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Celebrating the multiplicities of Latinx performance through directing
blu by Virginia Grise and *The Stars Through The Smog Showcase*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Cambria Lorene Herrera

Committee in charge:

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair
Professor Julie Sara Burelle
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2023

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University of California San Diego

2023

DEDICATION

For all the queer kids who thought they were too different to succeed.

For all the brown kids who thought they were not smart enough to complete a degree.

For all the girls who thought they had to make themselves small.

May you always keep dreaming.

May you learn to see the stars through the smog.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Celebrating the multiplicities of Latinx performance through directing
blu by Virginia Grise and *The Stars Through The Smog Showcase*

by

Cambria Lorene Herrera

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Vanessa Stalling, Chair

This thesis explores my celebration of the multiplicities within Latinx performance. I document my direction of *blu* by Virginia Grise and the creation of *The Stars Through The Smog Showcase* with the tools of movement, community-building, and metaphors I developed in the process.

In June 2022 I started leading an exploration of the multiplicities within Latinx performance and my directing work culminating in a production of *blu* (2011) by Virginia Grise and *The Stars Through The Smog Preshow Showcase* in March 2023. As a director, I embraced the multiplicities within myself including my experience with forgiveness, violence, femininity, and masculinity. In reflection, I identify three key areas where this style manifested: the rich interplay of music and movement, community-building, and metaphors in performance. The production and showcase celebrated the diversity of our predominantly Latinx team grounded in the multiplicities of our experiences.

blu is about a Latinx family in an unnamed *barrio* fighting to love themselves and each other in the face of the domestic and state violence imposed by colonial structures. A mother, Soledad, is fighting to protect her family despite the gang, domestic, and military violence that threatens her relationships with her first lover, Eme, and her children: Blu, Gemini, and Lunatico. She fights to stay with her second lover, the two-spirited Hailstorm, despite the pressures inflicted by colonial violence including queerphobia and intergenerational trauma. It is inspired by the stories of Mexica warriors: Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli, the origins of the energy in the moon and the sun. *blu* uses the Mexica metaphor of the moon and sun's daily dance to understand the world's balance of masculinity and femininity, violence and forgiveness, and the many other multiplicities of life in the *barrio*.

Inspired by the theme of reclamation in *blu*, I created *The Stars Through The Smog Preshow Showcase* to lead an ensemble of artists in creating performance pieces based on the reclamation of multiplicities within their own identities. Over the course of

fifteen weeks, I facilitated community-building events and workshopped performance pieces ranging from original songs, to stand-up comedy, poems, short plays, and drag performances. On March 3, 2023, before the opening performance of *blu* we shared these pieces on varying themes of reclaimed identity to an overflowing audience.

To create a performance that felt grounded in the movement and music of Latinx communities, we integrated dance, stylized movement, staging, and gestures with live mixing by DJ Nic Rodriguez-Villafañe. The playwright, Virginia Grise asked that “the directing style serve the music, movement, and mysticism intrinsic to the script” (Grise, 4). This necessitated that my collaborators and I explore the histories of our movements: what we’ve built in our lives and what we inherited from our elders and ancestors. We started with the music. Several of us in the show and showcase made playlists that excited us to move our bodies in the rhythms we felt the script move. The artists in these playlists ranged from Jenni Rivera to Bomba Estereo, Nitty Scott, Smokey Robinson, Selena, Snoop Dog, Bad Bunny, and others. These diverse artists built on the sounds of their ancestors to carry the weight of all the ugly and beautiful emotions they’ve felt across generations. From these playlists, I lead the production sound designer Padra Crisafulli, DJ Nic Rodriguez-Villafañe, and our assistants: Steve Llamas, Lula Britos, and Roselle-Angeline Castro through developing a playground of song ideas that we could explore for every scene. In early rehearsals, we directly responded to this playground when the actors read the lines while the song or beat played underneath them and discussed the influence this music had on our minds and bodies. It was a tool to feel something we couldn’t always describe with words alone: the cultural and emotional complexities that can only be captured in music.

From there we had to bend and sway to the rhythms of this music, leading us to several moments of dance and stylized movement. Beyond the sun and moon, Grise incorporated other powerful nature metaphors into the script that informed our movement. The final poem of the play repeats “Ocean waters carry you” (Grise 88). Sometimes nature explodes and erupts with power and sometimes it hushes into a controlled steady rhythm. We developed dances that explored a range of feminine energy: sometimes large and expansive like the ocean and sometimes tight with sharp turns like a twisting river. When the actors in this play put on their jackets and blankets, it was a bold, gorgeous gesture of protection. When they vented or challenged each other they sweated, pointed, pounded, pushed, slapped, punched, kicked, lifted, or shook their limbs. When couples danced or embraced, it was tender and bursting with love and connection through the emphasis of their arms, hands, hips, and legs. These smooth and violent motions explored the spectrum of movement of the *barrio*.

As Latinx people of Indigenous ancestry who were enslaved and forced to assimilate, we hold both freedom and captivity in every moment of our existence. I stylized this experience theatrically by staging moments of dialogue about captivity with free movements. When the boys were discussing their arrests by cops at school, they were casually lifting weights in the backyard and when Eme was telling his wife about his arrest, he was lounging in his lawn chair (Figure 1). While Blu was describing his pain as a soldier in Iraq he was standing in front of a screen of vast desert orange (Figure 2). In contrast, I staged moments of reaching for more freedom than their circumstances offered in more confined spaces. When Hailstorm fought for herself and her children to connect to the pain and truths of their Indigenous roots, she collapsed

onto the same palette that was Eme's cell and Lunatico's beating ground. While Gemini described her assault, she was held back by two young boys in a position that made her both constrained and in focus. When Gemini and Lunatico dreamed of a better future, they were confined onto a small roof-like platform. All of these movements helped us hold the complexities of what it feels like to be Indigenous, children of immigrants, and colonial subjects — a multiplicity we cannot articulate in words alone.



Figure 1: Lunatico and Eme speak of arrest



Figure 2: Blu in Iraq and Eme in prison

The opening gestures of the play were fire-making, searching, prayer, worship, door slamming, drinking, cooling down, strutting, posing, caressing, spinning, breathing, looking, dreaming, rising, and floating. In each of these beats, I analyzed the intention and worked with the actor to stylize and heighten the movement and feeling of these acts based on our lived experiences. With the choreographers, Danniell Urefña, Ulises Aguirre, and Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor, we created moments of unison, inspired by the collective dancing of Danza Azteca, and other Indigenous traditions. These dances feel spiritually charged and powerful because they are grounded in a conversation with the earth, waters, and ancestors. We created other intimate movements with sensual tenderness (Figure 3). I was inspired by my lover dancing hula for me on a rocking pier

or dancing close and tight at a nightclub. The acts of using Indigenous-inspired and intimate movements that my elders were never privileged to experience in public spaces were gestures of reclamation. Reconnecting to Indigenous movement is a healing act against forced assimilation and genocide. The intimate-made-public combated the shame that has been imposed on us for physical intimacy. Our movements evolved over time and rehearsal, inspired by the fall of the moon in the night sky and the moment in the script of Gemini's fall off of the roof. We let our bodies continually repeat the movement and evolve with the inspirations and synchrony that can arise from collective repetition. Eventually, these individual and collective movements connected us to each other across cultural differences.



Figure 3: Soledad and Hailstorm dance Bachata

This work with movement and a DJ mixing live for the entire show, immersed the audience in the sounds, movements, and languages of the *barrio* while breaking the traditional expectation of entering a theater or seeing a show about a Latinx family living in poverty. As soon as the doors opened for our production, the actors invited the audience to a dance party (Figure 4). We combated damaged, sad, dark, stereotypes folks might have of *barrrios*. We resisted years of violence and genocide against Indigenous bodies by moving our brown bodies proudly with breathtakingly styled hair, clothes, and jewelry. We combated the quiet, proper expectations folks have for theaters with an ensemble of actors dancing, talking, drinking, and eating as they reached across the barrier of the fourth wall and talked to audiences. They talked to professors, parents, grandparents, and little siblings, breaking a barrier of generational segregation that usually occurs in higher education and theatre spaces. On opening night there was a sea of movement across the audience: waving hands, giving hugs, applauding, hyping, stepping out of seats to dance, and swaying in the seats — a cacophony of sound and movement celebrating the spectrum that is Latinidad.



Figure 4: *blu* Opening Dance Party

In order to create a performance that celebrates the spectrum of Latinidad, I needed to build a community of trust so that the diverse artists on the team could dream. In *blu*, Gemini asks her little brother, “Luna, what do you dream?” (Grise, 27). I had to ask myself when I made this play, “What do you dream, Cambria?” I dream of creating stories with ensembles that can forgive, respect, and dream like their parents couldn’t. To do this, I first had to work on forgiving myself and the violence of my past. I intentionally chose the shows, “Gentefied” and “On My Block” to study the coming-of-age dynamics in Chicanx communities. Watching these shows helped me recognize my privileges as well as my colonially-imposed pains that contributed to the clinical depression and stunted dreaming of my late teens and early twenties. I recognized that I could reclaim a wide spectrum of things that were imposed on me in my youth including purity, assimilation, ignorance, and intolerance. In new definitions of these words for myself, I could facilitate a space for young people where they were free to be loud, brown, queer, sad, joyful, afraid, angry, and in the messy process of forgiving and rebuilding. To that end, I created *The Stars Through The Smog Showcase* collective inspired by Grise’s introduction to *blu*: “for the children who live under the blades of the helicopters, trying to see stars through the smog, for that place where the horizon meets the earth can you see it?” (Grise, v).

After the work on forgiving myself, I could lead the ensemble in understanding forgiveness within the script. In the climactic moment of the play Gemini cries out, “Protect me from my enemies. (*beat.*) We’ve been dead. Dead too long. (*beat.*) It’s time for you to let it go . . . blu i forgive you . . . let it go.” (Grise, 52). In this line, Gemini honors the histories of the men in her family and masculinity in Mexica culture and

declares that this is a moment of irrevocable change after abuse. She forgives her brother, Blu, for being too scared to do anything to help her after her rape and declares that it will no longer tie her down. I know exactly what it is like to tell your brother of assault, to tell the people in your family what hurt you, and watch them run away in disgust and fear. I was determined to theatrically highlight the incredible power and pain of that type of forgiveness. I use silence sparingly in my direction. Silent moments can often feel boring, drawn out, or distracting. But in a show with a DJ consistently playing vibrant music, I used silence to emphasize the power of Gemini's forgiveness. Gemini walked downstage to tell her story in complete silence and then walked upstage and climbed the ladder to the roof in complete silence again to tell Blu she forgave him (Figure 5). Silence became a theatrical device we used to hold the breath, determination, and brave energy of this powerful forgiveness. The importance I applied to this moment of forgiveness in the script I also brought to forgiveness in our process.



Figure 5: Gemini walking center stage in silence to tell her story

I've been gifted a lot of forgiveness in my lifetime. The faith tradition I inherited from my elders holds above all else that we are eternally held in salvation because we

are forgiven and that forgiveness is our hope. My first Quaker directing mentor, Rhett Luedtke, taught me the key to acting is instant forgiveness. I shared those words, “instant forgiveness” with the cast and saw it activate something in them. They all took silent and collective moments to start forgiving themselves a little more every day. They started trusting their instincts and acting in a way that was present in the character no matter what surprises came from their castmates, audiences, or their own actions. I see this type of acting as dancing on the waves of the play: acting that creates a palpable world for audiences that feels complex and full of the multiplicities of life.

From the groundwork of forgiveness, I was able to facilitate a space filled with love, friendship, silliness, rebellion, sensuality, and gender fluidity. To do this, I lead the team in collective visioning exercises I adapted from Quaker activist, Linda Stout, and read Cherrie Moraga’s essay on Coyolxauqui’s feminine strength (Stout; Moraga, 73-76). This gave them space to dream about what they wanted masculinity, femininity, violence, and restoration to look like in their futures. I took them to a gallery opening of Kumeyaay artists and out onto Kumeyaay land to be in relationship with our local community. Every day, I braided my hair to remind myself that my energy is threefold: from my ancestors, for the future generations, and my own to make whatever I want to build. I modeled and saw replicated a practice of respect for myself, my elders, and those who often go unnoticed. In our room, guests had a special place of honor. Understudies and assistants were celebrated as part of the essential work. We understood none of us were celebrating, creating, dreaming, or liberating if some of us were not. I built a process where young artists could play and craft in a different kind of playground than their parents ever could have: where we could hear the moon, gender

expansiveness was loved, and our tears, screams, and bad days were met with forgiveness.



Figure 6: The *blu* set featuring projected stars

With a community able to move in a framework of trust and forgiveness, I was able to use text analysis to lead the design of visual metaphors for Latinx experiences in performance. To create a visual metaphor for Soledad holding and fighting against the inheritances of her family and *barrio*, we designed a set that looked like a fragmented living room, kitchen, door, and neighborhood streets (Figure 6). We chose visuals that speak to our community: vintage furniture, tennis shoes over telephone wires, graffiti, stickers, tortilla holders, magnets, and many more details. These lived-in spaces were divided by cracks in the concrete. These cracks were a visual metaphor for breaking and rebirth in one action. We emphasized this idea by using beautiful, isolated lighting choices and stylized dance in a gang initiation scene. And again by projecting a video of an ocean on stage when a mother was considering an abortion and having a baby swim in her belly. This projected ocean, along with the stars, became a consistent visual

metaphor to tie in with the poetry of the script that connected the ocean with forgiveness and love and the stars to a community of loving beings.

In addition to text analysis, I used research to understand that the Mexica story of Coyolxauhqui and Hitzilopochtli were mirrored in the characters Gemini and Blu and helped audiences draw this connection through my collaboration with our scenic and projection designer, Michael Wogulis. We constructed a roof space that looked like it was held up by the starry sky, raised into place when Gemini's mother closed her eyes and dreamed of stars. We hung a large circle with a bold presence on stage and placed it directly behind Gemini's roof. When Coyolxauhqui was introduced, Gemini was on the roof in a physical position mirrored by a projection of the moon that became a Mexica image of Coyolxauhqui on the roof (Figure 7). In the scenes before Blu's death, we projected on this circle a sun that disappeared into the darkness. These methods connected the realness of the earth, sky, and moon with the multifaceted idea of eleven-year-old, Gemini, holding the same strength, pain, and experience of femicide as the Mexica warrior Coyolxauhqui. They connected her relationship with her brother, Blu, with the tradition of violence against women and the balance of masculinity and femininity in the world.

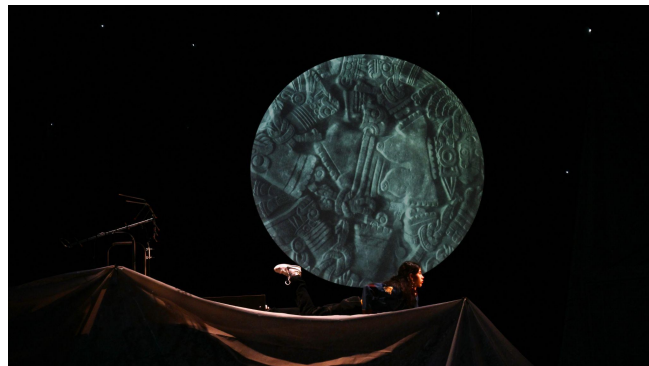


Figure 7: Gemini on the roof in front of the Mexica image of Coyolxauhqui

The violence in this play is both domestic and from the state. We staged realistic moments of punching and slapping within the family and in other places I used abstract staging to communicate the complexity of state violence in Latinx communities. I staged the doctor pushing a 17-year-old to get an abortion, an officer recruiting an 18-year-old to join the military, and a cop arresting a 14-year-old behind a broken chain-linked fence (Figure 8, Figure 9). Their faces were disfigured by the fence and the lighting but their presence through the shape of their costumes on their bodies and vocal work was piercing across the stage. These moments were intentionally staged with the same actors who played the family members because the state's systems of violence use members of the Latinx community to enslave, recruit, attack, and kill each other. They were staged behind the fence to build a metaphor for the layer of separation these people have from their community. Similarly, we used helicopter noises and searchlights from directly above the audience's head to localize the audience with the state violence and create a sonic call that we are all complicit in the state violence that harms Latinx communities.

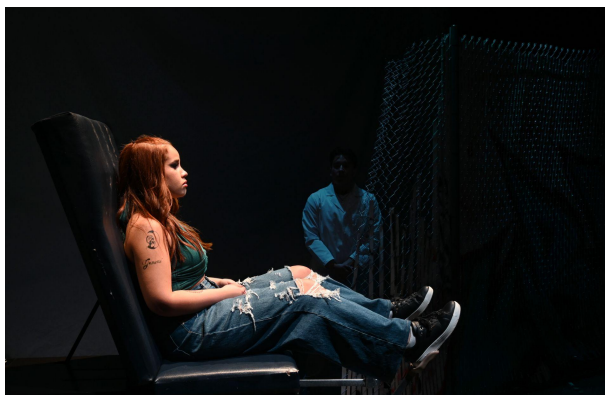


Figure 8: Soledad's doctor behind the fence



Figure 9: Lunatico's arresting officer behind the fence

The most intergenerational visual metaphor we could create on stage was through clothing. Through the styling of crop tops, cinched waists, and big jeans we

could capture the silhouette of a feminine Latina that has been popular since women started wearing pants in the U.S. and is still popular to this day (Figure 10). Through hoop earrings, dramatic makeup, and carefully pinned back or gelled down hair and braids, the feminine characters Soledad and Gemini were connected to all the Black and Latinx women who proudly originated and carry on these style choices despite the hypersexualization and class or slut shaming that they experience (Figure 11). The men's clothing captured both the violence and pride that comes with wearing a uniform (Figure 12). A uniform strips someone of their individuality and connects them to a team bigger than themselves. The men were always in a type of uniform: either one provided by the state, their occupation, or their role as a gang member in the barrio. The uniform of the barrio carries the most complexities of what it means to be a Latinx man: it is both conforming to American standards of dress through jeans or shorts and a t-shirt but rebelling in the largeness of the pants and tightness of the shirt - exposing more of the skin and the rebellious tattoos that hold a reflection of personal identity and affiliations.



Figure 10: Gemini's costume

Figure 11: Soledad's Makeup

Figure 12: Blu and Luna's Costume

The bridge between these two costume-style worlds and gender energies in this play is Hailstorm, a two-spirit parent fighting to reconnect to her Indigenous roots. She

holds the multiplicities of Latinidad within her body. She wore pants and a box-shaped t-shirt tucked in to shape a gender-fluid silhouette. She wore American clothing influenced by the *ranchero* style with a flannel shirt and boots and Indigenous-made and gifted jewelry crafted from beads and stones.

In the final moment of the play, I staged Hailstorm in a moment that synthesized all of the music, movement, community-building, and metaphor tools I've analyzed here. In her own pool of light, she danced with Indigenous-inspired movement choreographed by our elder and mentor, Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor, to the instrumental ballad of Afro-Latina R&B star, Rihanna, and the drumbeat played in a heartbeat rhythm by Blu, the step-son she could not save from a military death. It was truly an intergenerational movement that made her body like a sundial, slowly moving her arms in replication of the sun: the energy of masculinity and war according to the Mexica, but the dance was also feminine and fluid, inspired by the ocean. At the end of her dance, she held up her arms in release and crossed to extend her hand to her lover, Soledad. She offered Soledad tender togetherness through her extended hand while also honoring the violent loss that could separate them. This moment was made possible because of the forgiveness and trust formed between me, Dr. Jade Power-Sotomayor, the actor who played Hailstorm: Lisette Velandia, and the actor who played her understudy: Mayra Carrillo. Through performance, we profoundly symbolized a truth of Latinidad: that despite all of the violence within and towards the Latinx community, we continue to choose release and connection with each other.

I will carry my strengths in directing with expansive movement, community-centered process, and striking metaphors into every performance I direct in

the future. This work with *blu* and *The Stars Through The Smog Showcase* proved that I can create an environment that supports multifaceted storytelling with forgiveness, trust, and creativity. I learned to trust a process of learning, shaping, failing, breaking, and rebuilding to dream up and direct these productions. Dreaming and directing often means that everything falls apart for a while but I learned to trust my bold vision and process and see it through to a transformative end. My process serves the past through reflection, the present through forgiveness, and dreams of a better future. Together with my collaborators, I was able to explore expansive multiplicities within Latinidad and will take this same style of work into many more culturally-specific performance pieces in the future.

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