual Latino actors who speak English without a Spanish accent are cast in lead roles,³ and secondary characters are played by a range of brown-haired actors, who are white, Latino, and sometimes black, who use a Spanish inflection to signal their characters' ethnicity. This structure asks the audience to recognize ethnicity aurally for some characters and visually for others. Ultimately, Latino Shakespeares make clear that the performance of ethnicity places greater value on aural signifiers and requires a model of analysis that prioritizes language and sound.

What audiences finally see (and hear) onstage is only a small por-

tion of what occurs in the process of the theater making of Latino Shakespeares, which includes the politics of the rehearsal room. As Latino Shakespeares mix practitioners and roles that are Latino and non-Latino, Spanish speaking and non-Spanish speaking, challenges arise for monolingual directors to coach monolingual and bilingual actors in bilingual roles. Asolo Repertory's 2012 *Hamlet, Prince of Cuba*, was performed in Shakespearean English for one month and then entirely in Spanish for one weekend by the same cast, although some of the cast, and the director, did not speak Spanish. The director employed Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Nilo Cruz to do the translation and a bilingual Latino voice instructor, who was the first person to translate the Linklater voice method into Spanish, to work with the actors. This voice instructor, Antonio Ocampo-Guzmán, first recognized the need for both bilingual and Spanish voice methods when he directed Florida Shakespeare's bilingual *Romeo and Juliet* in 2005, and he has since trained other bilingual and Spanish-speaking coaches. In this way, Latino Shakespeares expand not just the reception of ethnicity, but the directorial strategies and acting methods for producing it.

The field of Latino Shakespeares demands new tools for theater making, and it does for performance analysis as well. Viewers of, and listeners to, Latino Shakespeares hear modern-day Spanish, perhaps in a variety of regional accents, together with Elizabethan/Jacobean English, and see a bevy of racial and ethnic bodies onstage. This lack of temporal, linguistic, and cultural cohesion calls into question—which is more foreign to today's audience: Modern-day Spanish or Elizabethan/Jacobean English? This cross-temporal code switching, the movement between languages from different time periods, can facilitate understanding for people who do not speak either language. For example, in Chicago Shakespeare's 2008 bilingual staged reading of *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio's first greeting to Romeo, "Good morrow, cousin" became "Buenos días cousin,"⁴ translating the greeting to a familiar phrase that eased comprehension for even non-Spanish-speaking audience members.

Funding initiatives specifically for what many would consider to be "cultural adaptations" are all but non-existent. Larger grants and corporate funding such as Shakespeare for a New Generation and funding from the Ford Foundation has assisted the production of Latino Shakespeares, but mostly in larger, established Shakespeare

theaters. The National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures (NALAC) offers a substantial grant that is open to Latino artists and organizations that “demonstrate artistic excellence in pursuit of social justice through the arts,”⁵ which makes Latino Shakespeares less likely to be funded. Without consistent financial support, most theaters that have produced a Latino Shakespeare have not produced a second one.

Programming strategies have also affected productions in larger theaters that have staged more than one Latino Shakespeares. At the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), a theater whose commitment to diversity has been exemplary for years, when Latino Shakespeares are staged, new works by Latino playwrights are not. For example, in 2009 the Festival staged an adaptation of *Don Quijote* penned by a Latino playwright, in 2010 a new play by a Latino playwright, in 2011 and 2012 they offered Latino Shakespeares, and in 2013 and 2014 new plays by Latina playwrights. But plays written by or about Latinos are not mounted in the same year as Latino Shakespeares; the Hispanic/Latino diversity box is fulfilled by either one or the other.⁶

This could be viewed as either a positive or negative consequence of Latino Shakespeares, but I argue that it clearly signals that Shakespeare is now part of the Latino Theatre canon, and similarly, other Latinoized classics are becoming so as well. Adaptations of works from the Spanish Golden Age such as Carlos Morton’s *Johnny Tenorio (El Burlador de Sevilla)* and Octavio Solis’s *Dreamlandia (Life is a Dream)* and of classical Greek drama such as Luis Alfaro’s *Oedipus El Rey (Oedipus the King)* and *Electricidad (Electra)* are making their way onto prominent stages. But Latino Shakespeares have gained the greatest traction. Indeed, in the October 2014 Encuentro in Los Angeles, an unprecedented one-month Latino Theatre festival with seventeen productions, there was only one work by a non-Latino playwright: a production of *Julius Caesar*.

Latinos are the fastest growing American minority group, and by 2050, the United States will be “the third largest Latin American nation, behind Brazil and Mexico.”⁷ As scholars of Shakespearean performance, if we do not talk about Latinos onstage, or why they are not onstage, or how Latino culture is being portrayed or being ignored, we are not talking about American Shakespearean performance.

Notes

1. “Latinidad” is a term that translates directly to “Latinity.” Latinos are typically defined as Americans or people living in the United States who are of Latin and South American descent. To note, “Hispanic” includes people of Spanish origin and is a term predicated on the Spanish language as the unifier across nations of people.

2. *West Side Story* does not present a group of ideal whites in contrast to Latinos, but rather a version of whiteness that deviates from the model citizen. Neither gang is presented as aspirational, and division in *West Side Story* has as much to do with all of youth culture as outsiders as it does with Puerto Ricans. “Whiteness on the border” is a term used by scholar Lee Bebout to describe the relationship between “whiteness and the Aztlán-reconquista narrative” (“The Nativist Aztlán: Fantasies and Anxieties of Whiteness on the Border,” *Latino Studies* 10, no. 3 (2012): 298), but here I use the term “border whites” to designate the Jets’ precarious position as whites who are not accepted by other more assimilated and middle-class whites. The Jets are unified through their position in society, their gang identity, and their white skin, but not through a shared national or cultural background or an ancestral language like the Sharks.

3. This is the common construct in Latino Shakespeares. By contrast, Shakespearean productions with Latinos in lead roles but without a Latino theme (e.g., much of Raul Juliá’s body of work at the Public Theater) often allow Latino actors to retain their accents, especially if they are well-known or celebrity actors.

4. Henry Godinez and Karen Zacarías, *Romeo y Julieta* (Unpublished Script, 19 July 2008, MS), 3.

5. “NALAC Fund for the Arts (NFA).” NALAC (National Association for Latino Arts and Cultures). Nalac.org. <http://www.nalac.org/nfa> Web. 5 Oct. 2014.

6. Although OSF’s season includes only one Spanish or Latino play per year, they offer additional events and support the development and staging of works by Latino playwrights. When Bill Rauch became the artistic director in 2007, he established a commitment to diversity in casting, staffing, and programming that has expanded each year. In summer 2008, OSF hosted a Festival Latino, and due to the success of the event, it morphed into CultureFest in 2010, which is now a biannual event that is inclusive of other cultures. In 2013, OSF hosted a Latina/o Play Project that became an annual initiative, and by 2015, OSF’s Web site included synopses in both English and Spanish of all productions.

7. Antonio Viego, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 108.

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