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Martha Chaves' 'Staying Alive' Narrative: Comedy, Migration and Feminism

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Author

Arrizón, A

Publication Date

2023-12-10

Peer reviewed

NEW ESSAYS ON CANADIAN THEATRE
VOLUME THREE

**LATINA/O CANADIAN THEATRE
AND PERFORMANCE**

EDITED BY NATALIE ALVAREZ

PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA PRESS
TORONTO

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We acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, the Ontario Media Development Corporation, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for our publishing activities.

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Cover photo by Mercedes Fidanza, a video still from Colombian Québécois performance artist Claudia Bernal's *Escritura X Escritura*, performance in situ at Ex Padelai, Cultural Centre of Spain, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2010.

Cover design by Leon Aureus

Book design by Blake Sproule

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Latina/o Canadian theatre and performance / edited by Natalie Alvarez.

(New essays on Canadian theatre ; vol. 3)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-77091-148-2

1. Canadian drama--Latin American Canadian authors--History and criticism. 2. Canadian drama--20th century--History and criticism. 3. Canadian drama--21st century--History and criticism. 4. Latin Americans in literature. I. Alvarez, Natalie, 1974- II. Series: New essays on Canadian theatre ; vol. 3

PS8089.5.L3L37 2013

C812:5409868071

C2012-907949-9

First edition: May 2013

Printed and bound in Canada by Marquis Book Printing, Montreal

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MARTHA CHAVES'S "STAYING ALIVE" NARRATIVE: COMEDY, MIGRATION, AND FEMINISM

Alicia Arrizón

In 1978 we are at the height of the repression by the dictatorship. There's a military curfew. The Sandinistas are coming down from the mountains to the city. The revolution is on.

The theme of my high school prom is "Staying Alive" and in my High School Yearbook, I was voted, "most likely to talk under torture."

Most people my age are interested in toppling the dictatorship. The nuns of our school embrace the "Theology of Liberation" and they are teaching us to . . . not to be indifferent to the suffering. My favorite nun tells me, "The problem is that the children in this school need to grow a pair—of eyes. You must learn to see the people so you can help them." And I started seeing, all right, seeing a lot. I see children begging at the traffic lights, I see slums where those children live when we go from our middle class home to our private school. I see children sniffing glue to stop the hunger. I see the children that most North Americans only see in UNICEF commercials.

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The theme of my high school prom is “Staying Alive” and in my High School Yearbook, I was voted, “most likely to talk under torture.” (Chaves, *Fragile*)¹

The above fragment is part of *Fragile*, a one-woman show in progress by Martha Chaves, considered one of Canada’s most prolific and entertaining comedians.² Chaves’s narrative marks the beginning of the Sandinista National Liberation Front–led Nicaraguan Revolution (Revolución Nicaragüense or Revolución Popular Sandinista) in 1978, which ousted the dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. In addition to the presentation of this historical event, the performing subject evokes her sheltered middle-class experience and situates herself as an eyewitness to the revolution. While the nuns taught her “not to be indifferent to the suffering” of the less fortunate, Chaves acknowledges her relatively privileged existence as a student in a private Catholic school, where one can joke—albeit with some hint of conscious or subconscious anxiety—about torture. The abrupt shifts in her narrative—from the

1 Tracey Erin Smith, an award-winning solo performer based in Toronto, is the founder and teacher of the SoulOTheatre class developed at Ryerson University’s ACT II Studio where Chaves developed *Fragile: A Play in Progress*. The class is designed to help and inspire professionals and non-professionals to create, write, direct, and perform in their own one-person show “by transforming raw material from their lives into creative personal story telling performances. Smith’s process turns personal experience into compelling and entertaining theatre, with no prior acting experience necessary” (Smith). Consult www.soulo.ca for more information about the program and Smith.

2 Currently based in Toronto, Ontario, Chaves performs regularly at Yuk Yuk’s, a Canadian comedy club chain, and at the Montreal Comedy Nest. Chaves has won a Soul’d Award and has been nominated for six Canadian Comedy Awards in the category of Best Female Stand-up. She has performed in Central America, Germany, for the UN peace-keeping troops in the Middle East, and has appeared in numerous festivals around North America and in countless humanitarian fundraising events. As an invited speaker at Lasalle Secondary School in Greater Sudbury, she told students to never back down from bullies when it comes to hatred toward their sexuality. Accordingly, she left students with the following message, “Keep staying alive. And keep kicking the ass-----!” (Carmichael). For more biographical information regarding Chaves, see “Roster Acts.”

dramatic representations of a repressive regime to her high-school yearbook designation as "most likely to talk under torture"; from the images of children surviving the slums of Nicaragua to her prom theme of "Staying Alive"—reflect Chaves's dramatic-sardonic humour, anchored in a consciousness-raising form of self-representation.

I aim to situate Chaves as a Latina comedian confronting her multiple subject positions as an immigrant living in Canada. Paying attention to her use of cultural signifiers to produce laughter, I intend to analyze the modality of her style, which I will refer to as "intersectional humour." In what context does Chaves contribute to expanding the definition of stand-up comedy while negotiating cultural difference, her exile, and feminism? How is the comical awareness of the subject positions—claims of identity, identification, and disidentification—produced in Chaves's comedy? Considering that humour and satire depend on transgressive acts and behaviours against the status quo, in the second part of the essay I will respond to these inquiries by placing Chaves in a broader context. If women have traditionally been discouraged from embracing comedy because it is too "unfeminine," how does Chaves's comedy function as psychological survival skill and an emancipatory strategy of liberation?

"STAYING ALIVE": THE SEARCH FOR LATINA/O CANADIAN IDENTITY

According to Chaves, she was drawn to stand-up comedy and playwriting because of her passion for acting but her opportunities as an actress in Canada were limited "due to [her] ethnicity" (Chaves, Telephone 22 Oct.). This socio-economic polarization along racial/ethnic lines is ironically represented in a public service announcement (PSA) released nationally on Canadian television in 2009, wherein she plays an immigrant with a Master's in Business Administration (M.B.A.) forced to work as an office cleaning lady in Canada. The PSA begins with Chaves sitting in an office with two Caucasian male executives. The men appear to be listening to her intently as she provides them

with business advice on ways to improve their bottom line. At the end of the consultation, Chaves stands up from her chair, picks up her cleaning spray and rag, and pushes her janitorial cart away. The men have a surprised look on their faces, showing in their reaction that they cannot reconcile the fact that this woman, who just gave them sound financial advice, is a cleaning lady. The PSA ends with the following caption: "If Canada is a land of opportunity, why is an MBA cleaning offices?" (Chaves, "Martha Chaves"). To be more specific, I would say, "If Canada is a land of opportunity, why is a Latina M.B.A. cleaning offices?" Often praised as a success story of multiculturalism and diversity, Canada's immigration system attracts highly skilled workers to better compete in the global economy. However, the caption and the overall content of the PSA announcement evinces Canada's self-awareness about the economic marginalization correlating with racial/ethnic/immigrant status within its borderlands. This issue is an ongoing subject in Chaves's comedy.³

In one of my interviews with Chaves, she explained her choice of profession as a stand-up comedian: "I think I was born to be a comedian. In stand-up, I write, I direct, I act." She laughs before continuing, "That way, I don't have to be cleaning houses or offices, selling drugs or selling a younger Latina into prostitution every time I am on-screen" (Chaves, Telephone 5 Nov.). As an actress, Chaves sees herself typecast in the stereotypical "Latina" roles of cleaning lady, madam, or drug dealer. She finds greater freedom to self-represent as a stand-up comedian while also having the opportunity to raise consciousness regarding the limitations imposed by the mainstream media on her and other women of colour. As a result, comedy becomes a tool of liberation and empowerment for Chaves while also becoming a process of self-typecasting. In his study *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, John Limon considers abjection as a self-typecasting mode in

3 See also Chaves, "Canada Immigration." At the end of this YouTube video, viewer discussion is included. In response to Chaves's role as an M.B.A., an angry viewer writes: "If this bitch is so smart then why doesn't she start her own business? I am sick of hearing how hard immigrants have it in this country. It is hard for everyone. Immigrants figure that if they are not the president of a company in 6 months; it is because of racism."

stand-up comedy. He borrows the term abjection from Julia Kristeva, arguing that stand-up comedy is an art form best exemplified by its fascination with the abject. The theory of abjection embodies figures that are in a state of transition or transformation, a state of in-betweenness or liminality. For Kristeva, the link between psychoanalysis and the subconscious produces "abjectifying" subjects and practices. Either in the form of scatological references in some cases or in relation to what makes "us" laugh (at times, an uncomfortable laughter), all of a comedian's life, Limon asserts, is abject. He says, "When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something mirroring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role (because 'abject' always, in a way, describes how you *act*) that has become your only character" (4). The many applications that abjection can have to stand-up comedy and its often crude content certainly applies to Chaves's comedic work. For example, references to the word "ass" (or *culo* in Spanish) are common in her comedic monologues. In one of her shows I recently attended, references to her ass as having Alzheimer's were hilariously articulated in the context of discussing her weight and body size.⁴ *Coño*, a word that has different meaning across the Spanish-speaking countries, is also a signifier in her repertoire. She has also jokingly called the audience "drunken asses" for peeing in their pants while laughing at her jokes.⁵

After all, laughter, she suggests, is the best remedy to survive: "I know this show will kick ass with the power of a bionic mule that just snorted lava off a Nicaraguan volcano. I will work it baby! Laughter is the best . . . exorcist! To

4 I attended two of Chaves's shows that took place at the Yuk Yuk's in Ottawa on January 25 and 26, 2013. During the same weekend, I interviewed her during her participation as a living "book" at a Human Library event that took place in the Ottawa Public Library's North Gloucester branch.

5 *Coño* is a common expression used in Spain and several Latin American countries. It originated in the Dominican Republic. Its meaning differs according to use, but in Spain and several Latin American countries it is also used in its literal form as slang for the female genitalia, the vulva. It is important to point out that those references to the audience as "drunken asses" were made in regards to some audience members who have the potential to behave disrespectfully during her shows.

perform an exorcism you do it in LATIN! For Latinos to endure all we have endured we had to have laughter" (Chaves, "Sunday Feature: First-Person"). For Chaves, endurance and survival are signifiers marking the trajectory of her comedy. She makes sense of her life by creating humour that not only subverts stereotypical images but also tells her individual story within a collective sense of self, which binds together the Latina/o community. In the following passage, she uses "staying alive" as a sardonic metaphor of self-subjectification:

Staying alive, besides being the title of that Bee-Gees tune and the John Travolta movie, has been one of the main motifs of my existence. Not only because I'm from Nicaragua, a war-torn country plagued with poverty and social injustice. Not only because I was born in the midst of a fundamentalist Christian family, in a macho-oriented society and I am a lesbian. Not only because I am an uprooted immigrant who was sent away to Canada by her parents, all alone, at the ripe age of 17. But staying alive has been my quest also because I am a stand-up comedian dammit! To stay alive is the name of the game in stand-up comedy as much as it is in bullfighting. (Chaves, "Sunday Feature: Dying is Easy")

In the Foucauldian sense, "the mode self-subjectification" or self-imagining acts through which Chaves confronts her existence, function as strategies of representation. Her position is clear as she resists the constraints exercised on her subjectivity or individuality. The context of the revolution is undeniably a dramatic event in her life experience, justifying her survival story and the reflective comedy it produces. While speaking as a survivor, she identifies as a Nicaraguan immigrant living in Canada. The "imagining" of Nicaragua, the place of origin, appears continually in Chaves's comedy.⁶ Suggested in the discursive configurations of a "war-torn country" are the allusions to

6 I use the notion of "imagining" here in reference to Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, which first appeared in 1983. For further discussion of *Staying Alive* by Martha Chaves, see Chaves, "De Colores."

the revolution, which was the main reason her parents "shipped her off" to Canada at the age of seventeen. The revolution is the cause and effect of her exile. Her parents sent her away to Montreal in 1978, the year the civil war in Nicaragua began, and she subsequently became a Canadian citizen. As a result of this upheaval, her parents and siblings also left for Guatemala a year later. According to Chaves, her parents sent her abroad with the excuse that they wanted her to learn a second language but "it was really because they feared that I would join the revolution" (Chaves, Telephone 22 Oct.). She successfully escaped the Nicaraguan Revolution, but in her Canadian exile she joined the "vaginista" revolution, as she suggested in a raunchy show at the Goodhandy's bar in the gay village in Toronto. In her interactions with the audience, she announced that she was a "vaginista" and that she was part of "the frente vaginista de la liberación nacional." While showing the audience the word "vaginista" written on her T-shirt, she asked how many people in the audience had a vagina and "how many people came to this world through the vagina" (Chaves, "Leather Bar").⁷ The audience responded with laughter and applause when hearing the word "vagina," but, most significantly, Chaves's brilliant articulations make reference to the Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional (the Sandinista National Liberation Front), the group that defeated the Somoza dictatorship and governed Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990.

It is clear that Chaves's exile to Canada is fundamental to her personal/professional being. However, her journey as an immigrant is not the story of an undocumented "border-crosser"; it "is based on an immigrant experience that not too many people talk about because usually people talk about immigrants who left and have to go with coyotes in tunnels with rats biting them or came through Niagara Falls in a bubble and stuff like that" ("De Colores").⁸

7 The word "vaginista" can be translated as a vagina activist, or, in certain contexts, as a lover of vaginas.

8 Originally *Staying Alive* was used as a working title of a semi-autobiographical piece by Chaves. Although she now uses *Fragile* as a working title for her one-woman show, she continues to use "staying alive" as a metaphor describing her life. Part of her material from *Staying Alive* was conceived at Alameda Theatre Company's 2010 De Colores Festival

Instead, her middle-class parents sent her to Canada to further her studies (and escape the revolution). The pain of her exile and the consequent loss of identity that Chaves describes, however, are similar to every immigrant's journey: "The suffering of not having a home has been always in my heart, of not having roots, of having lost my roots because my parents left to Guatemala while I was already here and never went back [to Nicaragua]" ("De Colores"). While she has lived in Canada the majority of her life, feelings of displacement are symbolically and comically performed in the trajectory of her work. As introduced in her biographical sketch, this feeling of being uprooted and having an uncertain identity are characteristics of a true Canadian: "She has lived in Canada most of her life, feeling uprooted, cold and confused about her identity, which, incidentally, is what makes her a true Canadian, eh?" ("Roster Acts").⁹

Chaves's use of the metaphor "staying alive" reflects her experience not only as a Latina immigrant but also as a lesbian and as a comedian. Most importantly, "staying alive" symbolizes her enduring the exile from Nicaragua. Her use of biting humour and the embodied knowledge and diverse contexts implicit in the signifier "staying alive" point to the rhetoric of marginality in

of New Works. The De Colores Festival focuses on providing developmental support for works in progress written by Latina/o Canadian artists.

9 Whether she feels like a true Canadian or not, her migration/exile to Canada was a necessity for her safety. As a result of the revolution, Nicaraguans preferred to migrate to neighbouring countries in Central America, as in the case of Chaves's parents, but those Nicaraguans who chose to go to North America were more attracted to the United States than to Canada. There were almost no Nicaraguans in Canada until the mid-1980s; however, their numbers gradually increased after 1983. It has been reported in the *Encyclopedia of Immigration* that in 1991 and 1992 alone more than 3,500 Nicaraguans were admitted into Canada. It was established that "[m]ost Nicaraguans were young and poorly educated and had often lived for some time in Honduras, Costa Rica, or the United States. In 2001, of 9,380 Nicaraguan immigrants living in Canada, only 170 came before 1981. About 88 percent (8,255) arrived between 1981 and 1995, most as refugees" ("Nicaraguan Immigration"). Numerical estimation of the Nicaraguan community in Canada has been difficult to conceive in absolute terms but both official and community sources have indicated that there are between 10,000 and 20,000 Nicaraguans in Canada today (Kowalchuk 1011).

the patriarchal cultural trajectory embedded in stand-up comedy and the social limitations confronted by female comedians. The marginal sites in Chaves's discourse not only indicate a positionality that is best understood in terms of the limitations of a subject's access to power but also represent a model of resistance to cultural/male hegemony (the "macho-oriented society") and Christian fundamentalism. In a feminist study that situates the woman comic culturally, Philip Auslander notes that "the processes by which cultural expression is disseminated in a patriarchal culture all create obstacles for the comic woman and the woman comic" (316). For Chaves, staying alive is a valuable metaphor responding to the many obstacles she has confronted since her exile: feeling compelled to perform her Nicaraguan self in a foreign country, marking her lesbian subjectivity, and fighting for recognition as a female, Latina immigrant comedian.

MULTIPLE SUBJECT POSITIONS AND INTERSECTIONAL HUMOUR

Chaves's multiple subject positions or the implications of being an immigrant/Latina/lesbian/comedian configure within the sites of intersectionality. While she understands the power of parody and humour to subvert established norms and transgress social taboos, Chaves's sardonic discourse illustrates what I conceptualize here as "intersectional humour." When Chaves emphasizes the paradoxes of her experience as a Latina immigrant (middle-class Nicaraguan) in Canada who happens to be a lesbian and a comedian, the sites of intersectionality pinpoint multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations. While intersectionality can be defined as a theory to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine, it has been fundamental in feminist studies, implying more than the study of difference and diversity.¹⁰ Chaves's multiple identities, marked in performances

10 Intersectionality attempts to capture the relationships between socio-cultural categories and identities, focusing on diverse and marginalized positions. Gender, sexuality,

analyzed here, capture the complexity of her intersectional subjectivity: the multiple specificities delineate difference (and her uniqueness) as a source of empowerment. If race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as categories of domination, Chaves's insistence on highlighting her multiple subject positions in her work intrinsically empowers her and her audience while challenging those who marginalize "the other." As Homi K. Bhabha has noted in a different context, the power of representation "as a theoretical and cultural intervention in our contemporary moment represents the urgent need to contest singularities of difference and to articulate diverse 'subjects' of differentiation" (74).

Chaves explores questions of identity and subject formation from different vantage points while performing the experience of living in two or more cultures, languages, and realities simultaneously. As pointed out in her biographical sketch, "Chaves is fluent in four languages (five when intoxicated or praying) and one of the few comics in the world who has the rare gift of doing comedy in a second language . . . and a third . . . and a fourth" ("Roster Acts"). Whether she is speaking of her experience as an immigrant, talking about the Canadian Latina/o community, or critiquing the Nicaraguan or Canadian governments, the essence of her humour comes from the necessity to integrate her Nicaraguan/Latina/o narrative with her Canadianness. She is a border subject who encourages her audience to think about the possibilities of understanding the Latina/o diaspora within the Canadian context. While she sees Canada as her new home, she often questions its identity. In *Queerly Canadian: An Introductory Reader in Sexuality Studies*, Scott Rayter begins the introduction by quoting some of the remarks made by Chaves at the tenth annual comedy night, Accent on Toronto: "I love this country. When Jack Layton died, the funeral for the leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition was presided over a gay minister married to a man. And the right-wing prime

ethnicity, race, class, and nationality are categories that help to explain the complexity of intersectionality while pointing toward identities in continual processes.

minister had to pay for it!" (xv).¹¹ Rayter uses the irony embedded in Chaves's remarks to address the complexities of Canadian identity. He says that she is not the first to point out

what many in a long line of cultural critics, historians, and, yes, comedians have noted: there appears to be something contradictory or paradoxical about this country, a quality often remarked upon whenever someone attempts to define Canadian identity. And yet, as others have suggested, we seem to take great pleasure in pointing this out, just as Chaves does above. (Rayter xv)

The use of Chaves's irony to introduce *Queerly Canadian* is intriguing to me. While the purpose of the book is to examine sexuality and its role in the building of Canadian identity, Chaves's inclusion is extraordinarily suggestive and significant. Her sardonic humour situates her in a continual search for a "new" identity, one that incorporates the specificities of Canada along with her multi-layered experience. This identity differentiates her not only within mainstream culture but also within the marked heterogeneity that defines the Latina/o diaspora in Canada. In one of her routine jokes, the Latina/o diaspora is suggested while making fun of mainstream Canadians for failing to differentiate between Nicaraguans and other Latinas/os. She introduces herself: "My name is Martha Chaves from Nicaragua. But at the end of the night people always think that I am Maria from Mexico, which is in the Dominican Republic" ("Martha from Mexico" and "Leather Bar"). Beyond the production of humour, Chaves urges her audience to continually recognize her ethnic background and differentiate it from that of other Latinas/os. This was also made evident when she described a day in her life as a comedian:

Forget "Spanglish" l'espectáculo will have to be in Spanfranglish, franchement. Now, there's a myth that Latinos learn French easily

¹¹ Layton was a Canadian social democratic politician and Leader of the Official Opposition. He was leader of the New Democratic Party from 2003 to 2011.

because French and Spanish are very similar but that is pure unadulterated "Le toro caca" [sic] Not even Spanish and Spanish are very similar. For example, Costa-Rican Spanish is not even close to Guatemalan Spanish—not to mention how differently those two nations kick a soccer ball! Holy Saint Frijoles! The audience is going to be a casa divided! There will be Rightists and there will be people who love Fidel. There will be Leftists and there will be people who wear Ché Guevara t-shirts thinking the face belongs to the singer from Rage Against the Machine. There will be homos in the closet and there will be queers in the cupboards. Latin people are very diverse and are in constant dispute with each other but—in my experience—they are united in one common thought, "Fear the homo". And as you know, fear is a killer; but not on a comedy stage. ("Sunday Feature: First-Person")

Chaves's representation of Latina/o heterogeneity is both funny and on point. She describes a community that is impossible to categorize in absolute terms. On one hand you have the Costa Ricans and on the other the Guatemalans, each group speaking their own "Spanish." When imagining a "Latina/o audience," she suggests that this will be a divided house because Latinas/os are "in constant dispute," only uniting (in her view) when it comes to homophobia, or "fear of the homo." As harsh as this may sound in the light of day, Chaves is using self-deprecating humour to insert her critical commentary regarding homophobia in the Latina/o community. The jokes about differentiating Latinas/os remain as the primary "punchline" and the subtle reference to homophobia becomes secondary, suggesting that she is more invested in addressing the complex characteristics of the Latina/o community. Although Chaves's subtle references to homophobia are intersected in the background of her joke, its inclusion is strategically configured. As a social commentary, the use of this humorous "double entendre" technique aims to sensitize and raise awareness while laughing about the complexities and prejudices embedded in Chaves's community. References to a diverse Latina/o population are significantly marked in the trajectory of Chaves's

comedy work. She represents a newly emerging community that has gradually expanded over the past thirty years. In *Continental Divides*, Rachel Adams examines the Latina/o diaspora, suggesting that the understanding of Latin Americans in Canada as a "new" North American constituency is fundamentally paramount to the integration of Canada in hemispheric relations. Her study demonstrates that these relations involve the need to "decentralize" US hegemony and to understand the cultures of North America in a new era of "continentalism." In particular, the cultures she includes in her study cross the borders of Canada, the United States, and Mexico. By highlighting the differences between the three countries, and the embedded cultural diversity within each other, she proposes a model envisioning the Americas of José Martí, *Nuestra América* (Our America). While his vision unified Latin Americans south and north, it resisted the imperial designs of the United States. Adams's attempts to move beyond the US nation and its cultural hegemony imagines the notion of the borderlands as a "borderless" divide, "since the entire continent has become a contact zone where Anglo and Latin American meet up, clash, and interpenetrate" (227). Chaves's comic configurations of *latinidad* imagine this "borderless" divide while emphasizing the possibilities of cultural heterogeneity and difference within difference.

"STAYING ALIVE" WITH THE POWER OF FEMINIST LAUGHTER

When I go out to do my job—whistling a joyful song and mentally dressed in full matador regalia including my red cape—I am often thinking how lucky I am. Honest. I may be on my way to a gig in a little town located in the cozy confines of the devil's rectum—northern Alberta—to play for an audience that is not remotely used to seeing a woman on stage—let alone a woman whose mother tongue is not English, let alone a woman who uses that tongue to (ideally) sexually satisfy other women and has no qualms about saying it in public in her broken English and still . . . I know it won't be as hard as being

Josey Aimes, the character of Charlize Theron in "North Country."
(Chaves, "Sunday Feature: Dying is Easy")

In Chaves's consciousness, a comedian must be psychologically prepared like a matador (including the "red cape") in order to survive. As demonstrated in her overall narrative, the intersectional forces she must confront to stay alive are not only associated with her ethnic background or her sexuality but with the challenges she confronts as a stand-up comedian. This matador/stand-up comedian analogy is fundamentally a feminist imaginative technique countering the belief that women are not funny. This belief has persisted as a negative stereotype in Western cultures and has been perpetuated by some male comedians like John Belushi and Jerry Lewis. Jane Curtin attested to this when she appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as part of a panel on women in comedy, sitting alongside Tina Fey and Chevy Chase, among others. Curtin said that the women writers on *Saturday Night Live* were often unable to contribute their work due to sabotage by the show's male comedians, especially breakout star John Belushi. She spoke about being in constant battle to be recognized by Belushi, who believed women were just fundamentally not funny. Curtin said, "So you'd go to a table read, and if a woman writer had written a piece for John, he would not read it in his full voice. He felt as though it was his duty to sabotage pieces written by women" ("Tina Fey").

Likewise, Jerry Lewis commented that he did not like any female comedians during a question and answer session with Martin Short: "A woman doing comedy doesn't offend me but sets me back a bit. I, as a viewer, have trouble with it. I think of her as a producing machine that brings babies in the world." "How about Lucille Ball?" Short asked him. "You must have loved her," he said to Lewis, who replied, "No" ("Jerry Lewis"). According to Lewis's logic, women are incapable of making people laugh because he can only imagine them as mothers. Lewis's statement was later supported and expounded upon by Christopher Hitchens in a 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair*, in which he used a "scientific study" to explain women's appreciation for—and lack of—a good sense of humour. He pointed out that his "... argument doesn't say that there are no decent women comedians. There are more terrible female

comedians than there are terrible male comedians, but there are some impressive ladies out there. Most of them, though, when you come to review the situation, are hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three." In short, Hitchens is implicitly suggesting that the only good female comedians are those he considers unattractive or unfeminine. The following year, in 2008, a response to Hitchens's piece was printed in *Vanity Fair*. Written by Alessandra Stanley, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" featured funny women and television stars, emphasizing the fact that female comedians are considerably more visible on television than before. According to Stanley, the history of women's humour, "or supposed lack thereof, is a joyless and increasingly moot subject, but it boils down to the point Virginia Woolf argued in her essay about Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* and it's analogous to the case Larry Summers made so clumsily with regard to women in the sciences that cost him his job as president of Harvard: namely, that society has different expectations for women." Increasingly, female comics are emerging and finding their own voice in this male-dominated field—as "bull-fighters," to use Chaves's analogy, employing humour as a psychological survival tool. For feminists, laughter serves many functions essential to their survival and emancipatory tactics; it has evolved as a protective shield against male hegemony. The subversion of sexism and patriarchy not only legitimizes women's concerns, deflating anti-women positions, but serves as both an attack weapon and a call for feminist solidarity. Through the matador analogy and metaphor, Chaves's feminist imaginative technique responds to the effects of patriarchy. The analogy serves its purpose: it communicates an awareness of resistance and always the desire to win the "fight." Humour is the weapon she must use to stay alive. Implicit in her defensiveness is the need to assert her position as comic woman, because as Joan Rivers once said, "Men find funny women threatening. They ask me, 'Are you going to be funny in bed?'" (qtd. in Stanley). The most basic level of comedy, the telling of a joke, has been considered aggressive and "unfeminine" behaviour. I remember being told many times while growing up that decent *señoritas* will never laugh out loud. I heard my aunt saying, "*Calladita te ves más bonita*" (when you are quiet you look prettier). Producing noise and being loud have been

practices associated with the "unfeminine." Being as subversive as Chaves's "unfemininity" is always a powerful act. When Chaves self-describes as "a woman who uses that tongue to (ideally) sexually satisfy other women," her insubordinate "tongue" dismantles the "normality" of femininity. For the Latina feminist, the subversion of "normative" femininity is coupled with the dismantling of the virgin/whore dichotomy embedded in the gender relations in Latina/o cultures. This dichotomy implies that women must assume subservient roles, either as Madonnas/virgins to be protected, or as whores to be desired and punished by men.

The gendered system embedded in the virgin/whore dichotomy affects not only Latinas, but also women collectively. First presented by Sigmund Freud in 1915, this dichotomy places the polarization of women into two categories: good girls versus bad girls. The good girls become wives and mothers and bad girls become the object of male sexuality and desire. The view of women as either virgins/Madonnas or whores has proven to limit women's sexual expression in patriarchal cultures. Patriarchy, Norma Alarcón contends, is the basis for the servile role of women in heterosexual relationships. She also argues that "when the wife or would-be-wife, the mother or would-be-mother questions out loud and in print the complex 'servitude/devotion/love,' she will be quickly seen as false to her 'obligation' and duty, hence a traitor" (186). Although this dichotomy is foundational in the development of a Latina feminist's thought, the need to subvert its negative effects is imperative and constituted new gendered expression and sexualized female subjectivities in the late twentieth century. Since the late 1970s, Chicana and Latina feminists have developed a type of intellectual mobility in order to reconceptualize gender relations and gendered bodies outside the boundaries of binary knowledge systems embedded in heteronormative patriarchies. In their studies, heteronormativity and homophobia have been contested for stigmatizing alternative concepts of both sexuality and gender, and for making certain types of self-expression more difficult. By considering the social structures that construct gendered/sexualized identities (such as gay and lesbian) and the sexual politics that separate men and women, the emergence of self-identified "queerness" has transformed common understandings of new

Latina/o gendered bodies and spaces. In Chaves's configuration of lesbian desire, when she uses "her tongue"—not only to produce laughter but to satisfy women sexually—the subversion of the feminine body appears in multiple layers of meaning. Defiantly, lesbian desire binds the politics of identity with those of visibility.

Women as producers of laughter have a long history; however, they have been marginalized and demonized.¹² In her introduction to *Women's Comedic Art as Social Revolution*, Domnica Radulescu suggests that female comedians or mimic actresses were as important as men throughout some of the early Christian era, "before the fathers of the church started in due manner to link them to Satan and consider them 'children of Satan' " (6). It is not by accident that the words hell, evil, or devil, are familiar configurations in Chaves's discursive humour, if not in the comedy of many comic women. Chaves describes sardonic laughter as the "byproduct of evil":

People think that humour comes from a rosy place but hell they are wrong! Laughter is a byproduct of evil! You can bet that in Paradise they didn't laugh. What were they going to laugh at? Everything was perfect until the Fall of Man you know, when a monkey threw a banana peel on the scale of evolution and Adam slipped making Eve laugh uncontrollably when she saw his goofy privates for the first time! Coño! ("Sunday Feature: First-Person")

The feminist technique inherent in Chaves's matador-analogous and symbolic humour is also evident in her commentary regarding the origins of laughter. Since humour and laughter are considered evil forces when produced by women, they must have subversive ends. They disrupt the social order. In her discussion of laughter, Chaves uses another analogy, but this time she

12 Comic women have existed since ancient times, having had a particularly strong presence in the *commedia dell'arte*, where female roles were generally played by women as early as the 1560s.

uses the Christian origins of "mankind" to relate laughter to Eve, the first woman in paradise:

Of course there's the risk that I may be humiliated and that I may even be putting my physical integrity in serious danger but the other side of that coin is that there's a bigger chance that I may be able to slaughter that "bull" and that those people who may have never thought they would give the time of the day to someone as "different" as me, may partake in the greatest equalizer: the sacrament of laughter which says their minds are opened even if just a little bit! I don't mean to sound like the pompous ass that uses "sacrament" and "laughter" in the same sentence nor do I mean to imply that in the great scheme of things our contribution to society is as grandiose as we, comedians, may be inclined to believe it is . . . but there's indeed an undeniable healing power in the elixir of laughter and that healing may not be as potent for the audience as it is for ourselves. ("Sunday Feature: Dying is Easy")

CONCLUSION

While some performers have used comedy to make fun of themselves and other women, others use it to deal with the ironies of daily life. Some comic women openly address the intersectionality of gender, race, sexuality, and disability, among many social categories. I place Chaves's intersectional humour in this context, which reinforces the re-enactment of individual and collective identity. While she conceives her comedy as a means of enacting the world(s) of difference, or the enactment of "someone as 'different' as [her]," she sees comedy and the laughter it produces as feminist vehicles for transformation. Chaves belongs to a generation of comic women who have pushed the boundaries of stand-up comedy while negotiating cultural difference: the comical awareness of the subject positions inhabited in acts of

self-representation—claims to identity, identification, and disidentification.¹³ From the work of Chaves to the contributions of Sara Contreras, Monique Marvez, and Sandra Valls, to mention a few, Latina comedians are raising their diverse voices across all mainstream media spaces from east to west of the US–Canada border. While Sandra Valls jokes about growing up Mexican and lesbian in Texas, Sara Contreras self-represents as a Puerto Rican single mother, living in an upper-class Jewish neighbourhood in New Jersey. Monique Marvez, a Cuban from Miami, has been featured at the Just for Laughs Festival in Montreal and hosts her own radio show in San Diego.¹⁴

Chaves's distinctiveness represents forms of resistance disguised in the power of laughing, the power of telling her own story, because, as she points out, "[T]here's indeed an undeniable healing power in the elixir of laughter and that healing may not be as potent for the audience as it is for ourselves" ("Sunday Feature: Dying is Easy"). She enacts the reality of her multiple selves, the middle-class Nicaraguan immigrant, the comic woman, and her lesbian subjectivity while acknowledging the many borders that criss-cross her identity and give it a distinctive shape. The markings of a split subject demand a space for representation across diverse social categories.

13 Consult my books *Latina Performance* and *Latinas on Stage* for an analysis of the works of Latina comic performers in the US.

14 Marilyn Martinez, who died on 3 November 2007, can be placed as part of this generation. She used to say that she was a triple minority because she was fat, she was a woman, and she was Hispanic. She was based in Los Angeles and was a regular at the Hollywood Comedy Store. Before she died, she was featured along with Sara Contreras, Monique Marvez, and Sandra Valls in the DVD *The Original Latin Divas of Comedy*.

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