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Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover (and Other STDs)*

José Esteban Muñoz

Ethnicity, Affect, and Performance

The theoretical incoherence of the identity demarcation "Latino" is linked to the term's failure to actualize embodied politics which contest the various antagonisms within the social that challenge Latino/a citizen-subjects. While important political spectacles have been staged under group identity titles such as Chicano and Nuyorican, Latino, a term meant to enable much-needed coalitions between different national groups, has *not* developed as an umbrella term that unites cultural and political activists across different national, racial, class, and gender divides. This problem has to do with its incoherence, by which I mean the term's inability to index, with any regularity, the central identity tropes that lead to our understandings of group identities in the United States. "Latino" does not subscribe to a common racial, class, gender, religious, or national category, and if a Latino can be from any country in Latin America, a member of any race, religion, class, or gender/sex orientation, who then is she? What, if any, nodes of commonality do Latinas/os share? How is it possible to know *latinidad*?

Latino/a can be understood as a new social movement. In this sense I want to differentiate between citizen-subjects who subscribe to the category Latino/a and those the US census terms "Hispanic." Rejecting "Hispanic" in and of itself does not constitute a social movement, nor am I suggesting any such thing. But I do want to posit that such a linguistic maneuver is the germ of a self-imaging of Latino as, following the important and path-breaking work of Chicana feminist Norma Alarcón, an "identity-in-difference." In this schematic an identity-in-difference is one that understands the structuring role of difference as the underlying concept in a group's mapping of collective identity. For Alarcón an identity-in-difference is an optic better

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suit to consider contemporary mappings of diversity than the now standardized homogenizing logic of multiculturalism.¹ To be cognizant of one's status as an identity-in-difference is to know that one falls off majoritarian maps of the public sphere, that one is exiled from paradigms of communicative reason and a larger culture of consent. This exile is more like a displacement, the origin of which is a historically specific and culturally situated bias that blocks the Latina/o citizen-subject's trajectory to "official" citizenship-subject political ontology.

This blockage is one that keeps the Latina/o citizen-subject from being able to access normativity, playing out as an inability to *perform* racialized normativity. A key component of my thesis is the contention that normativity is accessed in the majoritarian public sphere through the affective performance of ethnic and racial normativity. This performance of whiteness primarily transpires on an affective register. Acting white has everything to do with the performance of a particular affect, the specific performance of which grounds the subject performing white affect in a normative life world. Latinas and Latinos, and other people of color, are unable to achieve this affective performativity on a regular basis.

In his study *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams coined the term "structure of feeling" to discuss the connections and points of solidarity between working-class groups and a social experience that can be described as "in process" yet nonetheless historically situated.² Williams's formulation echoes Alarcón's explication of "identity-in-difference" as "identity-in-process."³ I will suggest that Williams's approach and a general turn to affect might be a better way to talk about the affiliations and identifications between radicalized and ethnic groups than those available in standard stories of identity politics. What unites and consolidates oppositional groups is not simply the fact of identity but the way in which they perform affect, especially in relation to an official "national affect" that is aligned with a hegemonic class. Latina/o (and other minoritarian) theatre and performance set out to specify and describe ethnic difference and resistance not in terms of simple being, but through the more nuanced route of feeling. More specifically, I am interested in plotting the way in which Latina/o performance theatricalizes a certain mode of "feeling brown" in a world painted white, organized by cultural mandates to "feel white."⁴

¹ See Norma Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 127–48.

² Williams warns us that it is important to "on the one hand acknowledge (and welcome) the specificity of these elements—specific dealings, specific rhythms—and yet to find their specific kinds of sociality, thus preventing the extraction from social experience which is conceivable only when social experience itself has been reduced." Thus the trick here is to identify specific "dealings" and "rhythms" that might not be recognizable or identifiable in relation to already available grids of classification, while, on the other hand, understanding these specific "feelings" as part of a larger social matrix and historically situated. See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 133.

³ Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects," 136.

⁴ While this essay is meant to be self-contained and stand on its own, it is also a prolegomenon of sorts to a book-length project on Latino as a structure of feeling, a way of "feeling brown" in the world. That book will tentatively share the same title as this article.

Standard models of United States citizenship are based on a national affect. English-only legislation initiatives throughout the nation call for English to be declared the official national language. In a similar fashion there is an unofficial, but no less powerfully entrenched, national affect. It is thus critical to unpack the material and historical import of affect as well as emotion to better understand failed and actualized performances of citizenship. May Joseph has brilliantly explicated the ways in which the performative aspects of citizenship have been undertheorized in previous discourses on citizenship. She reminds readers that within the important discourses on citizenship and participatory democracy, “[p]erformance emerges as an implied sphere rather than an actually located project.”⁵ In this analysis, following Joseph’s lead, I position performance as an actualized sphere, one which needs to be grasped as such to enact an analysis of citizenship. Citizenship is negotiated within a contested national sphere in which performances of affect counter each other in a contest that can be described as “official” national affect versus emergent immigrant. The stakes in this contest are nothing less than the very terms of citizenship. It is thus useful to chart and theorize the utility efficacy of different modes of affective struggle. This essay suggests that it is useful to look at contemporary US Latina/o drama and performance as symbolic acts of difference that insist on ethnic affect within a representational sphere dominated by the standard national affect.

I contend that this “official” national affect, a mode of being in the world primarily associated with white middle-class subjectivity, reads most ethnic affect as inappropriate. Whiteness is a cultural logic which can be understood as an affective code that positions itself as the law. The lens of Foucauldian discourse analysis permits us to understand whiteness and the official national affect that represents its interests as a truth game.⁶ This game is rigged insofar as it is meant to block access to freedom to those who cannot inhabit or at least mimic certain affective rhythms that have been preordained as acceptable. From the vantage point of this national affect code, Latina/o affect appears over the top and excessive. The media culture, a chief disseminator of “official” national affect, often attempts to contain Latina/o images as spectacles of spiciness and exoticism.⁷ Such mainstream depictions of Latino affect serve to reduce, simplify, and contain ethnic difference. The work of many Latino/a playwrights and performers operates in direct opposition to the majoritarian sphere’s media representation of Latinos. Much of this performance work functions as political attempts to contest and challenge prefabricated media stereotypes with dense and nuanced accounts of the emotional performances of self that constitute Latina/o difference and survival.

⁵ May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 14.

⁶ Foucault discusses truth games (*les jeux de vérité*) throughout his oeuvre. In one particularly useful interview Foucault describes truth games and their relation to the self: “I have tried to find out how the human subject fits into certain games of truth, whether they were to take the form of a science or refer to scientific models, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control.” Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in Paul Rabinow, ed., *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 281.

⁷ For more on Latino exoticism, see *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, ed. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997).

The affect of Latinos/as is often off. One can even argue that it is off-white. The “failure” of Latino affect, in relation to the hegemonic protocols of North American affective comportment, revolves around an understanding of the Latina or the Latino as affective excess. I know I risk reproducing some predictable clichés as to the Latino being “hot n spicy” or simply “on fire.” I answer these concerns by making two points: (1) It is not so much that the Latina/o affect performance is so excessive, but that the affective performance of normative whiteness is minimalist to the point of emotional impoverishment. Whiteness claims affective normativity and neutrality, but for that fantasy to remain in place one must only view it from the vantage point of US cultural and political hegemony. Once we look at whiteness from a racialized perspective, like that of Latinos, it begins to appear to be flat and impoverished. At this moment in history it seems especially important to position whiteness as lack. (2) Rather than trying to run from this stereotype, Latino as excess, it seems much more important to seize it and redirect it in the service of a liberationist politics. Such a maneuver is akin to what I have described elsewhere as a disidentification with toxic characterizations and stereotypes of US Latinos. A disidentification is neither an identification nor a counter-identification—it is a working on, with, and against a form at a simultaneous moment.⁸ Thus the “hot n spicy spic” is a subject who cannot be contained within the sparse affective landscape of Anglo North America. This then accounts for the ways in which Latina/o citizen-subjects find their way through subgroups that perform the self in affectively extravagant fashions.

Minoritarian identity has much to do with certain subjects’ inability to *act* properly within majoritarian scripts and scenarios. Latinos and Latinas are stigmatized as performers of excess—the hot and spicy, over-the-top subjects who simply do not know when to quit. “Spics” is an epithet intrinsically linked to questions of affect and excess affect. Rather than simply reject this toxic language of shame I wish to reinhabit it and suggest that such stigmatizing speech permits us to arrive at an important mapping of the social. Rather than say that Latina/o affect is too much, I want to suggest that the presence of Latina/o affect puts a great deal of pressure on the affective base of whiteness, insofar as it instructs us in a reading of the affect of whiteness as underdeveloped and impoverished.

The inquiry I am undertaking here suggests that we move beyond notions of ethnicity as fixed (something that people are) and instead understand it as performative (what people do), providing a reinvigorated and nuanced understanding of ethnicity. Performance functions as socially symbolic acts that serve as powerful theoretical lenses through which to view the social sphere. I am interested in crafting a critical apparatus that permits us to read ethnicity as a historical formation uncircumscribed by the boundaries of conventional understandings of identity. In lieu of viewing racial or ethnic difference as solely cultural, I aim to describe how race and ethnicity can be understood as “affective difference,” by which I mean the ways in which various historically coherent groups “feel” differently and navigate the material world on a different emotional register.

⁸ See my book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) for more on the cultural politics of disidentifications.

To better understand affective difference a turn to the phenomenological psychology articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre is efficacious. The methodological underpinnings of my approach have included Williams's historicization of feeling and Alarcón's formulations of an identity-in-difference. Sartre's 1939 text, *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*, first formulated many of the major ideas that would be fully realized in *Being and Nothingness*, the major text of the first half of his career. In that brief book Sartre rejects a Freudian notion of the unconscious and instead insists on a Husserlian description of the "conscious phenomenon" that is emotion. For Sartre consciousness is a conscious activity, the act of knowing that one thinks. Emotion is thus an extension of consciousness, what I would call a performed manifestation of consciousness. According to Sartre, humans comprehend the world as making demands on them. Life in this existentially and phenomenologically oriented description consists in a set of tasks, things we need to do. We encounter routes and obstacles to the actualization of certain goals, and make a map for ourselves of the world which includes these pathways and blocks to these goals. But when we are overwhelmed by this map of the world, a map replete with obstacles and barriers to our self-actualization, we enact the "magical" process that Sartre describes as emotions. When facing a seemingly insurmountable object, we turn to emotion. Sartre concludes this study by writing, "The study of emotions has indeed verified this principle: an emotion refers to what it signifies. And what it signifies is indeed, in effect, the totality of human relations of human-reality to the world."⁹ I am most interested in this notion of emotion being the signification of human reality to the world. Such a theory is deeply relational. It refuses the individualistic bent of Freudian psychoanalysis and attempts to describe emotions as emotions, the active negotiations of people within their social and historical matrix.

While these ideas about the relational nature and social contingency of emotion are helpful in the articulation of this writing project, it is equally important to posit that I do not subscribe to Sartre's approach without some deep reservations. Sartre ultimately describes the emotions as regressive, explaining that consciousness can "be-in-the-world" in two different fashions. One mode is what he calls an "organized complex of utilizable things," while the other magical way of being in the world clicks into place when the organized matrix of utensils is no longer perceivable as such and one becomes overwhelmed.¹⁰ Emotions describe for Sartre our relations to a world that has overwhelmed us. In Sartre's paradigm the magical realm of emotions is something *we regress into* when under duress. It does not take much critical scrutiny to unpack this move as betraying a typically misogynist gender logic that positions men as reasonable and better suited to deploying the world of utensils whereas women (and men who are overly feminine) are cast as a weaker order who must regress to a magical relation with the world. Furthermore, the discussion of magic and regression resonates with an understanding of people of color as primitives who forsake reason only to hide behind jujus.

Yet the actual description of an emotion can nonetheless be useful to a minoritarian theory of affect. Emotions are described in Sartre's book as surfacing during moments

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen and Co., 1962), 93.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

of losing one's distance in relation to the world of objects and people. Because stigmatized people are presented with significantly more obstacles and blockages than privileged citizen-subjects, minoritarian subjects often have difficulty maintaining distance from the very material and felt obstacles that suddenly surface in their own affective mapping of the world. The world is not ideologically neutral. The organization of things has much to do with the way in which capital and different cultural logics of normativity that represent capital's interests give normative citizen-subjects advantageous distance. I estimate that the use of Sartre's affective sketch is the way it can help minoritarian subjects better comprehend the working of emotion. This mapping can potentially enable a "critical" distance that does not represent a debunking of emotion but, instead, an elucidation of emotion's "magical" nature within a historical web. The phenomenological aspect of Sartre's inquiry demystifies the magic of emotion and this in and of itself is an important contribution to a theory of the affective nature of ethnicity.

Unlike Sartre, Walter Benjamin values the realm of affect, which he sees as a vital human resource under siege by the advent of technology. For Benjamin, the realm of affect has been compromised within the alienating age of mechanical reproduction. Though some technology represents the possibility for a utopian return of affect (notably cinema), Benjamin nonetheless longs and searches for strategies by which affect could work through (not avoiding, ignoring, or dismissing) the numbing alienation associated with technological modernization. Furthermore, he pursues aesthetic strategies that, as Miriam Hansen put it, "reassess, redefine, the conditions of experience, affectivity, memory and the imagination."¹¹ Sartre's work, when considered and partially amended in relation to a writer like Benjamin, stands as a productive theoretical opening.

Within this field of contested national affect, Latina/o drama possesses the potential to stage theoretical and political interventions. David Román has argued that the performance of Latino has "been politically efficacious for people from quite distinct cultural backgrounds and ideological positions to meet and organize under the label of Latina/o and Chicana/o in order to register an oppositional stance to majoritarian institutions."¹² While I have stated that the term "Latino" has been politically incoherent, it has nonetheless, as Román has argued, done some important political work.¹³ The performance praxis of US Latina/os assists the minoritarian citizen-subject in the process of denaturalizing the United States' universalizing "national affect" fiction as it asserts ontological validity and affective difference. A useful example of this theoretical/political potential is the often misread drama by the Cuban American playwright, Maria Irene Fornes, who eschews identity labels like Latina. Her refusal or reluctance to embrace an uncritical model of Latina identity is a critical

¹¹ Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25:2 (Winter 1999): 325. Also see Jonathan Flatley's forthcoming book, *Affective Mappings: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*.

¹² David Román, "Latino Performance and Identity," *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 22:2 (Fall 1997): 151–68.

¹³ For other crucial interventions that measure the political force of Latino performance see Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez, *José, Can You See?: Latinos On and Off Broadway* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); Alicia Arrizón, *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); and Jorge Huerta, *Chicano Theatre: Themes and Forms* (Ypsilanti: Bilingual Press, 1982).

and theoretical act. Only a few of Fornes's plays actually feature Latino/a characters: *Conduct of Life* is staged in a generalized Latin American nation, and *Sarita* features characters clearly marked as Latina/o. Even so, I contend that all of her dramatic personages represent Latina/o affective reality. Their way of being, their modes of negotiating the interpersonal and the social, stand as thick descriptions of ethnic feeling within a hegemonic order. Fornes's oeuvre stands out from the mainstream of American theatre partly because one is not easily able to assign motivation to her characters. Traditional narrative arcs of plot development are all but absent in her work, a difference that is often interpreted as the avant-garde nature of her plays. Such a reading is only half right, however. This particular mode of avant-gardism can be characterized as representative of a specifically transcultural avant-garde. Her plays appear mysterious to North American eyes because they represent a specifically Latin/o *manera de ser* (way of being). This mystery is not accidental or a problem of translation; this effect is, instead, strategic, measured, and interventionist.

This Bridge Called My Crack

In the remainder of this essay I will focus on a case study that I view as a left theatricalization of the affective overload that is *latinidad*. I will consider Ricardo Bracho's play, *The Sweetest Hangover*, and specifically its 1997 production at Brava Theater in San Francisco. This play represents a life world where Latina/o affect structures reality. The "excessive" affective that characterizes *latinidad* (and excess should always be underscored in this context as merely relative) is the fundamental building block of the world imagined in this performance. I will go on to suggest that the world of Bracho's production also indexes other anti-normative subcultural formations—such as the alternate economies of recreational drug use and homosexual desire.

This leads me to this paper's punning subtitle, "This Bridge Called My Crack," a play on the classic 1981 anthology of writing by radical women of color, *This Bridge Called My Back*. The word "crack" is invoked in this section as part of a playful attempt to highlight the thematics of anal eroticism and recreational drug use—the crack is not crack cocaine but instead crystal meth, a drug that, in certain vernacular orbits, is referred to as "crack." It is important to note that my punning here is meant to serve more than the general cause of irreverence. I am instead interested in calling attention to the continuation of the radical women of color project by gay men of color. In the 1983 foreword to *Bridge*, Moraga comments on the shift in cultural climates between the 1981 volume and the edition she is prefacing; within a parenthesis she writes: "(I am particularly encouraged by the organizing potential between third world lesbians and gay men in our communities of color)."¹⁴ Granted, I make much of this parenthetical statement; I use it, for instance, to draw a line between the groundbreaking work of *Bridge* authors and the recent cultural production of gay Latinos like Bracho, Luis Alfaro, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas, Nilo Cruz, and Jonathan Cineseros. I nonetheless connect the work of such cultural workers because I feel that they do "co-map" Latino life worlds where Latino affect—manifested in politics, performance, and other

¹⁴Cherrie Moraga, "Refugees of a World on Fire: Foreword to the Second Edition," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, 1983).

passions—is no longer represented as stigmatized excess. The gay male writing tradition that I am attempting to suture to this feminist tradition labors, via affective performance, to enact a powerful utopianism that is most certainly influenced by *Bridge*. Affective performances that reject the protocols of (white) normativity help map out cultural spectacles that represent and are symbolically connected to alternative economies, like the economies of recreational drugs and homoeroticism. Such spectacles and the alternative economies they represent help us, to borrow a phrase from one of Cherríe Moraga's poems, "dream of other planets." The poem itself, entitled "Dreaming of Other Planets," works as something of a key to understanding the utopian impulse that reverberates throughout Bracho's play:

my vision is small
 fixed
 to what can be heard
 between the ears

the spot
 between the eyes
 a well-spring
 opening
 to el mundo grande

relámpago strikes
 between the legs
 I open against
 my will dreaming

of other planets I am
 dreaming
 of other ways
 of seeing

this life.¹⁵

This theoretical formulation, "dreaming of other planets," represents the type of utopian planning, scheming, imaging, and performing we must engage in if we are to enact other realities, other ways of being and doing within the world. The play, like the poem, does not only dream of other spaces but of other modes of perceiving reality and "feeling" the world. While Moraga dreams of other ways of seeing, Bracho's play instructs its audience in other ways of feeling, feeling brown. For Moraga the dream of another time and place is achieved through the auspices of poetry and the act of writing. This notion of "dreaming" is ultimately descriptive of a critical approach that is intent on critiquing the present by imagining and feeling other temporalities and spaces.

More concretely, another planet that is dreamed in the instance of Bracho's play is a nightclub, a place called Aztlantis, a name that signifies both the Chicano lost homeland and the lost city of myth. This other place and time calls us to think about the project of imagining a utopian time and place. It is a scene of what I have referred to elsewhere as "everynight life."¹⁶ Nightlife is a zone where the affective dominance

¹⁵ Cherríe Moraga, *The Last Generation* (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 33.

¹⁶ See my coauthored introduction to my coedited volume, *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, ed. with Celeste Fraser Delgado (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

of white normativity is weakened. *The freaks come out at night*. The play's set is wide and spacious, organized by walls of corrugated metal, lit with flashing pinks and blues producing a frenzied nightclub aura. Vinyl shower curtains are deployed to further segment space. The freaks that populate this club include the central protagonist Octavio Deseo, Chicano club promoter and diva extraordinaire. He runs his nightlife emporium with the help of his ex-lover, the Salvadoran disc jockey djdj. The club's frequent performers are two black women—Plum, a black female student who leaves academia at night and enters the alternative affective register of Azlantis, and Natasha Kinky, a black woman of transgender origin who dances at the club with Plum. The club regulars are Miss Thing 2 and 1. Thing 2 is a twenty-year-old Filipino gay man and Thing 1 is a black Puerto Rican gay man, also twenty. The Things, who speak in rhyme and comment on all the play's proceedings, are both Greek chorus and a reference to the Things in Dr. Zeus's *Cat in the Hat*, little monsters who bring the house down. The cast is rounded off by Octavio's love interest, Samson, a thirty-year-old man of mixed Filipino and Chicano ancestry who works as a tattoo artist and a security guard at the club.

Bracho's multiethnic ensemble signals a new moment in minoritarian performance and cultural work in which the strict confines of identitarian politics are superseded by other logics of group identification. The play's grouping does not cohere by identity but instead by a politics of affect, an affective belonging. All of these subjects are unable to map themselves onto a white and heterosexually normative narrative of the world. The protocols of theatre, literature, and cultural production by people of color in the United States has primarily concentrated on black/white relational chains (which can best be described as colored/white configurations) or ethnic/racial separatist models. The fact that Azlantis is populated not exclusively by Latinos but by different kinds of people of color of various genders suggests that traditional identitarian logics of group formation and social cohesion are giving sway to new models of relationality and interconnectedness. We can understand the ties that bind this utopian nightlife community to be affective ones; shared vibes and structures of feeling assemble utopia in this production.

The play's multiracial and multigender composition is mirrored in the actual audience in attendance on opening night. It seems useful to cite a theatre review from the *San Francisco Examiner*, an article whose first two paragraphs focus exclusively on the play's audience and thus stands as a unique document of the play's reception.

Almost every opening night for a new play has something of the air of a party, given all the friends of the author and cast who turn out to show their support. Saturday at the Brava Theater Center, however, was more like attending a community celebration—perhaps crossed with the peak hour at a popular gay nightclub.

The house was as packed as it possibly could be, short of putting chairs on the stage. The median age was decidedly lower than at most theatrical events and the racial mix considerably broader. The crowd, or a substantial portion of it, greeted the world premiere of Ricardo A. Bracho's "The Sweetest Hangover (& other stds)" as if it were a celebration of a community that rarely gets to see itself depicted in any genre.¹⁷

Reviewer Robert Hurwitt discusses the racial composition of the play, which he describes as "a dramatic treatment of the world of gay people of color—Hispanic,

¹⁷ Robert Hurwitt, "Celebrating 'Hangover,'" *San Francisco Examiner*, 14 April 1997.

Asian, African American; male, female and transexual.”¹⁸ The reviewer’s amazement concerning the play’s audience dominates the first three paragraphs of the review. He is especially intrigued by the audience’s demographic relation to the characters onstage. The performative and happening-like nature of opening night and the play’s subsequent extended run are worth considering since that too is part of the play’s intervention. In his influential study of the Renaissance stage, Stephen Orgel explicated the importance of the actual space of the Swan Theater to the larger culture: “[the] building was the physical embodiment of both an idea of theater and an idea of the society it was created to entertain.”¹⁹ In a similar fashion the space of the Brava Theater and its audience work in tandem with the actual play text, representing a certain idea within the social, one that was first articulated in *Bridge*. And the literal space of a theatre like Brava, a major venue that specializes in feminist, queer, and racialized performance, is also important to consider. Brava is the literal figuration of an ideological landscape first laid out in *Bridge*. The fact that this queer male world can benefit and manifest itself in relation to this house,²⁰ partially built by racialized feminism, is a literal legacy from that foundational anthology.

The world of *The Sweetest Hangover* is a world without white people. During the play’s second act Thing 1 is feeling overwhelmed by the white people at the nightclub. He complains of what he calls “colonial regression syndrome.” He wears a pith helmet, ascot, and other items of explorer gear and talks about shooting a film called “Paris is Gagging—A Study in Whiteness and Other Forms of Madness.” His stalwart yet shady companion Thing 2 suggests he get over whiteness by simply blinking his eyes and letting in darkness. This ritual thus magically expels whiteness from the play, leaving a brown world of feeling, organized by the affective belongings between people of color. In this way *The Sweetest Hangover* mirrors and reconstructs the composition of *This Bridge Called My Back*. The play offers an ensemble of racialized and ethnic characters that, like *Bridge* and its contributors, try to reconceptualize the social from a vista that is not organized around relations to whiteness or the majoritarian sphere. In this fashion the play offers us a profound optic to think through the social that is predicated on a break from the structuring logic of white normativity.

The play amplifies the message of *Bridge* by folding in both male homosexuality (and eroticism) as well as the demimonde of recreational drug use. In the same way in which *Bridge* argued for modes of female being in the world that white feminism and different modalities of patriarchy rejected, *The Sweetest Hangover* makes a case for other ways of being in the world that are deemed outlaw and illicit. The play’s lead character, Octavio, as well as most of its other characters are recreational drug users. The production resists the moralism that US culture continually rehearses in relation to recreational drug use. In a simpler fashion the play embraces non-couple-oriented, non-monogamous gay male sexuality—a modality of being queer that is currently being demonized and scapegoated by gay pundits from the right. The “crack” that the

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

²⁰ Here I mean “house” to describe the actual theatre and the conceptual and ideological house built by radical women of color.

subtitle invoked is meant to speak to both demonized identity vectors: recreational drug users and gay men who refuse to compromise their erotic life by conforming to normative and assimilationist modes of comportment.²¹ While *Bridge* does not mention the anti-drug hysteria that surfaced during Ronald Reagan's so-called "war on drugs,"²² or the particularities of homophobia directed at men of color, it does, nonetheless, make a case for anti-normative and racialized ways of being in the world.

The major conflict in the play between Octavio and his lover Samson is not Octavio's drug problem, but Octavio's refusal to conform to a drug-free monogamous ideal that Samson desires. This ideal is a modality of affective normativity. The play enacts reversal in that Samson's desire for this ideal is critiqued with the same sharp critical lens usually reserved for individuals with a "drug problem." Octavio's particular relationship to drugs and sex is not moralized against or celebrated. Within the logic of the play drugs simply *are*. Such modes of being in the world are folded into the rich affective archive of *latinidad*. Obviously this is not to say that all Latinos participate in the alternative economies of homosexual eroticism or recreational drug use, but to imply that these demonized acts are, in part, components of some Latino experiences.

Sex and drugs are not the only horizon of Latino affective reality that the play embodies. Sound is as important to the play and the story of Latino feelings as the other nightlife components discussed in this essay. Octavio's ex-lover djdj has taken a "vow of sonics," which entails his refusal to speak through any other vehicle than the records he spins. Octavio asks Samson not to take this refusal to speak to him seriously since djdj broke up with Octavio by playing a song. Djdj's voice is heard in a series of one-scene monologues throughout the play. Since he does not "speak," his monologues represent non-diegetic²³ moments in the play, moments when the character speaks directly to the audience. The Things, Miss Thing 1 and Miss Thing 2, function as a Greek chorus during these soliloquies, sounding like a catchy pop melody hook chorus. In the first scene of the second act, a scene titled "djdj exposes," the master of sonics exposes his affective reality by playing snatches of songs by 1980s Latin free-style pop pioneers, like Exposé, who were made famous by their hit "Point of No Return." This melancholic meditation provides a moment of foreshadowing that announces the character's death later in the act. At this point in the drama djdj has literally hit a point of no return.

I met a man last night, and kissing him was hearing Exposé for the first time. *taking me to the point of no return. not the words uh-oh-oh or the tempo uh-oh-oh just that time of my life. high school keggers in Excelsior, after-parties hanging with the popular girls and all the doggish jocks and lookout weekend cuz here I cum because weekends were made for fun. This is the mid 80's high nrg cha-cha and six minutes, six minutes, six-minutes doug e fresh you're on-uh-uh-on time. Yeah it's like a jungle sometimes getting wasted and I think I'm going under this*

²¹ While gay culture generally moves to an assimilationist center, focusing on debates like gays in the military or gay marriage, Bracho's work and the work of a generation of radical gay men of color insists on resisting the terms of this national debate and instead investing in radicalized and unapologetic forms and practices of gay male difference.

²² The "war on drugs" was understood in certain activist circles as the "war on the poor."

²³ I borrow this phrase from the language of cinema studies. Non-diegetic means action that is part of the actual film text but not part of the plot or narrative.

numb feeling of lubes and Michelob as I dance with Michelle to Shannon's *Let the Music Play* or is it Lisa Lisa *Lost in Emotion*. Kissing him was a party in some football player's backyard where cops would come, Eddie would start with Lisa, Anita would leave to the backseat of a car, Daisy would fall in love with someone else's boyfriend for the second time that weekend. Straight mating rituals done to *the roof the roof the roof is on fire we don't need no water let the motherfucker burn*. Kissing him in the Mission, coming back from a beer run, Stacey Q singing *We Connect* and we do. But this is Collingwood Jurassic Park. 3 am and I don't know what song is on his radio. I'm kissing him and I feel the jets in my pulse.²⁴

The mention of "the jets in his pulse" announces the next moment in the play's soundscape, the Jets's "I Got a Crush on You." This monologue stands as a unique interrogation of a relational chain that connects affect to memory to sonics. Music plays a major role in Bracho's play; its job is to draft an affective schematic particular to the emotional emergence and becoming of a citizen-subject who will not "feel" American in the way in which the protocols of official affective citizenship demand. The sappiness of the pop tunes registers as affective excess to majoritarian ears but as something altogether different to the minoritarian listener who uses these songs as part of her affective archive. The sounds of popular culture and the playwright's citational practice tell a story about the way in which the resources of popular culture are deployed to tell an affective story that is different and decidedly dissident in relation to structuring codes of US national affect. Djdj's soliloquy, like the whole of the play, calls on music to conjure a past affective temporality, and that sonic past is important to the utopic reformulated and anti-essentialist nationalism of the play.

Dj dj's plot line is central to the play's narrative. His death due to AIDS-related complications breaks up the affective community that held the utopic world of the play together. Plum has gone off to law school; Nat, after traveling to Thailand for hormonal injections, has found a man; Samson has fled the urban space, running from a fear of AIDS and urban violence; and Octavio goes out in the world of "evernightlife"; Miss Thing 1 and Miss Thing 2 remain as the ruling queens of the bar stool. In the play's final scene the rhyming queens sit at the Endup, an actual gay bar in San Francisco, Thing 1 wearing opera glasses and carrying a butterfly net. These instruments of white gentility are to be deployed for the project of installing a man in his life. The dialogue indicates that even though the world of Azlantis has crumbled, the affective possibilities it represented are far from diffused. Thing 1 undergoes a brief crisis of consciousness on his bar stool throne, which his co-Thing talks him through.

- THING 1: Ain't no Azlantis to go to, no djdj (crosses himself) to sweat to. Ain't no Samson to swoon over, Octavio to gag on. Last I bumped in the girls, Nat had herself a man and Plum was 'bout ready to start law school. What's there for us?
- THING 2: These seats. A new bar. Same old fashions, same old tired faces and tracks. Why, you looking for something else?
- THING 1: I need more, more than kiking with the children, making a world dark and glamorous and giving off vapors to the white girl. Something for us, instead of waiting in line to be put on their lists.
- THING 2: And you got it. Cute fashions, friends in low places that are keeping you high. Major props.

²⁴ All quotes from *The Sweetest Hangover* are from the unpublished play. My thanks to Ricardo Bracho for granting me permission to quote from his work. Subsequent quotations are taken from this text.

- THING 1: We might have it by the d.j. booth or here in welfare alley at the Endup but turn to the corner and bam! you are punk ass shit. Nothing.
- THING 2: Naw I beg to differ. Being punk ass shit is not nothing. Being a punk is power.
- THING 1: According to whom? Not the fellas on my corner, definitely not my folks. Power don't come in bumps or pumps, girl.
- THING 2: The power of being a punk in the world comes from knowing it's your world and the rest of these sad motherfuckers live in it and to get to your groove. Boypussy Power!
- THING 1: Yeah but how can you hear your beat with the other wall of sound, white noise. . . .
- THING 2: Change the channel and stop listening to college grunge radio.

By advocating for “Boypussy Power!” Miss Thing 2 is riffing on the lessons and important manifestos of biopower made by radical feminists of color. In that instance a line is being drawn between the feminist field of struggle and the struggles that gay men of color face. The work of these radical women of color is instructive and enabling, both for these two characters in the play and for the playwright himself. The most important advice Thing 2 gives Thing 1 is the declaration that being a “punk” is power once one understands that the world and the groove belong to the “punks.” Thing 1 worries about the sound of white noise and Thing 2 makes it clear that he must learn how to tune such sounds out. The sound of white noise is the official national affect, the beat of a majoritarian drum that defies a minoritarian sense of rhythm. Thing 2 (and the playwright) instructs Thing 1 and the audience to believe in one's own affective groove, one's own way of being, dancing, striving, dreaming, loving, fighting, and moving in the world and never to let the affective hum of white normativity overwhelm that very important groove.

This analysis has posited ethnicity as “a structure of feeling,” as a way of being in the world, a path that does not conform to the conventions of a majoritarian public sphere and the national affect it sponsors. It is my hope that thinking of *latinidad* in this way will help us better analyze the obstacles that must be negotiated within the social for the minoritarian citizen-subject. I have positioned Bracho's work as a continuation of another project begun almost twenty years ago by fierce women of color who also found their way of being in the world labeled wrong, inappropriate, and insane. Many of the contributors to that volume wrote about the way in which the dominant culture made them feel crazy and wrong-minded. Part of *Bridge's* project was to show that this craziness was a powerful way of being in the world, a mode of being that those in power needed to call crazy because it challenged the very tenets of their existence. Ricardo Bracho's *The Sweetest Hangover* continues that project, allowing us to continue to dream of other planets and finally to make worlds.