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**Contemporary American Queer Drama:
Pushing the Limits to Remain at the Borders**

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years, after the American LGBT liberationist movement has managed to make new voices heard and acquired certain social conquests, partly overturning decades of exclusion and segregation, gay American drama has often focused on the stories of white upper-middle class men who lead lives that conform to heteronormative roles. This has been the pattern on the American stage following Tony Kushner's influential *Angels in America*. However, the LGBT collective debates between stances of assimilation to mainstream society and the intention of preserving identity paradigms that differ from hegemonic norms. The intersections between sexuality and ethnic identity offer an alternative model of characterization in drama, one that highlights differences and addresses issues that are frequently overlooked by the mainstream. The crosses between race and sexual orientation focus on the preservation of differences as a response to conformity to social mores. This analysis studies three queer plays belonging to Asian-American, Chicano and African-American playwrights who aim at transgressing hegemonic standards of normality and reject the idea of accommodating to society expectations. By doing so, these authors challenge American drama from the point of view of subject matter, characterization and dramatic structure, highlighting difference at the center of their plays. In the conclusions, I reveal that the new American queer theater may be that which rekindles the spark of belligerence that may have been lost when gay ceased to be a synonym for marginal and became another mainstream construct.

*To all the men who have helped me reaffirm my sexuality,
fuck by fuck*

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Abstract | i |
| Acknowledgements | iii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| PART I | 6 |
| Chapter 1. Gay History | 7 |
| <i>The love that dared speak its name: The history of gay liberation</i> | 7 |
| <i>The birth of queer liberation</i> | 13 |
| <i>All work and no play... Gay sex and the dangers of assimilation</i> | 14 |
| Chapter 2. Queer Theory | 18 |
| <i>“People are different.” Queer theory in the making</i> | 18 |
| <i>Gays spells with a G, as in guerrilla. Shock tactics in queer literature</i> | 21 |
| Chapter 3. Queer Theater | 26 |
| <i>The world is a stage: A queer approach to drama</i> | 26 |
| <i>Something there is that doesn’t love a fourth wall</i> | 30 |
| PART II | 34 |
| Chapter 4. Asian-American Gay Drama | 35 |
| <i>Chay Yew</i> | 35 |
| <i>A Play of His Own</i> | 35 |
| <i>Staging sides</i> | 35 |
| <i>Learning about AIDS</i> | 37 |
| <i>Language and Race</i> | 39 |
| <i>Broken Relationships</i> | 43 |
| <i>Final Comments</i> | 46 |
| Chapter 5. Chicano Gay Drama | 48 |
| <i>Culture Clash</i> | 48 |
| <i>The World is a Chicano Stage</i> | 49 |
| <i>On with the show</i> | 50 |
| <i>Final Comments</i> | 57 |
| Chapter 6. African-American Gay Drama | 59 |
| <i>E. Patrick Johnson</i> | 59 |
| <i>Pouring Your Queer Heart Out</i> | 62 |
| <i>The Boys in the Band</i> | 63 |
| <i>Final Comments</i> | 71 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Conclusions | 73 |
| Works Cited | 79 |
| Appendix 1. <i>A Language of Their Own</i> | |
| Appendix 2. <i>Mission Magic Mystery Tour</i> | |
| Appendix 3: <i>Pouring Tea. Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales</i> | |

Introduction

What is queer drama? Such a simple question in syntax and lexis cannot seem to find a simple answer. Some believe that it is drama written by gay and lesbian playwrights – which would possibly make even the Ancient Greek tragedies queer. Others consider that it is plays touching on gay sensitivities, but that idea overlooks the fact that drama has tackled gay issues even before queer theory itself. While it is true that we can make queer readings of the Ancient Greeks or provide a queer analysis of gay literature, it is key to understand that, as an academic construct, queer theory is a relatively new phenomenon. Queer theory is a rather young line of thought that was born in the 1970s and 1980s only after the Stonewall riots (and partly in response to them). As an offshoot of Cultural Studies, queer theory has come to provide an interdisciplinary framework on which to base the analysis of social phenomena that does more than simply portray LGBT characters or belong to gay or lesbian authors. It can shed light on cultural productions springing from diverse groups representing a multiplicity of sexualities divergent from heteronormative mores and voicing their wish to remain alternative. As such, queer theory has an important bearing on the artistic outputs of gay male identities in American drama throughout the twentieth century. It is for this reason that this theory is the foundation on which this analysis stands.

In the same line of thought, it is important to understand that the term gay can be equated to same-sex sexual practices or desires. However, beyond sexuality as performance, and more importantly for the purposes of this study, I also understand gay as the homosexual behavior closer to heteronormativity – that is, homonormative behavior. By contrast, the term queer expresses the will of the LGBT collective to stand apart from heteronormativity transgressively and belligerently, underlining individual identities (see Dolan, 2010; Turner, 2000). Thus, when discussing sexual practices, sexuality, desire, sensitivities or sexual drive, the term gay refers to same-sex eroticism. Nevertheless, I also use the word as the assimilationist form of fitting within heteronormative stances while I reserve queer for the transgressive and antagonistic manner in which gay individuals overtly react against conformity to hegemonic thought.

This work analyzes three queer plays written after *Angels in America* (Kushner, 1992/1996) entered Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* (Bloom, 1995), namely *A Language of their Own* (Yew, 1997), *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* (Culture Clash, 2003) and *Pouring Tea: Black Gay Men of the South Tell their Stories* (Johnson, 2012). The choice of these three plays responds to the fact that, since the premiere of the epic

Angels in America, gay American drama has mostly centered on the stories of white, upper-middle class, educated men (see Clum, 1992; Seidman, 1993). The three pieces that make up this corpus of analysis share the fact that they portray gay men belonging to different ethnic backgrounds: Asian-American, Chicano and African-American respectively. This point strikes them apart from general gay drama and stresses an intersection that is the core of this study. These works embody the raging battle against heteronormative assimilationism at present and transgress mainstream mores in order to keep true to the queer spirit.

As a literary representation of some aspect of LGBT existence, these three plays contribute to identify the intersections between sexuality and racial identity in order to explore the portrayal of queer men beyond the canons of traditional drama. For the purposes of this work, and following the ideas expressed by Ángel Raimundo Fernández y González, I understand a play as a dramatic text made up of theatrical elements such as dialogue and stage directions, written for its performance in front of an audience, but not its performance itself (1981, p. 248). Similarly, I take the ideas of Stefan Brecht (1978/1986) and Jill Dolan (2010) in that queer drama as a subgenre is made up of plays that challenge heteronormative canons presenting lifestyles that break the male-female binary opposite in sexuality.

The reason behind the choice of male gay drama – as opposed to LGBT in general, which may include the lesbian theater – responds to the need for focus. In his introduction to *Gay New York*, George Chauncey explains that “the differences between gay male and lesbian history [and cultural production of identity] and the complexity of each made it seem virtually impossible to write a book about both that did justice to each and avoided making one history an appendage to the other” (1994, p. 27). Therefore, while it is true that I will not analyze lesbian representations in American drama, its exploration may be carried out using the same model of analysis included in this study.

After the induction of *Angels in America* into the Western canon, which granted explicit recognition and validation to gay theater, the status quo of American letters changed. Considering that “queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin, 1995, p. 63), I mean to explore the strategies queer theater uses to preserve its belligerent and subversive nature. Additionally, I am interested in studying the form that contemporary queer drama takes, and whether queer

as a category is unique and unchangeable or if it mutates to diverge from heteronormativism.

As opposed to gay, queer may define itself as a dynamic position associated with transgression. Thus, while the former may entail assimilation to heteronormative mores – expressed in dramatic texts in the portrayal of characters who imitate heterosexual lifestyles or express their sexuality in an unobtrusive way –, the latter can offer plots, characters and forms of representation that diverge from conventional parameters. While assimilated gay drama usually portrays white upper-middle class characters who behave heteronormatively, the queer plays that I analyze here present characters that stand away from the mainstream, based on their sexuality and their ethnic identity, characters who belong outside hegemonic canons.

I tackle the sociocritic analysis of the three works diachronically, considering the socio-historical context of production as the result of a 50-year struggle. Within this framework, I analyze the plays synchronically by addressing issues of power and culture where queer opposes normativity. Regarding the formal structure of the three works, it is worth revising whether they pose the idea of transgression not only from the standpoint of content but as regards form. Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies provide the tools for this analysis, which is presented in six different chapters.

Chapter One presents the historical background of the LGBT plight. Diachronically, gay American drama is the result of the fight for freedom of expression born around the Stonewall revolts in the late 1960s. Eric Marcus (1992/2002) records a series of interviews to well-known personalities who were key in the LGBT struggle for rights throughout the 20th century. The concerns that these individuals express as eyewitnesses and makers of the LGBT social rights militancy outline the living history of the queer plight. John D’Emilio (1998) is one of the great pioneers of the study of gay history, and, through different milestones from the 1940s to the 1960s, he traces the germ of the Stonewall riots and the liberationist movement that followed. He analyzes the *sprit du temps* before the gay liberation movement was born and the way in which it nourished from previous instances of resistance such as the Black Power or those of Jewish community groups, and the intersections of sexuality, race and class. French philosopher Guy Hocquenghem (1972/2009) analyzes the feelings of insecurity that same-sex desire awakens in mainstream society. His perspectives, written at the time gay belligerence was flourishing, sketch fear as the main component of societal rebukes of alternative lifestyles. His ideas fit within the historical framework of the chapter

although many may actually see his thoughts as the birth of queer theory. Finally, the diachronic analysis of the socio-historical context resorts to the ideas expressed by Michael Bronski (2000) on the relationship between culture and politics in order to discuss the representations of pleasure and sexuality. The author introduces the notion of assimilationism as a form of invisibility for the “different” and highlights the consequences of such stance on the group.

Chapter Two delves into queer theory discussing matters of power and oppression. Queer theory resists definitions, but it takes elements from deconstructivism and social constructivism. Philosopher Michel Foucault (1977/1980b) proposed a model of discourse, knowledge and power considered by many the very foundation of queer theory. His contributions on power and sexual dissidence are the stepping-stones of my analysis of queer theory. Similarly, the author also discusses the importance of the never-ending process of transgression of hegemonic rule: As heteronormativity tends to adapt to external aggression, it assimilates changes in society and normalizes them. Thus, non-conformity is key for liberationist movements, which should seek to transgress norms perpetually. Nonetheless, in order to explore the key points of this theory, I base my analysis on the ideas presented by Judith Butler (1993a), who offers a feminine and feminist reading of Foucault’s ideas placing gender at the center of her analysis on sexual desire. Her thoughts on the resignification of the term queer and its performative use offer tools for understanding dramatic language as a performative act of queer values. Finally, the contributions of William B. Turner (2000) on his intellectual history of queer theory contribute to understand gender and sexuality. Although the author purposefully does not define the term queer with the intention of preserving its unstable quality, he highlights the fact that it entails resistance to hegemonic ideas of sexual or gender identity.

Chapter Three is devoted to the analysis of the formal aspects of queer drama. John M. Clum (1994/2000) traces a history of contemporary LGBT drama that is the model for this analysis as well as the historical basis for the study of contemporary gay drama. Jill Dolan (2010) theorizes on the forms sexuality takes in drama exploring queer sexualities, desire and love. Her analysis questions heteronormative positions and rests upon the reaction of audiences when witnessing instances of LGBT sexualities on stage,. The author criticizes mainstream drama due to its lack of positive queer images while she observes and studies LGBT productions in their attempt to overturn prejudice. Additionally, she studies how sexuality and race intersect in queer theater. Finally,

Stephan Brecht (1978/1986) presents case studies that contribute to shed light upon the very foundations of alternative queer plays of the 1960s and 1970s, the very roots of contemporary transgressive popular drama. Although the author's focus of attention rests on independent performances, his ideas on the use of language and structure still hold true in current drama, much though the venues may have changed. Brecht's observations prove insightful, because the transgressive strategies of the performances that he describes are part of major theater productions at present. While this is proof of the ground gained by queer drama, it also shows the relentless power of heteronormativity to absorb subversion and neuter it.

These first three chapters are combined following a relational paradigm in order to examine the three plays on three levels: diachronically as regards power, culture, and their historical context of production; synchronically in the manner in which the three plays embody the advances in queer theory, and formally, as to the study of structure and dramatic resources associated with transgression and queerness in drama.

The next three chapters constitute Part Two of this work, and individually they discuss each of the three plays. Chapter Four analyzes Asian-American gay drama as represented by Chay Yew's *A Language of Their Own*, a play written in 1997, barely after the world success of *Angels in America*. As such, it is still bound by the 20th century outlook on many queer issues such as assimilationism or AIDS as synonymous with death. Chapter Five tackles Chicano gay drama, in the form of drama troupe Culture Clash's *Mission Magic Mystery Tour*. The 2001 play portrays a more diverse cast of characters already in tune with contemporary LGBT concerns. Finally, Chapter Six takes over African-American gay drama through the analysis of the unpublished 2008 theater reading *Pouring Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales*, by E. Patrick Johnson. This play represents the novelty of deriving from a research project by the author, who later turned his findings into the book that gave origin to his one-man show. The three plays can be deemed as representative milestones of the two decades that have elapsed since *Angels in America*, and they can shed light on the future of LGBT American drama.

This study means to be a contribution to contemporary theater and gender studies by observing the construction of queer characters on the American stage at present and by analyzing the new forms that homoerotic drama takes nowadays and, possibly those still to come.

PART I

Contemporary gay drama is the result of a history of struggles for the right for self-expression commonly thought to have sprung around the Stonewall bar revolts in the late 1960s. In order to understand the theater of the turn of the 21st century, it is convenient to trace the change of heart that operated in certain American circles in the 1950s and 1960s that gave a voice to the disenfranchised gay minority. A few decades later, this movement paved the way for the flourishing of gay and lesbian drama. Nonetheless, at some time in the late 20th century, this blooming drama fell under the spell of hegemonic thought adapting its LGBT stories to heteronormative stances. In order to comprehend the spark of its origins and assess the fire of its beginnings, it is key to understand the social factors that operated in the mid-20th century.

Chapter 1. Gay History

The love that dared speak its name: The history of gay liberation

While same-sex practices may be as old as the Earth, the seed of the gay American liberationist movement may be traced back to only one or two moments in U.S. history. John D'Emilio (1998) believes that the germ for the liberationist movement may be found around World War II. The budding science of Psychology had given same-sex practices a name, homosexuality, and turned it into a disease. Michel Foucault argues that “We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal’s famous article of 1870 on ‘contrary sexual sensations’ can stand as its date of birth” (1978/1990, p. 43). Before Psychology became a practice and later a science, same-sex drives – be they occasional or regular encounters – were punished only by religion in a manner akin to fornication out of wedlock or adultery. However, in the late 19th century, Psychology gave homosexuality the character of a disease for the first time, unlike the former two, which passed inadvertently as matters of behavior. This judgment made homosexuals (in public office, or the military) undesirable. However, it also made same-sex practices a public matter by moving them away from the private or the religious spheres.

The shift in the outlook of homosexuality from the private to the public sphere had immediate consequences. The first result of this form of societal punishment that understood homosexuality as a reason for military unfitness entailed that for the first time young men were forced to ponder on their sexual practices. When these young men observed that their homoerotic desire was deemed as a disease by the hegemonic powers, they were somehow forced to hide their sexual preferences. Thus, it is paradoxical that “outing” homosexuality became a form of taking gay men and lesbians back into the closet. Much though public attempts to control this so-called disease were enforced through screening processes in order to ban gays and lesbians from the military, these experiments were doomed to fail: The desire to enjoy full citizenship rights made many homosexuals lie about their sexual orientation and the screening processes proved ineffective. In a 1948 book, Dr. William Menninger claims that “for every homosexual who was referred or came to the Medical Department, there were five or ten who never were detected” (as cited in D'Emilio, 1998, p. 25). Those who passed or slipped through the controls imposed by the government joined the military, and

service life during the war led to many men and women to be secluded and kept for long periods of time only in same-sex company: “The sex-segregated nature of the armed forces raised homosexuality closer to the surface for all military personnel” (D’Emilio, 1998, p. 25). Peer recognition (if not self-acceptance) led to the formation of clusters and networks, to the first discussions of group needs, and above all to the realization that gays and lesbians were not alone.

While D’Emilio places the foundations of the subsequent liberationist movement at the onset of World War II, other authors place the moment of self-realization as a group slightly later: According to historian Allan Bérubé, the birth of the “gay awakening” may be dated back to the postwar period when, for the first time, gays felt they were the targets of official discrimination (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 21). The author believes that the unprecedented persecution, provocation and molestation of the time led to the realization that homosexuality had abandoned the private sphere to become a public matter, which in turn called for the creation of organizations to protect the rights of the eclectic group. Associations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and ONE Inc. were burgeoning organizations that sprang in the 1950s based on what they saw other subcultural groupings had done: As Mattachine Society founder Chuck Rowland recalls, members thought, “Why can’t we do the same things the Jews do? If you had five hundred Jews in a community, they would have several temples. [...] a symphony orchestra. [...] a hospital. Why can’t we do all those kinds of things?” (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 25). The Harlem Renaissance had witnessed a similar movement of identification with the Jewish community in the fight for recognition: in the 1920s, works by black authors such as Jean Toomer’s “Fern,” or Claude McKay’s “Home to Harlem” had already used the strategy of identification with this ethnic group in order to be justified in their plight.

Whether the first moment of coming to terms with their own sexuality as a group be placed during or after World War II, because of official discrimination or due to government persecution, authors agree that the first collective effort for a Gay Liberation Movement occurred in the 1950s with the creation of the Mattachine Society. The members of this secretive society met regularly taking very careful precautions not to be followed for fear that the FBI or the police would trace their venues. The main issue at hand was not only that the members of the Mattachine Society were gay men and lesbians, but also that they were Socialists and Communists, radicals who

considered themselves some form of “NAACP for gays” (as cited in D’Emilio, 1998, p. 2); that is, leftist radicals in search for rights.

Much though the Mattachine Society was a relatively short-lived experiment, it paved the way for future civil rights debates and it underlined the incredible diversity within the group: queens, fairies, butch numbers and lesbians, among others. As Paul Phillips, a black member of the group, indicates referring to the segregated times of the 1950s:

I went to Mattachine in the first place to meet somebody who was like me, somebody gay. That was the primary purpose of my going. Once I found out there were others besides me, I was much better able to accept myself. (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 65)

The first instances of coming together and drafting claims for gay liberation were marked by the constant fear of exposure and persecution. Thus, the resulting association remained mostly underground and secret.

Despite the fact that after eleven years of meetings the Mattachine Society had only been able to gather less than four hundred members in different charters across the country and that “For all but a few, the dangers posed by exposure were too great to risk involvement with an organization for homosexuals” (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 73), new groups were gathering particularly in the major cities of the country, perhaps because of the anonymity that large cities can confer upon their residents. The press started to take note of these groups because they began demonstrating “following the example of the black civil rights movement” (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 74). While blacks coined slogans such as “Black is Beautiful,” in many gay demonstrations outside the White House, the LGBT collective carried banners reading “Gay is good”. This may have been the true engine behind the conformation of a movement. As D’Emilio claims,

As long as the ideological configuration of sin, sickness, and crime retained its dominance, homophile activists fought a losing battle. Any claims that gay men and women formed an unjustly persecuted minority lacked the persuasive power to mobilize a constituency or to alter the conditions of gay life. (1998, p. 129)

A change started to operate in the minds of many gay men and lesbians, fueled perhaps by a slight liberalization of obscenity laws that was paving the way for books, plays, physique magazines and films that would have been regarded as lewd only ten years before. People like Franklin Kameny, a member of the Mattachine Society and an active spokesperson for gay rights used to declare publicly:

We are interested in obtaining rights for our respective minorities AS Negroes, AS Jews, and AS HOMOSEXUALS. Why we are Negroes, Jews or Homosexuals is totally irrelevant, and whether we can be changed to Whites, Christians or heterosexuals is equally irrelevant. (as cited in D'Emilio, 1998, p. 153)

Even though much of mainstream culture still considered homosexuality degenerate, homoeroticism had ceased to be invisible in society: Civil suits, favorable court rulings and authoritative medical books were already leading the way of times to come.

By 1969, Greenwich Village in New York was a little haven with a few places where gay men and lesbians could gather somehow freely in spite of the frequent raids. One evening, just after midnight June 27-28, a group of officers from the New York Tactical Police Force called a raid on the Stonewall Inn at 55 Christopher Street. As Morty Manford, a Columbia University freshman at the time, recalls, "We had to line up and our identification was checked before we were free. People who did not have identification or were under age and all transvestites were detained" (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 127). That particular night, when the people who had been in the bar raid were released, they decided to wait around outside while the police dispatched those less fortunate in the vans. At the time, Christopher St. was a very common cruising area, and so there were many people who gathered around the tavern at the sight of what was happening.

Ray "Sylvia Lee" Rivera was one of the drag queens they found at the bar that night. Due to her attire, she was sure to be detained. As she explains, the patrons started to think, "Why the fuck are we doing all this for? Why should we be chastised? Why do we have to pay the Mafia all this money to drink in a lousy fuckin' bar? And still be harassed by the police?" (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 127). What was unique about that night was that it was the first time when lesbians and gay men manifested their outrage in the open against the oppression they felt as a group.

Not only did some 300 to 400 people attempt to stop the arrests by erupting into violent protest, but they even tried to burn down the bar with the police officers barricaded inside. "While confrontations between the police and students, blacks, and antiwar protesters were common by this time, the police never expected homosexuals to do anything but submit passively to their skull-cracking authority" (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 121). These confrontations between demonstrators and police that weekend are usually cited as the beginning of the modern movement for gay liberation because the number of rioters who gathered and due to the repercussions the event had on the

national press. “The Stonewall riot was able to spark a nationwide grassroots ‘liberation’ effort among gay men and women in large part because of the radical movements that had inflamed much of American youth during the 1960s” (D’Emilio, 1998, p. 233). Not only did this group take the militant example of groups such as the Black Panthers to fight: many gay individuals were themselves black or Latino.

Thus, the 1970s saw the Gay Liberation Movement adopt many of the strategies that other liberationist movements had already proved effective. Apart from the fact that there was more openness in the media about gay issues, “by the early 1970s, the number of gay and lesbian organizations soared to nearly four hundred” (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 121), a far cry from the mere 400 secretive members of the Mattachine Society ten years before. By the mid-1970s that number had escalated to over 1,000 organizations distributed all over the country (D’Emilio, 1998, p. 2). The decade witnessed a new paradigm in queer-mainstream relations.

Eric Marcus (1992/2002) outlines two different periods in the Gay Liberation Movement after the 1970s, which roughly coincide with the next two decades, “1973-1981. Coming of Age” and “1981-1992. In the Shadow of AIDS”. While Marcus has reason to showcase the coming-of-age period as a moment for settling down marked by the loss of the leftist passion typical of the late 1960s and 1970s and the advent of AIDS as the period distinguished by the fear of coming out, I believe that both periods may be defined by progressive battles to gain rights that were fought in different major cities throughout the United States. Undoubtedly, AIDS shook the foundations of the movement by producing a certain retreat from the big fights in favor of a new focus “as those afflicted with AIDS were fired from jobs, evicted from their homes, and denied health insurance” (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 45). In a way, the passion that was somehow lost in the 1970s due to a certain feeling of contentment and the media attacks and political setbacks that were suffered in the 1980s were all left behind and new energy was put to political fights in the 1990s. When the turmoil and initial panic produced by AIDS gave way to institutionalized policies that forgot the idea of a gay-exclusive disease (in spite of government policies by Republican Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr.), “new and existing gay rights groups [began] turning their attention to classic issues, including same-sex marriage or its legal equivalent, antigay violence, and the status of gay people in the military” (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 246). Largely, these fights are still raging in spite of the conquests gained.

Thus, the early 1990s meant a rebirth of the movement, which by this time had permeated to university associations and was gaining momentum in high schools all over the country. “With the election of William Jefferson Clinton in November 1992 – who received an overwhelming majority of the gay vote – most gay and lesbian Americans believed that the gay rights struggle had turned a dramatic corner” (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 345). Even though the changes were not as sudden as expected, much was done in the region of gay recognition and a positive media attitude toward homosexuals.

The legal standing of gay and lesbian people changed radically in many states and, on a national level, major policy overhauls took place. It is interesting to note that in many of the conquests, policy-makers relied on the attitudes that had taken place in racial liberation movements. As former Vice President Al Gore says referring to the debate about the inclusion of gays in the military, “That was pretty much the same argument made against integrating African-Americans into the military” (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 350). In a way, not only did the Gay Liberation Movement learn from other minorities about how to come out politically, policy-makers, the media and the corporate world also looked toward the liberation movements of other cultural subgroupings to come to terms with the idea of gay and lesbian rights.

All in all, the media started to see gay men and lesbians in a new light.

By the start of the 1996 television season realistic gay and lesbian television characters were situation-comedy staples, appearing in more than twenty shows ranging from *Roseanne* and *Friends* to *Mad About You* and *Melrose Place*, but were all in secondary or supporting roles. (Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 372)

That same season had female actor Ellen DeGeneres come out of the closet in her ABC network show *Ellen* as well as in her own personal life, which gained her the cover of *Time* magazine, a lead editorial in *The New York Times* and endless media coverage in early 1997, making her the first open lesbian in a prime time TV show. The following year saw rival NBC network raise the bar and have two gay men as protagonists of the prime-time sitcom *Will and Grace*.

In spite of the fact that so very much changed in the period portrayed in this account, the United States still faces major issues regarding discrimination. There are still a lot of fights to fight, but the road travelled is incredible, mainly for upper-middle class, white, gay men and lesbians. The openness in the major urban centers of the country and the acceptance in the mainstream media is promising. However, there are intersections between race and sexuality still to discuss. What is undeniable is that

history shows that “The love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas, 1892) found a voice: From the few militants that gathered in secret to the ever-growing number of organizations that struggle for gay rights today, the road travelled points to a minority that will not relinquish its fight for LGBT rights.

The birth of queer liberation

Guy Hocquenghem (1972/2009) was a French philosopher who wrote *The Homosexual Desire*, only three years after the Stonewall riots. His book is deemed by many as the seed of queer theory. In the context of the historical background portrayed on these pages, it aims at shedding some light regarding the mind frame that would shape gay literary outputs in the years to come.

In tune with what D’Emilio (1998) has expressed, but from the standpoint of having been a witness himself of the birth of the Gay Liberation Movement, Hocquenghem also believed that in its fight against homosexuality, society relentlessly discovers what its condemnation seems to cause: The very plague it means to eliminate thrives due to society’s rebuke (Hocquenghem, 1972/2009, p. 23). Such seems to have been the result of the medicalization of same-sex practices, discrimination around World War II, and the postwar government persecution of gays and lesbians.

Hocquenghem indicates that the fear which homosexuality awakens in heterosexual individuals springs from certain insecurity regarding homosexual desire. The lack of understanding of same-sex practices leads to the belief that all heterosexuals are instantly the object of gay and lesbian desire. This fear awakens medical, legal and judicial responses on mainstream society. However, mainstream discourse and practices are harsher outside the upper middle classes. The author believes that blue-collar workers and the oppressed masses are more harshly repressed than the upper classes or the intellectuals (Hocquenghem, 1972/2009, p. 35). This was the reality and the usual detainees that would be taken by the police in raids in gay bars in New York City: while white college students would be frowned upon at these bars but immediately released, drag queens, racial minorities and undocumented individuals would have to go through the ordeal of police arrests. This is a key aspect of Hocquenghem’s ideas as it sketches a standpoint that would prevail in years to come; that is, that there are differences between those who have access to knowledge, to wealth or to contacts and those who do not. The author stresses a need for action by all and believes in the need for constant

belligerence against a system that is unaccepting of the norms of non-heterosexual behavior (Hocquenghem, 1972/2009, p. 125).

Another point worth stressing is the fact that Hocquenghem paves the way to queer theory underlining the idea of the multiplicity of non-heterosexual practices within the gay and lesbian community,

The plural character of homosexual desire makes it dangerous to hegemonic sexuality. A thousand gay behaviors challenge the taxonomy that they try to impose upon them every day. The unification of gay desire practices under the term “homosexuality” is as preposterous as the unification of the partial drives of ego. (Hocquenghem, 1972/2009, p. 129, my translation)

This idea will later be discussed in further depth when addressing queer theory, but it is undeniable that in 1972 Hocquenghem paved the way for theorists who would later contend that the umbrella of queer theory covers well beyond white, upper-middle class, gay men who engage in same-sex practices that mimic heteronormative roles.

All work and no play... Gay sex and the dangers of assimilation

Michael Bronski delves into the relationship between culture and politics in the United States in order to analyze the Western incapacity of coping with pleasure and sex representations in the context of same-sex relationships. The author presents “an exploration of the tension that exists between heterosexual fear of homosexuality and gay culture (and the pleasure they represent) and the equally strong envy of and desire to enjoy that freedom and pleasure” (2000, p. 2). Bronski discusses gay culture in the 1970s, its backlash after the advent of AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s and its ulterior equilibrium towards the end of that decade, when media hype heteronormatized the idea of LGBT culture. This moment is of particular interest as it sets the tone for what occurred after gay drama became an artistic event of political correctness.

While it has been shown that the gay rights movement gained visibility and conquered outstanding advances in the sociopolitical fields, the author sees certain “assimilation” in the way gay culture has penetrated mainstream culture, and warns advocates for gay rights about the fact that “This serves as a reminder that the struggle for gay freedom is inseparable from other struggles for social justice” (Bronski, 2000, p. 2). The leftist, radical origins of the gay rights movement connected social action with other cultural subgroupings such as blacks, Jews and women. However, the possibility gay culture-makers have always had of sneaking back into the closet has given gay authors the chance to acquire invisibility while still influencing mainstream culture.

This is a key idea for Bronski, who advocates for cultural visibility without renouncing to the gay struggle.

Mainstream culture has a way of transmitting and professing conservative values that may clash with those which are presented in non-heterosexual works of art, “In postindustrial Western society, much popular culture is a prefabricated commodity that, while manufactured to bring pleasure by inciting the senses, also has as its goal the reaffirming of basic traditional, even reactionary, social norms” (Bronski, 2000, p. 28). Stereotypes and platitudes oftentimes serve this purpose: they rely on common expectations to produce plots that simply confirm the subjective visions of the majority on any particular issue. For example, in *Skyfall* (Mendes, 2012), the latest film of the well-known 007 franchise, the secret agent’s nemesis is a megalomaniac who happens to be gay; this characteristic produces the logical fallacies of false cause and appeal to emotions to transmit negative values against gay men to the great audiences. Popular entertainment, which is the creation of mass pleasure, usually aims at revitalizing “the status quo in sharp relief to the more radical function of pushing or transgressing the boundaries of social thought and experience” (Bronski, 2000, p. 28). The ultimate goal of queer culture is to push the envelope of traditional cultural values, but in order to do so, it has to adopt a belligerent position refusing to abide by heteronormative virtues.

While mainstream culture has forms of fighting difference and reassuring the public about traditional values (the cinema and television being the flagships for this strategy), as a more elitist art (simply by its much lesser audience reach), the theater has always been a sanctuary for the different, “Women and men who chose to remain outside the strictly defined world of marriage, children and home life found comfort in the looser social structure of the theater” (Bronski, 2000, p. 31). The working hours, the creative milieu, the sense of community established inside, the role-playing and the natural camp of the world of the theater proved to be a haven for the different. Thus, the theater became one of the engines, but far from the only one, in the portrayal of alternative queer lifestyles.

In this respect, much though same-sex desire may oppose mainstream heterosexual practices, gay cultural productions offer endless possibilities. “Since the gay community is composed of women and men with a wide range of other identities – racial, national, class, ethnic, religious – its boundaries are open-ended” (Bronski, 2000, p. 54). While the unifying factor beneath the umbrella of gay culture is attraction to

individuals of the same sex, its cultural outputs may prove diverse, eclectic and naturally eccentric.

Nevertheless, the very possibility of gay authors of “passing for heterosexual” to conform to mainstream values is what sets gay cultural productions apart from productions belonging to other cultural subgroupings, and the very reason why they may be considered particularly threatening to reactionary society. “Unlike African slave culture, which was always clearly identifiable, gay culture often coexisted, invisibly, within the larger culture” (Bronski, 2000, p. 56). After all, a mainstream literary world that accepted Whitman, Melville and Thoreau or Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal and Truman Capote may not be said to misrepresent gay sensitivities. Yet, as Bronski points out, “The power of gay culture is the power to critique mainstream culture, particularly in areas of sexuality and gender, to be able to speak the ‘truth’ or offer an alternative model” (2000, p. 56). This very intention of presenting a different outlook of society (and sexuality) is what has been considered a threat to hegemonic mores.

As pointed out, the queer menace to mainstream values found cause among conservative policy-makers in the very diverse roots of its members: Some could assimilate to the establishment while masquerading gay subplots in seemingly innocuous stories, others employed strategies based on radical political views, but the lack of structure that defines gay culture (due to diverse backgrounds and outlooks on the world that compose it) produced unrest in mainstream conservatives. Part of this unrest may be seated on the ever-growing numbers of gay and lesbian individuals. This is precisely the paradox of the LGBT collective: in spite of the traditionally non-reproductive orientation of the group, its numbers grow year after year.

Regarding the influence posed by gay culture upon mainstream culture, Bronski believes that “All unmodified subcultures pose a threat to the perceived cohesion of the dominant culture. This threat is usually decreased through the process of assimilation” (2000, p. 62). After the political conquests of the 1970s and the visibility that ensued in the 1980s and 1990s, suddenly the arts and the media started portraying gay men and lesbians in a more positive light: “white, urban, middle-class, professional men who had the time and money to pursue pleasure rather than responsibility, culture rather than families” (Bronski, 2000, p. 155). Although it is undeniable that this mainstream vision of gays is far more positive than the one which portrayed them as the corruptors of all that was sacred in American society, it hides a trap: Here gay men become unthreatening because they relinquish their own identity to comply with a persona

catered for mainstream tastes. Positive though it may be, this image of gay men and women reinforces “the idea of homosexuals as the other: not demonized, but exoticized” (Bronski, 2000, p. 155). This is the perception that at its very roots undermines years of struggle for homosexual rights as it assimilates queer culture accommodating it to heteronormative needs. Bronski sees the dangers of this point of view as a tempting option to the constant fight for LGBT acceptance and recognition. It may seem like a conquest, but in the final analysis, it is a conquest that compromises the very nature of queer as different, the very notion that makes gay and lesbian culture different.

Assimilation allows mainstream society to make differences more palatable because they can be made to mimic heteronormative models. However, at the core of the 1960s and 1970s homophile movement lied non-conformity against this assimilation, which gay men and lesbians viewed as a sugar-coated version of themselves for the public. In order to preserve their group identity (or identities) at the time, militants believed that two important political changes had to operate in the group: “The first was that the forces of gay liberation could succeed only if they worked in coalition with other oppressed groups. Gay liberationists viewed all oppression as originating from the same source: a white, heterosexual, capitalist, male-dominated society” (Bronski, 2000, p. 67). The turmoil of the 1960s awoke the conservative fear that those undesirable would be included in mainstream culture. That fear was confirmed by an apparent gay rights conquest: many gays and lesbians seamlessly assimilated to mainstream society “straightening” their queer artistic outputs and thus relinquishing the very ideas that made them different, limiting gay influence and retreating from the queer fight. The alternative implies going back to the roots of the movement and allying with other cultural subgroupings; that is, making the plight of other excluded minorities our own. In the case of gay culture, a culture made up of individuals who also oftentimes belong to other minorities such as racial ones, it means strengthening bonds with other radical organizations. “The second change in political strategy was to emphasize the power of the sexual. Gay liberation was as much a product of the sexual revolution as it was of the left, feminism, or the civil rights movement” (Bronski, 2000, p. 67). At the heart of the history for gay and lesbian rights lie processes of identification, strategies of common vindication and the recognition of diversity within the group. The gay struggle is the fight for visibility and acceptance, and this acceptance can only become effective when differences are embraced.

Chapter 2. Queer Theory

“People are different.” Queer theory in the making

As such, queer theory is a complex concept that resists definitions, although it takes elements from deconstructivism and social constructivism. When its analytic method is outlined, it may be suggested that queer theorists suspect that we are living in a paradoxical world and that the historical attention to the function of paradoxes (instead of their denouncement as a failure of logic or reason) is a productive enterprise both from the intellectual point of view as from the political perspective.

In this sense, many deem the model of discourse, knowledge and power that philosopher Michel Foucault (1978/1990) proposes as the cornerstone of queer theory. His contributions on power and sexual dissidence are here the starting point for the analysis of queer theory.

Foucault sees repression as the key to liberation from the social taboos that centuries of institutional domination (by Church, school and government among others) have placed upon individuals. In a paradoxical turn, this repression functions, at some point in history, as the outlet for the liberation of the subject, “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, non-existence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (1978/1990, p. 6), an idea very much in tune with the way in which scholars like D’Emilio see World War II oppression as the source of self-realization. The interplay of power (as a tool for submission) and language (as a tool for freedom) are important factors at the time of analyzing a type of literature that fosters non-standard forms of sexual expression. “A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom” (1978/1990, p. 6). This implies that Foucault sees the possibility of self-expression as the first step toward the liberation from the moral bounds set forth by a society that heavily relies on the oppression of the masses. Breaking social mandates is a subversive enterprise, but one of vital character to transgress norms, as a form of advancement toward new territory.

This new territory, discovered when sex begins to be discussed, crosses the lines marked by the establishment and upsets social constructs, because “the existence in our era of a discourse in which sex, the revelation of truth, the overturning of global laws, the proclamation of a new day to come, and the promise of a certain felicity are linked

together” (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 4). This concept is echoed in Bronski’s proposition that the sheer mention of homosexuality brings forth the idea of sexual practices that may seem to clash with conservative values. Thus, the discussion of gay issues instantly becomes a discussion on sex. Bronski agrees with the idea that gay discourse emphatically becomes sex discourse (2000, p. 2). The upheaval produced by the discourse of sex, then, according to Foucault, brings in itself the possibility of happiness. The philosopher does not associate this idea to the greater good, nor does he indicate whether he refers to the happiness of society or of the individual. In this respect, his analysis is purely descriptive without explicit moral judgments.

In order for this liberation to take place, the author expresses the need for transgression, “the language of sexuality has lifted us into the night where God is absent in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it, and restores it to the empty purity of its transgression” (Foucault, 1977/1980a, p. 31). The idea of the death of God rests upon the shift from a theocentric society to an anthropocentric one in which the human being becomes the most important entity in the universe.

As society evolves changing the relationships established between individuals, social norms tend to be adapted to these changes. In this context, the realm of transgression is placed in what today we may consider the cultural borders; that is, in the area furthest removed from the center of these norms.

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of a passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. (Foucault, 1977/1980a, p. 34)

Foucault sees the space for transgression as a line that is never crossed, a horizon of sorts that is redefined as the boundaries set by transgression are expanded. As an act, transgression is bound to fail, as it may never reach the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow: The road travelled, or the space conquered, instantly becomes established territory; it is normalized, which calls for the need to progress further toward new limits which are always the breeding grounds for transgression:

The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. (Foucault, 1977/1980a, p. 34)

The feat of transgression is that it is always bound to fail, in the sense that it can never enjoy success: there is always a new space to transgress. This is what Foucault calls the “endless striving” (1977/1980b, p. 55) of transgression.

Within the context of the struggle for gay rights previously discussed, it is possible to ascertain that the advances in the socio-political field throughout the 20th century are forms of transgression: from the very personal identity self-realization around World War II, to the comprehension of the official oppression which ensued, to the formation of civil rights organizations later and the active riots around the Stonewall bar, all these are instances of transgression of personal and social boundaries, transgressions that were regarded by mainstream society as ground lost, but which only served as new springboards for other struggles in the fight for equality. “Transgression carries the limit right to the limit of its being; transgression forces the limit to face the fact of its imminent disappearance to find itself in what it excludes” (Foucault, 1977/1980a, p. 34). This is the query at the heart of the gay liberation movement. Foucault’s analysis does not necessarily consider the American gay rights plight; rather, he traces historical actions and deems the French May movement as an instance of a road to travel.

I have mentioned that the philosopher does not emit moral judgments on the matter of transgression, but he simply describes the social movements that go beyond boundaries as facts to analyze:

Since this existence is both so pure and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable association with ethics if we want to understand it and to begin thinking from it and in the space it denotes; it must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations. (Foucault, 1977/1980a, p. 35)

Foucault’s ideas lack the vehement impassionedness of opinion and retain the quality of diagnosis of historical facts.

Additionally, the author gives language a key role in the act of transgression. To him, it is verbalization, the use of discourse itself, the engine behind transgression, “This language’s claim to tell all is not simply that of breaking prohibitions, but of seeking the limits of the possible” (Foucault, 1977/1980b, p. 61). This point holds particular importance for my analysis as it will be devoted to drama, written language meant to be spoken upon a stage. In this sense, I understand that the theater has the true potential of breaking boundaries, “Language must push back to infinity this limit it bears with itself, and which indicates, at once its kingdom and its limit” (Foucault,

1977/1980b, p. 65). Language is regarded as a source of transgression as well as a tool for bringing down prejudice.

As one of the forefathers of queer theory, Michel Foucault paved the way for contemporary analyses of gay and lesbian literature due to his comprehension of the elements at play in the transgression of social norms. As Guy Hocquenghem, he discussed social movements which upset the establishment tapping into alternative lifestyles. Their contributions later consolidated in what we understand as queer theory much though their goal was to revise history in the making.

Gays spells with a G, as in guerrilla. Shock tactics in queer literature

Regarding the construction of queer theory, Judith Butler (1993b) analyzes the concept of queer in the context of feminist theory. Taking Foucault as a starting point for her understanding of sexual desire, and perhaps in tune with Guy Hocquenghem's ideas, she discusses the performative effect of individual identity and the roots of political struggle. For Butler, gender and sexual expression are performative but, according to the author, neither follows a unique reference model. The author wonders about the way in which the concept of queer, which for a long time had been used pejoratively, acquired a new meaning, "When and how does a term like 'queer' become subject to an affirmative *resignification*?" (Butler, 1993b, p. 223). In the past, the term "queer" as used by heterosexuals always represented a form of normalizing reality; that is, it reaffirmed the sexuality of the enunciator while it degraded the receiver to a substandard condition. Queer theory and the gay rights movement appropriated the term to use the language of the oppressor against the oppressor. Such a strong word was frequently used to chasten and humiliate, but it was hardly ever used in polite company. When the term was appropriated, it took center stage in the most diverse spheres such as the academia just to name one, which obviously produced an effect of infringement of the laws of morality as a shock tactic, in tune with Foucault's ideas of transgression and power.

In this respect, Butler analyzes performative acts as "forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power" (Butler, 1993b, p. 225). In her analysis, she views these acts as coming from a position of authoritative power; that is, the righteous power allotted to one who uses this power for the greater good. In the case of the term "queer", the resignification comes after the overt response of LGBT rights

groups, which may explain its change of meaning. However, Butler considers that “queer” may still be used as a swearword, but nowadays, in the context of the gay rights fight, more often than not it is used as a cry for freedom: proof of this may be the chant in so many LGBT marches, “We’re queer; we’re here. Get used to it!”

The term has acquired, then, a subversive quality. By its very nature, it transgresses the norms of heteronormativity and yet, it poses a question for the future, “If the term ‘queer’ is to be a site of collective contestation, [...] it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (Butler, 1993b, p. 228). As such, “queer” can never quite win the battle. In the same manner as Foucault believes that acts of transgression always set new boundaries to break, chase the limits without ever reaching them, within the umbrella of queer ideas, the fight must never end.

Nevertheless, Butler sees certain dangers in using “queer” as an umbrella term because “As expansive as the term ‘queer’ is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions” (1993b, p. 228). These divisions may spring based on gender (male vs. female, or rather gay men vs. lesbians), or on the grounds of race, class, age and the like. The author sees identification under such broad term complex, and yet, she understands that this very amplitude in designation may work to the benefit of the gay rights movement:

Indeed, it may be that the critique of the term will initiate a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within lesbian and gay politics or open up new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these constituencies are radically distinct from one another. (Butler, 1993b, pp. 228-229)

Seen this way, queer theory may very well benefit from expanding its limits and engrossing its files.

Judith Butler’s ideas on queer theory part from the analysis of the term “queer” itself and open up to the discussion of the limits of queer and the dangers of the resignification of the word. However, her understanding of the transgressive quality of the concept is key to the comprehension of a theory as contestation to heteronormative principles.

On a similar note, William B. Turner (2000) also centers on Foucault. The scholar considers different debates around queer readings and identity policies. His views contribute to understanding diachronic perspectives of categories such as woman,

man or homosexual among others as a new approach to thinking gender and sexuality policies.

Turner does not necessarily define queer postulates; rather, he presents current debates around the complexity of a theory that strives not to be defined in order to maintain a freedom that only ideological flux (and occasional turmoil) can provide. However, he stresses many points of contact with other movements that also represent the disenfranchised, such as feminist and black rights organizations. At this, he decides for liberation fronts as the stepping stones of academic theories. His approach is also historicist and nurtures from ideas by queer and proto queer philosophers such as Butler and Foucault respectively,

Queer theorists perform those investigations with an eye to tracing the historical development of those concepts and their contributions to definitions of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ such that differences of power along those axes of identity permeate our culture at a level that resists fulsomely the ministrations of political action conventionally defined. (Turner, 2000, p. 3)

In this respect, the author revises these key concepts of gender (the binary opposition of masculine and feminine) and sex (the vast variety of individual sexual practices) and sees in them categories that could hardly define a person’s identity: gender and sex are two constituting elements among the countless other elements that make up the individual self. As such, then, the author dismisses identity as a valid element in the elaboration of queer theory. He does so by disproving different strategies that have intended to pin down identity solely on sex or gender, such as Simon LeVay’s 1991 research on the differences between brain structures in gay and heterosexual men, or U.S. Supreme Court decisions like the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* case or the impossibility to pin down a concept or identity because of its obvious historical variation. According to Turner,

The point is precisely to refuse the accepted identities, the expected and predictable alignments or divisions among reading, interpretation, scholarship, scholarly identity, and politics – to name only the most obvious categories that queer theorists have muddled with their inquiry. (2000, p. 146)

Recognizing that Teresa de Laurentis was the first scholar to use the term queer in 1991 as we understand it today, Turner sees that the umbrella of queer is vast enough to encompass literally everyone, “Queerness indicates merely the failure to fit precisely within a category, and surely all persons at some time or other find themselves discomfited by the bounds of the categories that ostensibly contain their identities”

(2000, p. 8). The vagueness, then, of concepts such as identity and the vastness of the idea of queer reinforce the difficulty in apprehending the term. This does not demean the impact of queer theory; it simply formalizes current debates on the expanse of its field of study: thinkers like Foucault see power relations and transgression as its cornerstone; Butler understands the performativity of speech and its resignification as its breeding grounds, and Hocquenghem sees never-ending contestation at its roots, while other authors like Eve Kosofski-Sedgwick sees its power in its denial of universal claims and on the focus on difference, and David Halperin views that “*There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*” (1995, p. 63). In spite of such conceptual vagueness, these ideas contribute to unravel its meaning and stress the belligerent quality of queer theory as based on resistance to prevailing notions of sexual, gender or racial identity.

Resistance is a concept very much in tune with the postwar gay rights movements which consolidated in the 1960s and 1970 and which gained momentum in the 1980s and early 1990s, well before there was a term in the academia to encompass gay and lesbian efforts for understanding the political stance which nurtures queer theory.

These ideas do not aim at reductionism. Much on the contrary, they mean to highlight the complexity of queer theory while understanding its very foundations. Underlining the connections between sex, gender and race among the numerous others which may make up an individual’s identity, Turner finds solace in a term that may simplify the endless possibilities of marginal subjectivities,

With the formulation “[sexuality marker] + [race/ethnicity marker] + [class marker] + [age marker],” one began to reach the point of dismissing practical and theoretical returns, despite the political and intellectual imperative to include all corners in a movement by and for the culturally and political marginal. (2000, p. 30)

As yet another paradox of the theory, its simplification under a hypernym serves the purpose of complexifying the concept well beyond the old binary oppositions of man/woman or homosexual/heterosexual. The collective under the term “queer” has given way to the inclusion of bisexual and transgender persons in the discussion. The gay and lesbian rights movement has grown so vast and encompassing that it has spawned a number of groups which constantly strive for more and more inclusion. Thus, LGB (Lesbian Gay and Bisexual) at some point became LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender), which gave way to LGBTQA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,

Transgender, Asexual) and LGBTI (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersex), which later added a further category in LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning). For this reason, queer is a necessary term to include the disenfranchised:

“Queer” has the virtue of offering, in the context of academic inquiry into gender identity and sexual identity, a relatively novel term that connotes etymologically a crossing of boundaries but that refers to nothing in particular, thus leaving the question of its denotations open to contest and revision. (Turner, 2000, p. 35)

With this instability of meaning and its democratic character, queer moves beyond matters of sexual orientation (which nonetheless remain at the very core of the theory) to encompass issues of race, class and age among other categories viewed as features that enrich a personal identity.

Queer theory has nurtured from ideas predating the LGBT rights movements. But these ideas were revised and adapted when the gay rights cause was introduced in the academia. “The trajectory of Foucault’s work as refracted through the prism of queer theory in the 1990s points toward resistance to an increasingly rationalized model of identity that even many lesbians and gay men see as potentially liberatory” (Turner, 2000, p. 176). In this sense, with queer theory, the political struggle of the gay and lesbian rights movement gained a new forum for debate in the academia. However, liberation seems to remain the main aim of the crusade: The more ground covered, the new boundaries to reach.

Chapter 3. Queer Theater

The world is a stage: A queer approach to drama

Historically, drama has always been a genre that has placed the great issues a society needs to face center stage. Because of its very nature as a spectacular representation of life, plays have frequently anticipated social conquests, psychological perceptions and scientific breakthroughs. As Michael Bronski (2000) believes, “The vicarious engagement of emotions through popular culture can help clarify personal feelings that are otherwise unarticulated. We can be moved by theater because we relate to the plight and feelings of the characters” (p. 28). Scholar John M. Clum (2000) provides a very encompassing history of contemporary gay drama throughout the 20th century that serves as a model for study and a historical basis to study current queer plays.

Clum divides his history of contemporary gay British and American drama thematically; that is, placing closer attention to different trends in the plight of the theater to come out of the closet over the past 50 years, “I cover enough drama to show that the tradition of what can be called gay drama has been central to twentieth-century theater, though critics once called it ‘superficial’” (Clum, 1994/2000, p. xiii). Clum sees two types of plays in American gay drama: Those produced between the 1930s and 1960s, which were characterized by the invisibility of its gay characters, “If homosexuality was mentioned, it was usually in a heterosexual, heterosexist voice” (Clum, 1994/2000, p. 3). And others that spoke about shared experiences and were consumed primarily by gay audiences. This is the type of theater that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s in the post-Stonewall years (Clum, 1994/2000). This division matches the societal trends occurring in the period.

Clum first published his book, *Acting Gay*, in 1992 and, although he later revised it in the 2000 second edition, *Still Acting Gay*, his analysis falls short when it comes to current American gay drama. Although his new introduction is rich and updated, I believe that to better understand the position of playwrights regarding queer themes, twentieth century gay drama may better be divided temporally into three different periods: First, the time when the presentation of gay characters in plays was imperceptible; then, the period that extends from the moment gay characters gained the spotlight to the entrance of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* into Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*, and finally, the turn of the 21st century. These three periods may

contribute to outline queer representations on the American stage following three different strategies: concealment, acceptance and engagement.

According to Clum (1994/2000), postwar American drama is characterized by avoiding, escorting or denying the issue of homosexuality. It is a period notorious for making the closet the ideal place for gay men; for stressing the idea that homosexuality was not to be seen or discussed, and for understanding that what was left unspoken was better than what was said. However, it must be pointed out that never before in the history of American drama had the issue of homosexuality gained such a presence (subvert at that) than in the forties and fifties, which perhaps hints at an unprecedented blooming interest in the subject.

There are a number of key figures in this period that touched upon the issue of homosexuality without tackling it directly. More often than not, the gay characters in their plays are either dead, gone or absent, while those characters that are implied as gay end up dying or suffering stigmatization, a whole sign of the postwar years. Homosexuality was virtually concealed almost to the point of invisibility, so that only a few could understand the undertones, while the general public could remain in blissful ignorance of the issue.

Although they are far from the only playwrights dealing tangentially with the subject at the time, three writers stand out in their concealment of gay themes in their plays: Edward Albee, William Inge and Tennessee Williams produced works where gay characters were reduced to invisibility and where speaking one's sexual preferences equaled death. These authors enjoyed enormous critical and commercial success on Broadway, and while they did create gay characters, they were nonetheless unable to place them in the spotlight. "The primary issue for Williams' homosexual characters in his plays of the forties and fifties is the devastating one of exposure, of making the private public" (Clum, 1994/2000, p. 122). This idea coincides with what was occurring in American society at the time, not unlike the reasons for which the members of the Mattachine Society chose secrecy.

Clum believes that just as the consolidation of the gay rights movement took place with the Stonewall riots, its ripple effects were also felt in the theater. "Post-Stonewall gay drama is basically about finding a place on the dance floor, a place in society where gay men can safely not act straight. It is about the experience of being gay as seen from the inside" (Clum, 1994/2000, p. 160). While I agree with Clum's ideas in this respect, I believe that the massive change in the theater's relationship with

homosexuality came from within the theater (obviously fueled by external forces) but not solely as a response to Stonewall: As a matter of fact, a year before the Stonewall riots, Mart Crowley's *The Boys in the Band* (1968) marked a breaking point from the period of gay closeting or concealment in drama. Although the play does present stereotypes that may be unnerving in their depiction, the new understanding of gay culture in the play opens the period of acceptance or at least recognition of a gay lifestyle in drama. Even though the play still perpetuates the tragic, stereotypical image of the gay man with memorable lines such as the admonitory "If we... if we could just... not hate ourselves so much. That's it, you know. If we could just *learn* not to hate ourselves quite so very much" (Crowley, 1968/2008, p. 111) or "You show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse" (1968/2008, p. 112), it is a seminal work that openly places gay protagonists center stage for the first time in American drama. In this sense, Clum considers that "While positing unhappy isolation for most of its characters, *The Boys in the Band* also defined a subgenre of gay dramas about redefining the rules of gay men's relationships" (1994/2000, p. 206). In tune with Foucault's ideas on the never-ending lines to cross in the matter of transgression, this is an authoritative work and a key line that was crossed, although the play is but a stepping stone in the endless new spaces to transgress in queer drama.

The 25 years that encompass the following period of acceptance are eclectic and Clum presents them in extreme detail: It covers the birth of the movement, the opening of the closet, the break with gay stereotypical images, the appearance of AIDS, and the consolidation of the fight for LGBT rights. Much though the development in gay drama from 1968 to 1994 seems colossal, there is one common element to the plays written over these years, and it is the intention of creating gay characters deserving understanding, acceptance and respect, thus fashioning a positive gay self for the first time in the history of the American theater. The reasons for this search for a good LGBT image may be very different, but the end goal remained the same throughout the period. Key plays of this period include Martin Sherman's *Bent* (1979); Craig Lucas' *Torchsong Trilogy* (*International Stud*, 1978; *Fugue in a Nursery*, 1979, and *Widows and Children First*, 1979); Doric Wilson's *Street Theater* (1982); Ned Weeks' *The Normal Heart* (1985) or Terence McNally's *The Ritz* (1975), *The Lisbon Traviata* (1985/1989) or *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* (1991).

"The challenge for post-*Boys in the Band* and post Stonewall gay dramatists is to find forms more suited to the creation of a positive gay self" (Clum, 1994/2000, p. 207).

The *sprit du temps* forced a development in society which enabled playwrights to produce works where queer characters could be depicted in a new light, where they acquired a fresh voice and enjoyed a renewed interior life that made them whole perhaps for the first time in American theater history. And this unity often entailed diverse forms, styles and manners of being gay. The seventies, eighties and nineties mean, then, a blooming era of the American drama in which the stage came out of the closet with honesty and self-respect.

The period closes with Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* in its two parts, *Millennium Approaches* and *Perestroika*, a play which recreates characters from very recent American history to provide a new vision of the period in which the pandemic of AIDS appeared. Undoubtedly, *Angels in America* has many merits, among them a broad-reaching audience appeal, an unprecedented financial success and huge critical acclaim. In 1994, critic Harold Bloom included it on the list of works belonging to the Western canon. It is the very last item on the list of works that according to the critic have shaped Western thought¹. And it is for this very reason that I believe that it is the play that closes the period: The search for the recognition of openly gay productions in American drama was accomplished. I also believe that this inclusion may mark the exhaustion of American gay drama as we have come to know it.

Our playwrights have developed a dramatic medium that allows space for, in ascending order of importance, *display*, of the male body and of queer theatricality; *polemic*, some assertion of where we will not compromise with the mainstream; *self-examination* of ourselves as individuals and members of what is called the gay community; *transformation* through theatricality and irony of the representational and narrative forms which maintain our oppression; and *celebration* of our courage, resistance and difference. (Clum, 1994/2000, p. xiii)

The new battles to fight in the theater; the new limits for transgression; the new stories to tell, and the new characters to meet lie in the future. However, gay drama runs the

¹In his 1994 book *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages*, critic Harold Bloom defends the idea of the existence of a Western canon on which contemporary thought is founded. In the epilogue, Bloom presents four appendixes listing the works that in the author's opinion have been most significant for Western culture. Despite the fact that in a 2008 interview by Jesse Pearson for University of Yale magazine *Vice* (Pearson, 2008) the critic rests importance to these four appendixes underlining that they were included in the book only at the request of his editors and agents, the lists are interesting as milestones which give frame to this work. Additionally, as mentioned, 1996 and 1997 were the years when American television came out of the closet portraying gay and lesbian characters in most prime-time shows, which may also support the idea that the induction of *Angels in America* into the Western canon was a cultural milestone in queer media history.

risk of perpetuating themes within the comfort zone of acceptance. In this respect, Clum strikes the difference between gay and queer drama, a difference that corresponds to the guiding principles of queer theory, “Gay (as opposed to queer) drama tends to be about the gay bourgeoisie and tends, as mainstream drama does, to accept middle-class ideals and aspirations, even as it critiques them” (1994/2000, p. 266). Thus, gay drama is WASP by nature, the theater of the white, educated, upper-middle class gays. *Angels in America* marks the gateway to a new period in American drama, a period with two divergent roads: the well-travelled road of gay, assimilated, homonormative drama that conforms to mainstream expectations, and the road less travelled of alterity, queerness, experimentation and belligerence, perhaps embodied by plays that will take a non-WASP direction. This distinction, very much like Bronski’s ideas on assimilation, may mark the new horizon of LGBT drama, the spaces that still need to be conquered.

Something there is that doesn’t love a fourth wall

Jill Dolan (2010) is a scholar who theorizes on the audience’s response to witnessing displays of sexuality on stage and explores the formation of queer sex, desire and love in the theater. The author starts by challenging mainstream expectations when seeing a play; that is, by questioning the position that many have of understanding heterosexuality as normal. However, she focuses on the strategies that queer productions have, “Theatre created from a consciously LGBTQ perspective ascribes politics to how it is produced, as well as its content and form” (Dolan, 2010, p. 3). This entails that queer theater has a political agenda that shapes the plot or its staging, which in turn would imply mindful decisions on the part of everyone involved in a dramatic event: Playwright, director, actors and crew. Such synergy, then, makes the staging of queer drama a collaborative effort, much in tune with the cooperative participation and inclusive nature of other gay rights enterprises.

Dolan traces a brief history of gay drama and the different changes in attitudes throughout the 20th century. For example, she recognizes that the search for a positive gay and lesbian identity is a new phenomenon, “For much of American and British history, mainstream theatre produced by noted playwrights had no place for healthy, self-actualized gay men or lesbians” (Dolan, 2010, p. 8). This is a statement which agrees with Clum’s perspectives on the importance of the road travelled in the past 30 years. Similarly, Dolan recognizes strategies such as those expressed by Bronski on assimilation, “some social activists have embraced the assimilationist strategy, shifting

their attention to marriage rights and to allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the US military” (Dolan, 2010, p. 11). The danger that this form of conformity poses is abandoning the political fight by staying within the boundaries set by heteronormativity: gay productions that adopt a traditional theatrical format encase behind the fourth wall roles that replicates (even with gay and lesbian characters) mainstream forms of behavior, “even in plays written by gay men or lesbians, realism constrains the power and self-determination of LGBT people” (Dolan, 2010, p. 15).

Abandoning transgression (of forms, plots, representations and the like) marks the death of the political intent of queer drama. Dolan believes that “Queer performance theorists reacted against realism’s conservatism by championing post-modernist styles and genres that refused to observe the conventions of fourth-wall domesticity” (2010, p. 15). The fourth wall closes in the action on stage detaching it from the audience. Additionally, it represents the compromise of adhering to mainstream values and abandoning the political fight. By contrast, Dolan sees a trend when it comes to complex identities shaped by sex and race alike. Here she sees a renewed political interest, “Gay and lesbian playwrights of color often find themselves even more compromised by a lack of social approbation and access” (2010, p. 53). This idea may mark a possible limit for contemporary queer drama to transgress. However, Dolan closes her look on queer sexuality and drama warning about the dangers of conformity, “Community, or social movement-oriented theatre continues to sustain a diverse LGBT population, but lesbian, gay, trans, and queer drama, whether assimilationist or more radical, whether queer in content, intent, or form, more frequently disperses into the cultural mainstream” (2010, p. 82). This may indicate the possible exhaustion of a type of drama that found its force in the struggle of a discriminated group but which may be absorbed an ever growing cultural center that tends to embrace the margins more often than not, leaving little room for new fights to fight: a betrayal of sorts of all those who struggled to gain an equality that is still far from equal.

Stephan Brecht (1978/1986) presents twelve case studies of counter-culture, independent performances belonging to the 1961-1977 period that may be transposed to the current perspectives of contemporary gay drama. The author defines queer theater as “derisive low comedy and burlesque, disdainfully (without compassion) and gleefully (instead of tragically, and rather than merely comically or satirically), and thus, as is logical, without pretense of its makers being otherwise” (Brecht, 1978/1986, p. 9). This definition stresses the importance of ridicule to show contempt for well-established

societal norms while it underlines its element of contempt and scorn for mainstream traditions. However, it also indicates its joyful character as a celebration of alternative lifestyles.

The different performances that Brecht studies have a common element of farce and a marked emphasis on the extravagant. By nature, the cases at hand stress the lack of highbrow pretense; yet we may consider that due to its subject matter and non-traditional performance venues, these comedies were not particularly written for the entertainment of mainstream audiences, in the sense that ordinary people would have considered them offensive due to their lewd humor, which made use of physicality, absurdity, instability of meaning and mistaken identities to achieve their aims of entertainment. In this respect, the author rejects the idea that queer theater be considered immoral; rather, he indicates its amoral character, “by no standard or rule, – and yet with a core or nuance of despair and dejection” (Brecht, 1978/1986, p. 9). This idea may clash with the mainstream condemn so often found in the 1960s and 1970s for gay themes. Many of these plays were one-person shows or artistic events which meant to be participatory and which integrated the audience so that they would not be mere witnesses of the performance.

As a common denominator for the presentations, there is a playful treatment of serious topics that have sexual elements at their center and a marked mockery of established norms and forms with an emphasis on ridicule. Mainstream society is defined as evil, “preposterously pretentious, foolish and devoid of dignity and stature” (Brecht, 1978/1986, p. 9). In the great tradition of Shakespearean fools, these drag queens, transvestites, campy poets, dancers, “freaks” who defied all characterization, performers at large, were in charge of telling the truths of the artistic visions presented. These “truths” were laid out in non-traditional spaces such as apartments, bars, cafés and the like, an idea which goes in tune with what Michael Bronsky asserts about the artistic environment at the time:

The explosion of a distinct gay art and culture in the 1960s was a direct result of the physical, economic, and social structures of the gay ghetto. The political and artistic milieu of the ghetto promoted experimentation with innovative forms and subject matter, and the abundance of inexpensive space and the willingness of local audiences and business owners to open to new work created a crucible that encouraged artists. (Bronski, 2000, p. 218).

A key term in this vision, and one that matches the idea of subverting traditional stereotypes about drama, is the idea that these presentations spring from the ghetto to

denounce a lifestyle denied (and more often than not rejected) by queer performers, that of mainstream, assimilated presentations. Brecht believes that queer theater aims at beauty, “the beauty possible under these conditions, the beauty of the low, the evil and the ridiculous, low, evil and ridiculous beauty, in no way natural, but artifice only, or art” (1978/1986, p. 9).

In tune with Foucault’s ideas on transgression as an unattainable limit which must be pursued but never reached, Stefan Brecht also sees in the queer theater the clear and present danger of falling into conformity. For Brecht, the source of artistic energy lies in the actors’ carefree contestation to mainstream values, “But since his energy is entirely dependent on an exuberance of rage, his art, an active rebellion, is prone to degenerate into good-humored comedy and unthinking repetition, and to fall apart” (Brecht, 1978/1986, p. 9). Queer theater is meant to use shock tactics, to tell truths about reality and to scorn the world around it, but it constantly runs the risk of falling into comfort zones, of forgetting its principles, of accommodating to mainstream tastes and, in the process, of obliterating all that is sacred to it.

Although queer performances as such may have been a fashion of the 1960s and 1970s, in the sense that those decades saw some of the most experimental forms of the queer art in the 20th century, some key principles may be drawn from Brecht’s study to chart the future of queer drama. From the number of performances that the author analyzed, it is possible to sketch general characteristics of queer experimental drama, namely, that it generally offers alternative types of presentations, in the sense that it may be participatory; it can engage audiences, and it usually breaks the fourth wall. Additionally, the settings where these performances tend to take place are non-traditional. The plot or stories presented disdain mainstream lifestyles and their characters are colorful, and confusing in the sense that they may be androgynous, or their gender may be unstable (gender bending, cross-dressing and transvestism usually profit from confusing the audience through illusion). In this sense, these performances constantly break the boundaries of the possible and offer non-conformity to mainstream rules as well as a rejection of traditional forms of dramatic discourse. Finally, it embodies a resolute despair due to a feeling of exclusion from mainstream society and a paradoxical desire to remain out of it (Brecht, 1978/1986). These ideas were valid at the time, and they are valid if queer theater aims at preserving the very values that make it marginal.

PART II

The intersection of sexuality and racial identity is an interesting point of analysis for queer theory as both spheres embody a multiplicity of voices and a diversity that seem to be the fitting object of study of this unattainable line of thought. In the same manner that sexualities may be multiple and unstable, shifting in form and performativity, race as a social construct seems old-fashioned, while racial identity depends, just like sexual identification, on the individual. Thus, analyzing the forms in which three authors belonging to three different ethnic backgrounds build their plays at the crossroads of ethnic and sexual identity, underlining pride in their heritage may prove enriching for Cultural Studies and, particularly, it may contribute to understand the direction in which the queer theater may be moving in the 21st century.

Chapter 4. Asian-American Gay Drama

Chay Yew

A Language of Their Own is not a play about borders but a play about sides: It embodies not the permeable barriers that frontiers create but the spaces on either side. It is constructed juxtaposing a series of binary opposites: English-Chinese, public-private, desire-disease, and love-friendship among others, setting up a yin and yang paradigm that is true to the Oriental customs and heritage which are integral to the characters' life experience and a leitmotif throughout the play.

Author Chay Yew was born in Singapore in 1967 and started his career as a theater director in the late 1980s in his homeland with the play *As if He Hears*, which was banned in that country due to the fact that a gay character in it was "too sympathetic and too straight-looking" (Factory, 2005). Since then, and even after moving permanently to the United States, he has continued presenting plays in Asia.

A Play of His Own

A Language of Their Own premiered in Los Angeles in 1994 at the Celebration Theater and its final version – on which this analysis is based – had its New York debut in 1995. The play displays the relationship of two Asian-American characters, Oscar and Ming, who break up after a four-year relationship when Oscar is diagnosed with HIV: they both move on with their lives, Oscar befriending a stereotypical Harvard, Asian student called Daniel, and Ming falling for a Caucasian waiter called Robert. The constituting elements, which may even include "a live musician in the production" (Yew, 1997, p. 122), set the foundation for a melodrama in which emotions can be heightened and exploited in search of empathy for the gay community. However, some features such as the complex character-creation work that the play requires, the conflicting personalities, the setting instructions that call for a certain critical self-reflection on the part of the reader/audience and, particularly, its heavy use of irony and certain moralizing, didactic aspects may rather make *A Language of their Own* a satire.

Staging sides

The play works based on constantly clashing binary opposites. There are numerous literal and figurative references to conflict, combat and belligerence. The fact that "OSCAR and MING often speak to the audience, as if they were lawyers defending

different points of view on the same case” (Yew, 1997, p. 122) contributes to fostering division and allows the audience to take sides and the actors to elicit and seek support for the points that they make. The traditional Elizabethan apron stage is modernized here since the characters make direct appeals to the audience breaking the fourth wall as they are meant to convince the audience/jury. In that respect, the play follows the ideas expressed by Jill Dolan (2010) that “Queer performance theorists reacted against realism’s conservatism by championing post-modernist styles and genres that refused to observe the conventions of fourth-wall domesticity” (p. 15).

Yew defines the setting as “Spartan” (Yew, 1997, p. 122), which again harkens back to the idea of war and becomes an oblique reference to the Greek army of Antiquity which was supposedly composed of gay warriors who defended their territory from foreign invasions, understating the feistiness of the LGBT collective. The setting and the distribution and layout upon the stage predisposes the audience/reader to a novel theatrical experience where they will witness the plot developing while also constitute the jury that will decide which side to support.

Additionally, the play departs from orthodox staging paradigms in the sense that it somehow becomes untheatrical: Suspension of disbelief usually indicates that no matter how grandiose or extraordinary the events staged are, the audience agrees to accept them as life-like. The convention applies to major playhouse productions as well as to small, one-man shows. However, in this case, the playwright calls for a type of direction and acting that becomes almost cinematographic, “The playing and direction must never be obvious, sentimental, or heavy-handed. More is gained in subtext and subtlety and by interpreting the darker tones of the characters and the play’s themes” (1997, p. 122). Yew’s direction enables playing *A Language of their Own* in smaller houses where the acting will lack the grandiloquent expression we have come to expect from the theater and where, due to the proximity of the audience to the actors, we will find the type of performance more typical of the cinema or television, where close-ups and extreme close-ups ensure a more minimalistic and precisionist acting style.

Continuing with the idea of conflicting sides, the two acts of the play, “Learning Chinese” and “Broken English”, mimic the division and clashing stances of Oscar and Ming. Their titles remind us of a lack of completeness and a certain inadequacy to stand on one’s own: learning Chinese entails an incomplete process filled with good intentions which do not deliver, whereas broken English implies the impossibility of leaving behind one’s heritage, which interferes with correct communication: Either way,

communication in *A Language of Their Own* is failed and incomplete. The gradual break-up in communication that the couple exhibits mirrors their own failure to settle their issues and advances in the play degrading into nothingness.

Oscar and Ming's relationship, then, makes this a play about facing an enemy, where love becomes a battlefield and the stage, a space for losing or gaining ground. In turn, the characters embody the irreconcilable differences that fuel their parting: Oscar, who is HIV-positive, stands for tradition, the upholding of family values, leading a closeted life, leaving matters always private and preserving his heritage. In turn, Ming represents the Asians who cannot speak Chinese, who have been Americanized and are outspoken, public, out of the closet and vocal about their opinions. The two constitute the thesis and antithesis, the yin and yang of a dysfunctional relationship that is coming to an end.

Learning about AIDS

The first act of the play sets the ground for the major themes that are developed in *A Language of Their Own*: suffering, repression, discrimination, identity and assimilation. The first lines establish the two planes on which the play works, the courtroom-style allegation in which each part defends himself in front of the audience breaking the fourth wall, "MING: I can never forget what he said to me" (Yew, 1997, p. 123), and the more personal tone in which the lovers are coming to terms with their separation and address each other, "OSCAR: I don't think we should see each other anymore" (1997, p. 123). These two planes function temporally (the "now" in which the characters plea their points and the "now/then" of their relationship as it was) as well as spatially, in the sense that the specific times and locales of their breakup become the material that feeds the pleas that each of the parties makes and that occurs in the general, more universal time and space of the playhouse/courthouse. These two planes, yet another instance of binary opposites that make up the unit of the drama, coexist, overlap and mirror the pendulum that is their relationship.

The synthesis that Oscar and Ming's relationship once constituted has broken, as the characters have changed, "OSCAR: We've become two very different people. [...] Since the test" (1997, p. 124). HIV/AIDS was one of the triggers of much of the LGBT theater occurring in the 1990s as a response to the inaction of the two Reagan administrations (1981-1985 and 1985-1989) and George Bush Sr's (1989-1993). At the time, groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation very often used shock tactics to call

attention to their plight. As Jill Dolan recalls, “Queer Nation rejected the conventional goals of the more established movement, arguing instead that fear around the AIDS pandemic had shut down the most important and liberatory aspects of queer culture” (2010, p. 11). In this sense, it is important to note that *Angels in America* had just entered the cannon at the time *A Language of Their Own* premiered, for the first time situating an AIDS drama among the most influential works of Western literature². In this context, Yew’s play represents a step forward in the sense that HIV becomes the conflict that sets the plot in movement but it does not mean to elaborate heavily on the disease; rather, it depicts the psychological effects of sickness on the couple as well as provide certain didactic elements typical of the 1990s regarding how to deal with AIDS. According to John M. Clum, “Gay AIDS dramas dismantle the misapprehensions about AIDS while affirming the Person With AIDS. They also, in the process, deconstruct the oppressive constructions of homosexuality that have been perpetuated by popular dramatic representations” (1994/2000, p. 34). In that regard, the disease gains notoriety and represents a key concern of this queer drama, but it is the background story on which the personal histories of lack of communication of the characters develop from a more personal perspective.

When Oscar finds out that he is HIV positive, he is the one who decides to end the relationship, partly because he wants to protect Ming and partly because he desires to face the disease in accepting solitude. In order to break apart, he responds to Ming’s protests by fronting the name of his condition:

MING: He got sick.
 OSCAR: AIDS.
 MING: Sick. (Yew, 1997, p. 137)

Confession becomes liberating and, in this case, it intends to be the liberation from and of his partner. Michel Foucault believes that “confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in [...] love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses [...], whatever is most difficult to tell” (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 59). In the 1990s, HIV/AIDS was equated in the collective subconscious to a death sentence, so by putting forth the possible finiteness of his life

² While it is true that *As Is* (Hoffman, 1985) and *The Normal Heart* (Kramer, 1985) predate *Angels in America* by almost ten years and they are two of the first plays dealing the issue of AIDS/HIV in American drama, they did not receive the critical and audience acclaim that the latter did. *Angels in America* almost instantly became an influential play embraced by mainstream audiences.

due to the disease, Oscar eases the blow that entails the end of this relationship with Ming. In this sense, expressing his problem serves the story in that it scares Ming away from him while it contributes to the didacticism of the play, raising awareness of the dangers of being infected. While Ming simply refers to the disease in the most general of terms, Oscar's decision to repeat it, to name it and to express it brings the issue into focus:

MING: Sick
 OSCAR: HIV positive
 MING: Sick
 OSCAR: Positive. (1997, p. 138)

Ming objects to Oscar's repetitiveness, and protests against Oscar's attitude, "MING: I don't know why you keep volleying, ramming the words AIDS and HIV positive down my throat. It's like you're almost fucking proud to wear the label around your neck. I hate it. I hate it" (1997, p. 139). Activists like Vito Russo, one of the founders of militant group ACT UP, points out that HIV brought about a certain call for action when the LGBT community realized that "issues of homophobia that we talked about in the seventies [...] have been made more palpable by the AIDS crisis" (as cited in Marcus, 1992/2002, p. 293). Therefore, by having Oscar mention his medical condition to his lover repeatedly, *A Language of Their Own* brings the issue center stage to discuss the human side of it; it voices society concerns, and it politicizes the issue.

Nevertheless, in spite of the pedagogic perspective analyzed here, AIDS is the excuse to highlight the true issues that undermine Oscar and Ming's relationship; namely, their personal differences stemming from racial and sexual identity: The protagonists struggle with opposing perspectives regarding their racial heritage, which in turn are made evident in their respective outlooks of what it is to be a gay Asian-American man. HIV/AIDS becomes the justification for their relationship to end. This may not be evident in the first act, but when Act Two explores the relationships that Oscar and Ming have established after breaking up, it is noticeable how their problems stem from a deeper source than that of the disease.

Language and Race

It should become evident that *A Language of Their Own* is in the final analysis a play obsessed with language: its two acts are named after the two languages that create the dual identity of its protagonists, metalanguage is a recurrent strategy, theatrical

camp offers comic relief, dramatic intertexts are common and first language acquisition and foreign language learning foster the debates on what it is to be truly Asian or Asian-American in the United States.

While metalanguage is generally the term used to refer to the academic language discussing linguistic use and its rules, the play utilizes a strategy akin to it to discuss dramatic conventions within the play. The purpose of this infinite regress into drama is twofold: while it ensures breaking the fourth wall and interrupting the suspension of disbelief in order to reach out to the audience, it also provides instances of camp that offer comic relief to lessen the melodramatic load of the scene, fostering the idea of the play as a satire. Oscar thinks he may have been too blunt with Ming at the moment of their break-up, “OSCAR: Some people like to rehearse their speeches, say the right things, use the right words, wear the right color-coordinated clothes, put on the right music – put on a Broadway production just to ease the pain” (1997, p. 125). The absurdity of the situation calls the audience’s attention to the artificiality of the play while confirming the natural camp of the world of the theater as well as of queer discourse.

According to Susan Sontag:

In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. Of course, not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve. (1961/2001, p. 285).

Yew frequently refers to pop icons and mass media. The strategy is used to release tension through irony and camp. In that respect, the play presents many other intertextual instances that function as nods to queer culture. For instance, Yew makes use of the stereotypical taste gay men have for Hollywood or Broadway musicals and uses a reference to the film *My Fair Lady* to discuss how frustrated Oscar was as a child because he did not speak proper English:

Everyone at school spoke English beautifully, and my English was always – well, unrefined, pidgin, tainted. The stuff Rex Harrison sang of in *My Fair Lady*. When I saw the movie, I felt I was Audrey Hepburn. More than anything else in the world, I wanted to be like her: delicate, refined, speaking perfectly, and wearing a Cecil Beaton original. [...] I think *My Fair Lady* was pivotal in my life. It taught me how to speak proper English, appreciate good clothes, and made me realize I was gay. (Yew, 1997, p. 131)

The author resorts to stereotypes to provide irony to the speech, such as the alleged knowledge of designers, the refined taste and the correct elocution of gay men. Additionally, his identification with gay icon Audrey Hepburn, and the Rex Harrison reference – who not only received an Academy Award for his performance in the film but also starred in the 1969 tragicomedy *The Staircase* portraying a gay hairdresser – not only support the peroration “made me realize I was gay” but also contribute to profile Oscar as an individual who leads a life of stereotypes, conforms to social expectations and adopts an assimilationist outlook of queer politics, which will be further discussed below.

Michael Bronski traces the importance that the theater has traditionally had upon the LGBT collective, “For homosexual men, the theater provided a sense of community with other homosexuals” (2000, p. 31). This strategy helps to vindicate the theater as a queer haven as much as it reinforces the idea that drama at the time had become a space for LGBT activism. Judith Butler responds to those who try to separate the world of the theater from the world of politics:

To oppose the theatrical to the political within contemporary queer politics is, I would argue, an impossibility: [...] the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake (more productive, I think, than an insistence on the two as polar opposites within queerness). (1993a, p. 23)

Thus, calling attention to the naturalness with which gay men live theater life not only instills a better understanding of the community but it also reinforces the political plight meant to be fought culturally in the 1990s.

Throughout the play, Yew pays homage to the forceful *Angels in America* in covert references that highlight how influential Kushner’s work was among his contemporary playwrights. Kushner’s ultimate vision proves optimistic in times of AIDS and is meant to bring hope to the LGBT community. In the second part of the play, protagonist Prior has been living with AIDS for five years; has difficulty walking, and is half blind, but his attitude to life is inspiring and uplifting. One afternoon he meets with Louis (his ex-partner), Joe’s mother, and a Latino former drag queen in Central Park. The future seems promising. His final soliloquy asserts:

Prior: This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come. (Kushner, 1992/1996, p. 146)

In *A Language of Their Own*, Oscar confesses that he lets Ming be unfaithful at times, “I can usually tolerate harmless indiscretions. I turn a blind eye” (1997, p. 142), which evokes Prior’s disability due to the illness as well as Lois’ unfaithfulness toward Prior. In a different scene, he recognizes that it is impossible to recuperate the bonds he had with Ming, “And you can’t go back. Only forward” (1997, p. 174), in another echo of the epilogue of *Angels in America*. These covert nods to Kushner’s work, as others which refer to a multitude of gay referents in the world of pop culture evidence Yew’s detail for reflecting queer cultural sources with camp.

It is interesting to note that Yew uses particular linguistic choices to stress the disease motif throughout the play, sometimes in a subtle manner and others using metalanguage. Oscar refers to the English that he spoke as a child as “tainted,” which foreshadows his “tainted,” HIV-infected blood as an adult. This negative idea is later repeated when the couple quarrels:

MING: We avoided each other like the plague.

OSCAR: That was a poor choice of words. (1997, p. 141)

The reference to the “Pink Plague,” as AIDS was known in the early 1980s, becomes a cruel reminder of the darkest hour in recent gay history. Yew captures the sign of the times and uses the language of the oppressor (be it the establishment or the media) against mainstream society to focus the audience’s attention on the way society sees AIDS patients.

In turn, language learning, culture acquisition and cultural assimilation are also the foundations of the play upon which identity matters are built. Oscar and Ming are very different from the point of view of their “Americanization” as Asians: The former was raised in a Chinese home and painfully learned to master English. Ming, on the other hand, practically cannot speak Chinese and embraces the direct and straightforward mode of discourse of American English. The two lovers apparently symbolize two different forms of being Asian-American, one that prides in tradition (even when those traditions may be hurtful) and one that takes ancient traditions, adapts them and modernizes them to his context.

Oscar symbolizes Asian-Americans who are true to the ways of their ancestors and upholds customs that border on the stereotypical. He prefers to remain quiet, meek and passive, avoiding curse words, strong language and belligerence. His main trait is inaction and submissiveness, “MING: When you don’t want to talk, you just clam up. Keep quiet” (1997, p. 128). Ming, on the other hand, is outspoken, offensive and blunt

in his appreciations, but when language is not enough for him, “he threw things around” (1997, p. 129). Ming represents action and aggressiveness. He feels diminished in the eyes of other Asians, as he believes they see him as a traitor to their heritage, “My Chinese is unbearable to them” (1997, p. 131). Racial identity stereotypes are constant throughout the play, and Oscar and Ming discuss the different forms of being Asian-American:

OSCAR: You’re not Chinese, anyway, so what would you know about –
 [...] You’re of a different type.
 MING: Of Chinese? Meaning?
 OSCAR: You’re an ABC. [...] American-born Chinese.
 [...]
 MING: I’m a banana. Another category.
 OSCAR: Yellow on the outside. White on the inside. (1997, p. 130)

The issue at stake is not which of the two partners seeks assimilation to American mainstream culture because they both represent two forms of assimilation: when expressing their Asian-Americanness, their focus is placed mostly on the American side of their racial identity. While Oscar believes that generally “Asians only date white guys – to assimilate” (1997, p. 168), Ming is convinced that “I dropped my culture for another” (1997, p. 174). Much though the play has so far been analyzed as a set of binary opposites, it is in this respect where Oscar and Ming appear similar: In their discourse, they both equate all that is American as normal. When it comes to culture, their differences are discursive, perhaps matters of opinion or style only, because deep down, their desire is to be more American:

OSCAR: Like every American couple.
 MING: Like every normal couple. (1997, p. 127)

Michael Bronki (2000) has expressed his ideas regarding how the LGBT collective should not pursue assimilationist practices as they hurdle the possibility of reaffirmation of group identity in its diversity. However, *A Language of Their Own* adds a racial identity component to the character’s well-established and assimilated existence. The couple fails to fight the urge to assimilate to take a more political stand, not only from the point of view of sexuality but also from the ethnic perspective.

Broken Relationships

Act Two continues developing the themes of suffering (a disease but also a break-up), social repression, discrimination, racial and linguistic identity and

assimilation. However, this act takes on a more ironic tone throughout and explores the new relationships that protagonists Oscar and Ming build after they separate. Additionally, the constant references to pop culture as embodied by gay icons are further presented and the piece explores the motif of death as liberation from the hardships of human pain.

“Broken English” takes up seamlessly after the last scene of Act One. Oscar and Ming have met at a party, but their new boyfriends accompany each of them: Oscar is with a Harvard business student who is Asian and conforms to all the stereotypes we have come to expect from Asians in mainstream culture, while Ming has gone to the party with Robert, who is Caucasian. The lack of closeness and emotional attachment that both their relationships present foreshadow their eventual doom. When Oscar overhears his new boyfriend Daniel at the party having a conversation with a group of friends, and talking about “Government spending on AIDS. Racism within the gay community. Relationships. Madonna” (1997, pp. 178-179), he feels the urge to yell at him and silence him regarding topics about which he knows nothing. Silence and silencing are the forms Oscar has of relating to his partners. On the other hand, Ming reminisces about a trip to Europe that he made with new life companion Robert. The beauty of their memories in France and Italy contrasts with the negative words to describe their tour: “Paris in winter,” “frigid banks,” “lonely arias,” “a sad violin,” or “a lone pier” (1997, pp. 180-181). These undertones contribute to define Oscar’s loneliness and melancholia. Additionally, as in a litany, their memories are intermingled with the phrase “Not saying a word” every time either Ming or Robert see themselves as a couple. It is noticeable not only that both characters complain about their respective silence, but also that silence, submissiveness and the incapacity to be outspoken about their love are the qualities for which Ming always blamed Oscar. The unnerving Asian silence that Ming saw in Oscar is now (or perhaps has always been) an integral part of his temperament.

In Act One, Oscar understands that the Chinese do not show love through words, “OSCAR: It’s our way” (1997, p. 133). However, Act Two brings about a reversal of roles between the new lovers. Oscar becomes demonstrative now and Daniel, who is also Asian, is the one who calls for silence and reservation in their relationship:

OSCAR: I love you.

DANIEL: It’s delightful. Nice. It’s driving me insane.

OSCAR: I love you.

DANIEL: I wish he'd stop. I thought all Asian men were typically quiet. (1997, p. 204)

In *A Language of Their Own*, repression takes the form of conforming to the social expectations of the way Asians are supposed to be. The qualities of passiveness, submissiveness and repression are perceived by the characters not only positively but also as an ideal of Asianness to which they are to subscribe. The irony produced by the Asian characters' certainty that silence is an appropriate form of behaving in a relation makes them a parody of themselves, confirming the satiric qualities of the play. At different times in it, language fails to all three Asian characters. Oscar understands that the expression of personal feelings should go implicit, "My father and mother have never said they loved me. My friends are the same. It's our way" (1997, p. 133). Similarly, his boyfriend Daniel believes that "Perhaps, silence is best" (1997, p. 224). Finally, as pointed out, in the second act Ming becomes more reluctant to speak out and words often fail him, "And what should I have said" (1997, p. 173). In the context of the shortcomings of these Asian characters when it comes to self-expression, even Robert, who is a Caucasian-American who displays a direct pragmatism at the time of communicating, "Let me put this in plain and simple English" (1997, p. 199)(199), soon recognizes his inadequacy to get through to Ming:

ROBERT: Then we tired of it
 Lost interest
 Got lazy
 Became indifferent
 Words gradually lost their meaning and significance
 Like drunken dancers, we emphasized wrong accents in words
 Sentences led to misinterpretations
 Misinterpretations led to misunderstandings
 Misunderstandings led to inevitable silence

In the end we spoke different languages (1997, p. 217)

Robert's final peroration echoes Oscar's conclusion that he and Ming had become "different people" (1997, p. 124). The inadequacy in the use of language as an identity feature offers a platform to discuss the lack of meaningful communication in the two couples, subverting the expectations of eloquence created earlier in the play through the courtroom layout of the characters' interactions in Act One.

Final Comments

A Language of Their Own poses many of the issues at stake in the mid-1990s that constitute the multivocal components of contemporary queer theory: the intersections between race and sexuality, the influence on HIV/AIDS in interpersonal relationships, the dangers of not speaking out and the perils of uniformity for queer values. Assimilationist practices have been deemed by many as pernicious for the realization of the queer individual as they curtail differences by standardizing what it is to be, for example, a gay individual within the LGBT collective. More importantly, according to Yew, when racial identity assimilationism and sexuality assimilationism intersect, they seem to result in the absolute inability to communicate due to the interference with two pivotal and defining aspects of the characters' identity.

Oscar and Ming fail to uphold their personal differences and opt for trying to assimilate to mainstream (gay) culture, regardless of the fact that they take different roads to achieve that assimilation: Oscar does it obsessing with language and speaking good English while Ming does it letting go of this heritage. The problem lies in that, as Michael Bronski explains:

While the construct of 'whiteness' was malleable, at times even ostracizing certain European cultures, it always excluded those of African, Asian, and native-American descent, and often those of Latin descent as well. Since these groups could not assimilate, they existed in an uneasy association with the dominant culture. (2000, p. 43)

Bronski upholds the idea of identity preservation from the point of view of sexuality as much as from the point of view of race, and stresses the importance of these mixed identity issues as part of the diverse queer experience. The obsession with assimilating to mainstream (gay) values provides the conflict that their relationship embodies and the reason why the play may be read as social satire within the Asian-American group.

The satire always refers to current events from a sarcastic point of view in order to call attention to their ridiculousness. The fun that is made of the events portrayed aims at embarrassing those who act in a reproachable manner, its lofty aspiration being to denounce and eventually produce changes in society. William Turner (2000) has indicated the inclusiveness and diverse quality of the LGBT collective:

The great virtue of 'queer' lay precisely in its undefinability, which included a certain unpredictability in the implications and consequences of deploying the concept. The point is precisely to refuse the accepted identities, the expected and predictable alignments or divisions among reading, interpretation, scholarship, scholarly identity, and politics. (p. 146)

Therefore, by highlighting the failure in Oscar and Ming's lives to set up a healthy relationship due to their constant inability to voice and accept their differences, Yew gives *A Language of Their Own* a tone of dissatisfaction in certain attitudes of Asian-American gay men.

In agreement with Turner's idea that "even the political manifestations of queerness tended to have an academic tone. Queer nation seemed perpetually self-conscious about the common desire among participants to be as inclusive as possible – along the known lines of sexuality, gender, race and class" (2000, p. 107), Yew marks a path for underlining differences as a form to overcome adversity. By underlining their failures, the playwright supports a common iconography of the 1990s, that which equated silence and death. Oscar's demise due to the disease is a symbol of how the inability to speak out as an individual and as a group can actually kill.

Chapter 5. Chicano Gay Drama

Culture Clash

Chicano literature embodies in itself a vast, colorful mosaic that lends itself to the inspection of Cultural Studies. It is a literature that acquires its identity nurtured in the different peripheries that compose it: It is written in the United States, but it retains firm roots in Latin American culture; it is signaled by the use of terms and syntactic constructions in Spanish while its main language is English; it recuperates Latino traditions, but blends them with the American culture where it is immersed; it is rich in neologisms that are the result of synergies between Spanish and English, and it fosters cultural intrusions typical of immigrant's literature. The study of Chicano works is a form of recuperation of oftentimes-silenced voices reverberating from the frontiers, be they political, social, racial or economic.

In spite of the multiple readings performed on this border literature – ranging from identity and double citizenship, to discrimination and culture, to bilingualism and alterity, to migration and national borders, or to race and color –, rarely have the critics of Chicano literature tackled queer issues from an LGBT perspective. Rather, when it has come to sexuality, gender studies have generally referred to the disadvantaged position of women in this Latino culture (see Schaefer, 2008; Blackwell, 2011; Herrera, 2014). Theater group Culture Clash challenges the establishment from the cultural borders of race, sex and status in its 2001 play *Mission Magic Mystery Tour*, which brings forth the divergences in different Latino groups in San Francisco. This play in particular is apt for the analysis of the cultural intersections between Chicano culture and LGBT issues.

Culture Clash is a theater group established on the significant date of May 5th (*Cinco de Mayo*), 1994 by Richard Montoya, Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza in the Mission District of the city of San Francisco. Over the past 30 years, the troupe has travelled all across the United States presenting shows that are comedic, inspiring and thought provoking. The three performers that make up the group write their own plays, where they enact and denounce different situations that not only Chicanos but also other ethnic minorities undergo (and generally put up with) in America because of their lifestyle and their skin color (see *Nyoric Stories*, 1999; *Anthems*, 2002, by the same theater group).

The World is a Chicano Stage

Commissioned by the BRAVA Theater Center, an organization founded in 1986 by a group of women artists “with the intention of bringing attention to the unspoken realities of women’s lives, through the creation of new theater works” (Powers Cuellar, 2014), *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* premiered in 2001 at the Eureka Theater in San Francisco. The play offers an array of over thirty characters that represent the changing reality of the Mission District, from the Chicano traditionalists, to the arrival of the digital yuppies, to the San Francisco Beats, to the diverse San Francisco gay community, to a wide assortment of the new Hispanic immigrants from different Latin American countries. A minimalist stage is the floor on which these very diverse types feel embraced and rejected by the seeming Paradise that is the Mission District. The play means to expose the situation of these different groups in their relationship with the establishment.

As the play does not make specific references to a particular set design, it may lend itself to performance on a proscenium stage as well as in non-traditional spaces. This bare stage paradigm fosters the use of very few theatrical properties. In that respect, the scenery is created with the projection of images such as the Virgin of Guadalupe or falling roses on the backdrop. The use of incidental music, prerecorded voices, lighting, and special effect fog establish mood and offer transitions as characters go on and off the stage. In this particular case, stage directions are reduced to a minimum – such as the ones mentioned above – possibly because the dramatists of the piece wrote it for themselves to perform, thus leaving occasional props, costumes and positions mostly implied for any potential theatrical event in which dramatic creation and authorial fine-tuning would blur. As Fernández y González (1981) point out, every dramatic text needfully implies the existence of theatrical elements that, due to their specificity, produce a real or imaginary representation. In this respect, stage directions work in the same manner. Only the real representation makes a theatrical event out of the dramatic text, though (248). In this sense, the fact that authors Montoya, Salinas and Siguenza are also the performers of the play means they have the privilege of neglecting specific stage directions. While this strategy makes the play more personal, it may also prevent other theater troupes from taking over the text and performing it in other locales, thus leaving the message Culture Clash wishes to voice circumscribed to cities where they can perform themselves.

The authors/performers may not necessarily recognize themselves as queer artists, but in the diversity that they undoubtedly uphold, Stefan Brecht's proposition regarding queer drama also holds true, "Since the queer artist, having no justification for it, cannot allow himself the disfigurement of care, his art is entirely dependent on energy" (Brecht, 1978/1986, p. 9). This energy and this contempt for conventions is transmitted by the characters in the different scenes that make up this play, and this contempt for conventions goes in tune with Foucault's ideas on transgression as a never-ending process of challenge (1977/1980a). The ongoing creative energy of these three individuals makes *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* a participatory theatrical experience where the dramatists/actors are meant to engage audiences, at times breaking the fourth wall, at times improvising on a bare stage that is both the creative ground for the physicality of their actions and the springboard to project their political message.

On with the show

The fragmented storyline of the plot recalls the skit format of drag performances of the 1960s and 1970s at venues such as Café Cino, where drag queens would parade non-stop on and off the stage area. In this case, the relentless action opens with two upper-middle class Chicanos "wearing suits, carrying suitcases and talking to each other on their cell phones. They never stop moving" (Culture Clash, 2003, p. 111): They incessantly complain about the arrival of the dot.com-er group that will gentrify their *barrio*. They criticize the first yuppies who arrived at the Mission over the past few years. As character Jim 2 recalls:

A lot of yuppies have moved to the Mission. They moved here because the rent was cheap. But now they're afraid. Because the rents have quadrupled. Ha ha ha! Guess what yuppie? You've become a Latino! They're one of us now! Because now they live with the same fear that every Latino family has ever lived with. (2003, p. 112)

The reversal of roles, turning the once-oppressor into an oppressed new minority works as a reminder that everyone can become an "Other;" that all of us can be "queer" at one time or another given the right circumstances. However, Jim 1 and Jim 2 are paradoxically unaware of the fact that their mere presence is pushing away other inhabitants of the area such as the Flower Lady who makes a living selling flower at *cantinas*, "La renta me lo [*sic*] han subido bastante" (2003, p. 113). The Mission District becomes a frontier of sorts where the passage does not include but excludes individuals.

This sudden reversal of roles and the irony of the situation paves the way for the instability of meaning that ensues when “*the Flower Lady has changed into a Cuban transsexual health-care worker, Adelita*” (2003, p. 116). This transition becomes meaningful as the text will later echo the change, during the discussion of gender transitions in trans individuals.

Adelita is the first character to set the queer tone of this play, although she is not the only one belonging to the LGBT community. Adelita merges concerns of gender identity, “When I was a transvestite and prostitute my name was Hilda. But now that I’m a ‘straight woman’ I changed my name to Adelita” (2003, p. 116), with concerns of racial identity:

When I came from Cuba to San Francisco, I got my first culture shock. I met other Latinas, but they didn’t speak the way I do, they didn’t dance the way I do, they didn’t fuck the way I do. So, I had to learn to be un poquito más Mexicana, un poquito más Salvadoreña, then I was accepted. (2003, p. 116)

Culture Clash breaks the homonormative stereotype of the gay upper-middle-class man (perhaps embodied by the guppies who take over the Mission district from the Latino community). In the process, the group challenges identity issues fossilized in mainstream America.

The character defies what Steven Seidman (1993) calls the “ethnic model of identity and politics in the gay male community” (p. 117); that is, understanding gay culture as a univocal type of subculture that fosters assimilation to heteronormative mainstream culture. Seidman underscores that “individuals whose experiences and interests were not represented in the dominant gay identity constructions criticized the ethnic model as exhibiting a white, middle-class bias” (p. 117). In this respect, Adelita may be convinced that she has assimilated to mainstream culture because she is a straight woman working to complete her transition; she has changed her name, and she has modified her Cuban accent to conform. However, she is a transgender individual who works as a health educator with straight Latinas who acts as a middle-person, a go-between in more than one sense. From an ethnic perspective, she works across national and ethnic groups. From a gender point of view, she epitomizes the current permeable barriers of sex and sexuality. From a social angle, she discusses health issues such as HIV and drug additions. From a political standpoint, she works for voicing concerns that according to her are never discussed, such as HIV, bisexuality or transgender issues

in the Mission District. Her certainties regarding assimilation challenge assimilationist mores.

When the issue of assimilationism is tackled in queer ethnic theater, there are two different forms of assimilation under discussion: conforming to the attitudes of heteronormativity and fitting within the stereotypes of white hegemonic society. LGBT ethnic drama poses the dilemma of conforming; yet, the two separate but intertwined identities, queer and Chicano pull to defend their diverse identity: as they are intrinsically united, the perspective toward assimilationism tends to lose momentum.

In her extended speech, Adelita breaks the fourth wall (one of the few characters who does that in the play), making her the closest to the audience. In tune with Foucault's ideas:

The mere fact that one is speaking about [sex] has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. (1978/1990, p. 6)

Adelita exposes her true, fabricated self for the audience to embrace. In this respect, following the tradition of Shakespearean clowns, Adelita is candid and straightforward. In yet another one of her roles as a middle-person (because of her dual position as a queer individual and as a "straight" woman), she can tell her Latina patients at the health clinic that their husbands, who have just come out of jail, may transmit HIV to them because they have been having sex in prison, not only presenting a health concern but also exposing the hypocrisy of certain Latino males. Since the outburst of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, queer drama has often adopted a didactic purpose: from detection of the disease, to prophylaxis, to treating HIV-positive individuals, to understanding the LGBT community, to fighting hatred and discrimination.

In the fragmented structure of the play, Adelita's monologue stands out as a whole scene: As Jill Dolan believes, "Autobiographical solo performance's monologue structure offers rooms to address difficult social truths and allows LGBT people to explore their similarities to one another, as well as their differences" (2010, p. 43). *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* nurtures from the tradition of the experimental theater of the 1960s and 1970s and, as such, the contents of the play make it political drama. All throughout the play, queer theory, feminist theory and identity politics intermingle at the hands of the different characters that come and go.

Adelita introduces the character of the Doctor, who attempts to shed some light on homosexual issues permeating his speech with outdated concepts of gender identity, “The Transgender Umbrella was created to identify gender identity disorders” (2003, p. 117). This speech, which analyzes the process of gender transition in different stages, “Cross-dresser or Drag-cross-dressing,” “Transvestite Fetishist,” “transgenderist,” “transsexual” and finally “the full woman” (2003, pp. 117-118), echoes the metamessage established earlier in the play when the character of the Flower Lady becomes Adelita. The ideas delivered by the Doctor are reminiscent of the ideas on homosexuality that were the norm from the hegemonic perspective during the first half of the 20th century before the gay liberation movement was born, ideas such as the ones Eric Marcus (1992/2002) summarizes, “At the time [in the 1950s], psychiatrists and psychologists, with few exceptions, believed that homosexuals suffered from a treatable mental illness” (p. 5). The ideas introduced are a transition to the irony of Adelita’s following monologue. The inclusion of these outdated ideas within the dramatic organization of a postmodern queer drama resignifies the bigoted perspective. When the Doctor presents the final stage in his theory of the “Transgender Umbrella”, “the full woman!”, “*A female stagehand wearing a headset reluctantly enters, gives the Doctor the finger and stomps off*” (2003, p. 118). Such metafictional strategy – which calls the audience’s attention to the artificial quality of the show – goes in tune with what critics such as Dolan point out, “Queer performance theorists reacted against realism’s conservatism by championing post-modernist styles [...] and in which the apparatus of performance was revealed” (2010, pp. 15-16). In an ironic turn in the play, Adelita mirrors the Doctor’s words appropriating terms but changing the message, “The Transgender Umbrella was formed to unite the different groups” (Culture Clash, 2003, p. 119). This appropriation of the language of the oppressor to reclaim terms and turn ideas around does not go without self-criticism, though: “The problem with the Umbrella is that there is envy between the different categories. For example, [*To female audience member*] ‘I have titties, and you don’t, bitch.’ You know what I’m saying? *Así está la cosa*” (2003, p. 119). By making reference to current issues faced by the LGBT community, Culture Clash also contributes to the current debates that fuel queer theory at present in a counterpoint that is meant to be food for thought on these current issues.

The impressive boom and the exposition that *Angels in America* meant for gay identity issues in drama opened up new pathways in contemporary American gay theater to retrace its steps into places where gay militantness and combativeness are still

required. There is still the need for equality in areas where gay rights mingle with the fight for other rights still missing such as citizenship rights, equality rights and justice for marginal groups. To do so, drama becomes “smaller,” more intimate, in the form of performances at independent theaters, cafés, bookstores and clubs. As Peter Brook (1968/1996) believes, “When the theatre comes closest to reflecting a truth in society, it now reflects more the wish for change than the conviction that this change can be brought about in a certain way” (p. 102). One of the strategies this protest acquires is didacticism. It has been indicated that the queer theater means to teach certain aspects of LGBT culture to mainstream society. Queer drama intended for consumption by gays and lesbians seldom presents a didactic purpose, as is the case of drag performances in gay clubs. However, gay plays that are meant to reach larger audiences tend to offer aspects of queer culture unknown outside the cultural subgrouping. As opposed to what happened at the times of the theater of concealment – until 1968, when only gays were able to catch the undertones that authors like Tennessee Williams planted in their plays – or in the drama of acceptance – from 1968 to 1995, when the feat of prowess was simply having gay characters as protagonists – the theater of engagement (that is, post-*Angels in America* plays) is characterized by the intention of taking over more intimate issues within the LGBT community.

Another pivotal character presented in *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* is Rodrigo Reyes, who is introduced by Herbert in a catalogue meant to sketch Reyes from the multiplicity of facets that make up his persona, “Rodrigo Reyes, Chicano, farmworker, high school graduate, licenciado, taxi driver, enamorado, activista encabronado, escritor, pinto [*sic*], a veces actor y director, amante de hombres y mujeres y el mundo” (2003, p. 127). This description of Rodrigo Reyes mirrors the convergence of political, social, identity and LGBT issues that the play as a whole tackles. In that respect, such compressed enumeration of distinguishing features summarize the main concerns of the play: ethnic background, education, political activism, writing as an art, drama as a craft, and sexuality.

From the point of view of sexuality and queer theory issues, Rodrigo comes out of the closet to Herbert in a nonchalant manner, “You know, Herbert, I’m gay... would you like some flan?” (2003, p. 129) and later in the play he introduces his medical condition using parallelism, “You know, Herbert, I’m HIV-positive. Would you like another cerveza?” (p. 130). This section of *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* brings back the problem of HIV and AIDS. Within the male-oriented, traditionally chauvinistic Chicano

society, coming out and being HIV-positive are deemed as tragedies of equal negative weight. Upsetting expectations by pairing the so-called tragic and the commonplace is a camp strategy. Sontag indicates that camp sensibility is one “that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous” (2003, p. 275). The irony of superimposing the inconsequential and the intimate provides relief to the moment and releases tensions.

However, the moments of release give way to seriousness when the fear of dying to AIDS takes on the poetry of the Chicano/Mexican outlook on death, once again intermingling ethnic and sexual identity matter. The character of Pachuco enters after Herbert speaks about the good physical condition in which he has found Rodrigo, but Pachuco foreshadows what is to occur to him, “Aquí entre nos / la muerte no es / una calavera, / sino una preciosa / calaca” (2003, p. 130). In Spanish, “calavera” and “calaca” are two terms that refer to the same reality, the human skull, and by extension, the human skeleton. However, “calaca” is a term used only in Mexico and Honduras (hence also by Chicanos in the United States) which is more loaded with the idea of death than the skull in the rest of the Spanish-speaking world, which may also be associated with piracy. It also carries a certain semantic weight of beauty, seduction and allure. Pachuco’s character both foretells Rodrigo’s end and works as an angelic figure who takes Rodrigo beyond, “Herbert: Two weeks later, I got a call that Rodrigo had died. But he’s not gone, he’s here, among us, walking in the Mission” (2003, p. 132).

It is possible to observe how *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* pays homage to the influential *Angels in America*. Tony Kushner’s honored play was at the time the most authoritative theatrical piece to tackle the issue of AIDS, although not the first one and far from the only one. As in Chay Yew’s play, the epilogue of *Angels in America* is also echoed in Herbert’s words. While the influence of Kushner’s play may result incontrovertible, *Culture Clash* spins the queer issue in a new direction, “And I said, ‘Because it’s the end of the millennium and I intend on having fun’” (2003, p. 133). The solemnity with which Kushner’s play tackles AIDS and death finds a different outlook in this Latino play, one that may be intended to portray Chicano culture as opposed to white mainstream American culture.

Nonetheless, as in *Angels in America*, this play also tackles the issue of HIV/AIDS heads on, but it offers multiple perspectives on matters of activism. Without taking sides, the play presents opposing views on matters as complex as medications:

Ronnie Burke: All my friends who bought into AZT early on, died horrible deaths. Okay? You have to understand that, alright? AZT, ddI, ddC, d4T,

3TC, ILS, Crixivan, Susvita, these are the worst, the worst drugs possible for immuno-suppression. Big pharmaceutical companies are making hundreds of millions of dollars off AIDS, AIDS research and AIDS hysteria. And that's why we say, 'AIDS is over!'

ACT UP Critic: I'm able to sit here and talk to you because of the drugs I take. ACT UP/San Francisco is dangerous and out of control. (2003, p. 132)

Only when dealing with matters of race and identity does the play take a stand. As character Ronnie Burke protests, "Spanish is not allowed to be spoken in the [AIDS Foundation] office. Now that's real outreach to the Mission" (p. 132). Once again, the intersections between race and sexuality enrich the political discussion on the American stage.

After tackling different issues such as the changing face of the Mission District, the relationships between subcultural grouping, race and identity, tradition and adaptation and understanding and bigotry among others, the play ends with the Flower Lady on the stage. The stage directions indicate that:

A Spanish Friar in a monk robe enters and takes the roses away from the Flower Lady. He hands her a laptop computer and exits. She slowly opens the computer and begins to type. Behind her, a bright gobo slowly fades up and reads: HYPERLINK: HTTP://WWW.MISSIONROSAS.COM. (2003, p. 149)

The representation of the changing face of the Mission, embodied in the Spanish monk from colonial times, and the destruction of Chicano traditions, represented by the stolen roses – a symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe and by extension of all Mexico – may be observed as criticism of contemporary American culture. However, the power of adaptation of the poor vending woman provides the inspirational tone to make the play assertive in its positive outlook of the future and optimistic in its defense of traditions: After all, "rosas" is preserved in its original Spanish.

Sharon Zukin has extended the concept of "landscape" to discuss the human nature within it by incorporating the dynamic links that bind together the socio-economic, cultural and political spaces of a region. For the author, the existing social and political institutions and the ever-changing material conditions of the market mold the dimensions of a given landscape (as cited in Valle & Torres, 2000, p. 20). In the play, we can observe the constant intention of the authors to set up links between the different groups that make up Latino America today. With humor, irony and sometimes

sarcasm, the playwrights advocate for unity and seek a place where all Latinos can co-exist peacefully.

Final Comments

Mission Magic Mystery Tour is ambitious in its scope: the varied issues it tackles undermine the dramatic unity that is expected of traditional theater. Nonetheless, in its broad diversity, the play functions as a showcase of San Francisco culture: It is a literature with two borders, and in that respect, it defends both of them equally forcefully: Its message is not gay but queer; it is not Chicano but Latino. In its interest for inclusion and for diversity, it takes on many of the social and academic concerns of the early 2000s and builds upon them to construct mixed-identity personas in their characters.

The play coincides with the socio-academic vision of theater as a political springboard for the transmission of ideas. Thus, its bare stage highlights their idea of drama as artifice, and the barren setting makes the reader/audience gain focus on their message, raising awareness for their political ideas: A non-traditional stage design as a symbol for the incursion of non-traditional lifestyles in the social arena. After all, an activist group commissioned the play with the intention of underlining certain political stances.

The circular structure of the play, opening and closing with a preoccupation shared by many at the head start of the new millennium – the changes that the virtual era will produce on society at the advent of computer massification – explores not the ideas pertaining the era of communication but the smaller, more personal and more individual preoccupation of how our lives will be affected by the business that the computer revolution ensues. True to the spirit of the time, the play does not focus on the great concerns of society but on the little histories of the people that are daily affected by political decisions, perhaps not in Washington, but at the Town Hall. The intimate becomes a platform for the general, the individual a belligerent part of the collective, but preserving its own identity within the group.

Merging sexuality, gender and sex together with ethnic identity issues is the path that *Culture Clash* chooses to express themselves. In this way, for the theater group, assimilationism poses the danger of disregarding sexual and race individualism, as in the case of transsexual Adelita, who gives in to the urge to conform by letting go of

portions of her own personal history. The dangers of assimilationism outweigh its benefits in the play, and so it is rejected.

The didactic spirit of the play fosters racial understanding as well as gender and sexuality empathy. As much border literature, it encourages the comprehension within the diverse groups and toward hegemonic, mainstream society. On the racial side, it focuses on upholding and defending tradition, on the queer reading we can make of the play, it nourishes the appreciation of difference. As one of the characters in the play complains, “The worst thing is being hated by people that don’t know anything about you” (2003, p. 142). *Culture Clash*’s message transcends frontiers not because it is universal but because it pushes the envelope by transgressing the hegemonic mores of normality.

Chapter 6. African-American Gay Drama

Patrick Johnson

Pouring Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales is a dramatic text written – and performed – by author E. Patrick Johnson. The text is the result of the research that he carried out using the methodology of critical performance ethnography in the American South between August 2004 and October 2006. His findings were published in the 2008 book *Sweet Tea: Black Men of the South. An Oral History*. So powerful were the voices of the 63 men that he interviewed that eventually he felt:

When I started to transcribe the narratives for the book, I determined that a lot of the stories fell flat on the page [...], and so I said there has to be a way that I can sort of recreate the interview experience for the reader and that's when I came up with the idea for doing the show. (Johnson, "Pouring Tea Promo", 2009)

Pouring Tea, then, was developed as a response to the need to give a voice to many of the characters whom E. Patrick Johnson had interviewed.

Therefore, as all the characters in the play come from real interviewees, the introduction to *Sweet Tea: Black Men of the South. An Oral History* offers interesting insight that I will analyze as the framework, context and foundations of *Pouring Tea*. As the play has not been published – and its analysis springs from the kind contribution that author E. Patrick Johnson made himself for the purpose of this work –, it does not have a prologue proper: The introduction to *Sweet Tea* provides the background for the introductory analysis of the play.

As so many other queer histories, *Sweet Tea: Black Men of the South. An Oral History* resorts to personal accounts to build group identity, to recuperate gay history, to highlight community struggles, and to teach lessons learned from the past while offering life experiences that serve as exempla to lead the way as to how to resist oppression and fight homophobia. In this respect, Johnson believes that:

Oral histories have proven to be an invaluable resource for documenting and theorizing the cultural norms, practices, beliefs, and attitudes of a particular historical period; the oral narratives of the particular men presented here simultaneously illuminate multiple identities – racial, sexual, gender, class – within a country where identity nonconformity has historically positioned one on the margins of society. (2008/2012, p. 3)

Johnson tackles different issues such as his position regarding assimilationism, transgression, diversity and multiple identities. The book presents 63 interviews, while

– depending on the performance – the play includes nine to ten characters. In both works, they range in age from their twenties to their nineties. Thus, his recreation of monologues and interviews in the play make up a 20th century black gay history of sorts. This history is composed of personal stories, oral narratives that become transgressive in the sense that never before had they been enacted. They offer a model of how black gay men have resisted discrimination in a region that traditionally has seemed unwelcoming of “dissident sexuality” (2008/2012, p. 2). The issue at hand being not how they have adapted to their surroundings but how they have managed to retain their personal identity/identities in the face of oppression.

Johnson rejects the idea of assimilationism when it comes to black gay identity. His ideas are inspired by Donna Jo Smith, who believes that

if we allow ‘southern queer’ to mean ‘white southern queer,’ if we do not fully ‘race’ ourselves and our subjects, we will not decenter the white southern subject as ‘norm’ and we will end up reifying that the South is white” (as cited in Johnson, 2008/2012, p. 6)

Johnson understands that conforming to the rules of homonormative behavior as established by white gay men is overlooking the impact of both sexuality and race in the identity of black gay men: To him, assimilating is not only accommodating to sexual stereotypes but undermining black heritage.

The rationale behind using oral histories as the food for this black gay history coincides with Michel Foucault’s idea that “Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom” (1978/1990, p. 60). The transgressive aspect of *Sweet Tea* – and by extension of *Pouring Tea* – is that it provides a voice to, or rather unearths the voices of, those who have been silent and thus invisible to society. As Johnson believes, “Blackness and gayness are rendered alternatively visible and invisible depending on the social context” (2008/2012, p. 3). In tune with the *raison d’être* of Cultural Studies, recuperating the ideas of those who have been made invisible becomes a form of transgression of hegemonic thought.

When Johnson believes that the methodology for his oral history “would take advantage of my training in performance studies and ethnography, for the sensuousness of performance ethnography – the smell, taste, touch, sight, and sounds of the cultural space of the other – is also a part of the southern way” (2008/2012, p. 8). He resorts both to the achievements of black history and of queer history in order to break new

ground in the American South. Judith Butler has expressed the ways in which performative acts build upon previous conquests:

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes a prior action, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. (1993a, p. 19)

Johnson takes advantage of the social conquests of some fifty years of the black liberationist movement and the gay liberationist movement to construct a new black gay history in the South. In doing so, he not only gives a voice to the 63 men included in his book and the ten that constitute this version of the play under analysis, but he reveals a plight invisible to many.

When studying Johnson’s work, it is noticeable that the passage from *Sweet Tea* to *Pouring Tea* was inevitable for him. When writing *Sweet Tea*, the author went to great lengths to preserve the orality of the narratives, “I also retain many of the narrators’ stutters, pauses, and tangents to capture their voices in a way that does not render their speech ‘sterile’ and to capture the performance nature of southern [...] black vernacular speech specifically” (2008/2012, p. 9). Personal history, regional roots, sexual identity and racial background constitute the raw material that Johnson has collected to represent his subjects of study and build this historical account. However, it is important to stress that the author recognizes his authorial touch in the selection and presentation of the personal accounts, “Such editing highlights how history, and the ethnographic process itself, is a fiction. [...] I want to be clear about the way in which I have framed these narratives to tell a particular story of black gay sexuality in the South” (2008/2012, p. 20). The set of stories that make up *Sweet Tea* – or Johnson’s rendition of them – proved so powerful that the author decided that they were the material for a performance of sorts. *Pouring Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales* is the result of his selection of some of the stories in the book. The one-man show that Johnson has created includes ten characters: Freddie, Michael, R. Dioneaux, CC, Larry J., Chaz/Chastity, Countess Vivian, Stephen, Duncan Teague, and Johnson himself as the interviewer. Each character is introduced with a particular song, which helps the transitions between characters – represented by minimal costume changes – although music serves as a cue for mood changes as well.

Pouring Your Queer Heart Out

The structure of dramatic texts is generally a typical one: the presentation of the characters and certain defining features, guidelines for setting, a division into acts, and dialogue. *Pouring Tea* follows none of these characteristics: Its 90-minute structure offers sound cues, a narrator – who occasionally asks a few lead-in questions – and the speeches of the nine different characters that he impersonates. The role of the narrator is to introduce a sketch of the characters and make the transitions between characters, who generally present monologues or extended speeches in which they outline their lives or discuss a significant event in their lives. The venues where the play has been presented are educational institutions such as schools, colleges or universities or organizations which seek to make a political point with this performance.

Considering the venues, structure and plot organization, *Pouring Tea* best fits the structure of what Stefan Brecht (1978/1986) has defined as queer theater. The play calls for alternative types of presentations more suitable to theater readings, lecture performances or minimalist productions; it engages certain audience participation, and often breaks the fourth wall. It is true that none of the 12 performances that Brecht studied would have been aptly presented at educational institutions in the 1960s or 1970s. However, it is important to note that Brecht underlined the idea that queer presentations took place outside of the “sanctity” of theaters and explored alternative sexualities at alternative venues. In this respect, Johnson’s theater readings fall within the alterity of queer drama. As pointed out, the venue of the play may very well be non-traditional: it may take place in classrooms or auditoriums. Its characters are colorful, sometimes androgynous, or gender bending. Regarding content, the play also follows Brecht’s definition of queerness:

Its sense of tragedy, tho [*sic*]? perhaps arising from self pity, is a touching inconsistency; its devotion to truth, tho [*sic*] perhaps an expression of anger, an arbitrary admirable choice; its love of beauty, tho [*sic*]perhaps rooted in despairing vanity, a heroic paradox. This inconsistency, choice and paradox make it queer. (1978/1986, p. 9).

The text of *Pouring Tea* offers non-conformity as an alternative to hegemonic values and rejects traditional forms of dramatic discourse. These features characterize the play as queer in the sense that it challenges traditional notions of drama.

Pouring Tea embodies and embraces the guidelines of queer drama. Were it to have a more standard structure, it may lose some of its belligerent and queerophile

approach. Theorists such as Jill Dolan have indicated that traditional dramatic structures and theatrical performances undermine the power of queer drama:

The theatre genre of realism came under particular scrutiny because of its tendency to represent a hermetic world, closed off by the ‘fourth wall’ that imaginatively separates actors/characters from spectators, who are encouraged to identify and support worlds framed by conservative ideology that tends to marginalize, demean, or, worse still, exile or murder gay and lesbian characters. These theorists proposed that even in plays written by gay men or lesbians, realism constrains the power and self-determination of LGBTQ people. (2010, p. 15)

Dolan’s ideas on conventional theater entail her belief that conventionalism equals assimilationism as regards gay characters. By contrast, when queer drama tends to preserve a non-standard, unusual form, it echoes the uncustomary and non-traditional existences of the LGBT characters that it portrays. Thus, assimilating to heteronormative roles – or homonormative behavior – weakens the activism of a group that is recognizable in its diversity. Traditional dramatic structures mean conforming to tradition and upholding the value of standardization.

The play has a confessional tone that is fostered from the very beginning: Johnson, the narrator, opens the play welcoming the audience, “There is nothing like Sunday mornings in the South. And no Sunday meal is complete without a glass of sweet iced tea. So, like a good southerner, I’m going to share little [*sic*] tea for you tonight” (Johnson, 2012, p. 1). In the play, tea is a term loaded with intricate meanings and references. Johnson clarifies the multiplicity of meanings in his book: While sweet tea is a staple throughout the South, the expression “pouring tea” is equivalent to “gossiping” in regional gay slang. Similarly, there is a large number of slang or taboo expressions such as “tearoom” or “tea bagging” that give the expression pouring tea different undertones. Additionally, as the drink may be bitter or sweet depending on its brewing, it lends itself to being used as a symbol for gay life itself. Finally, as with most typical foods or drinks, there is a multiplicity of ways to make “sweet tea,” and most people in the South will claim that they have the most traditional form of brewing sweet tea (2008/2012, pp. 17-19). This diversity of recipes is also symbolic of the multiplicity of queer voices south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The Boys in the Band

The stories proper begins with the one told by Freddie, a man in his sixties born and raised in Madison, Georgia, who lives in Atlanta. The character is asked to describe

his childhood and he recalls a series of hardships that originate from his father's not accepting him, his mother mistreating him and his classmates abusing him. However, the traumatizing experiences that elicit in the reader/audience the horrors of bullying are meant to set a tone of independence and resilience in the play. From the point of view of the adult who has a gay life companion and a seemingly well-rounded life, Freddie remembers how his father believed he was not his son and his mother treated him cruelly. As in other gay plays, there are references to pop culture here, such as the films *Roots* or *The Exorcist*. These intertexts provide an effective common ground for the reader to visualize the events of his life in seriousness or with irony and camp, "You saw the movie *Roots*? You know how they held the baby up? [...] My grandmother held me up and declared that none of her blood was in me, which meant that her son was not my father" (2012, p. 1). Camp is used here to ameliorate the blow of tragedy. Quoting again Susan Sontag, camp "is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (1961/2001, p. 279). As in the two plays already analyzed, camp is the strategy of choice to ameliorate the blow of tragic existence. Diverting attention from adversity is a typical indicator of camp. Additionally, camp here, as in the other two plays studied, serves the purpose of anchoring the recollections in pop culture, trivializing the event and offering a touch of irony as comic relief.

The character introduces two issues of interest from the point of view of gay drama, the idea of concealment and empowerment. The first one relates to a lesbian teacher Freddie had, the only one who made sure that he was protected from bullying:

I later found out that she was, in fact, a lesbian. And was a married lesbian. She had a husband and some children, but she was, in fact, a lesbian. And she would assign a girl to tell her, so along the way I was kind of protected by people. (2012, p. 5)

Typical of the behavior of gay men and lesbians around the 1950s, Freddie's teacher concealed her sexuality to fit into heteronormative roles by getting married. Nonetheless, Freddie underlines her sensitivity toward her queer student and reminisces about her as the only solace in his otherwise tormented childhood.

Interestingly, the following anecdote presented by Freddie brings forth the idea of empowerment of gay men, an empowerment that springs from necessity due to hardships:

I said, "Listen, do not bother... I keep telling you to leave me alone. I want to be left alone. I'm not bothering you. Don't bother me." And what always

happened if anybody attacked me, they always ended up seeing some of their blood. [...] So rumors spread. “Don’t bother him. He’s a mean little sissy and he’s stronger than he looks.” (2012, p. 6)

In spite of the name-calling typical of the time, the anecdote contributes to create the persona of the fighting gay black man, tough due to the hardship that he has had to overcome.

In tune with Freddie’s empowerment story, Michael, the second character presented in the play, discusses his coming-out story and the part that independence, self-reliance and self-assertion have played in his life. Thirty-six-year old Michael opens his speech with a very defiant “Everybody in my family knows” (2012, p. 6), although he is quick to add, “It was not easy for me” (2012, p. 6) as a form of self-aggrandizement: Personal battles appear more epic the more tearing the adversity. However, his story subverts expectations in the sense that the first man to know that Michael was gay was his father, who reacts showing a detached understanding rather than flat-out rejection, “People will say cruel things” (2012, p. 7). Michael’s story is meant to depict a family history wrapped in denial: His father states the unforgiving manner in which the world will treat him; his mother disrespects his community, “‘Look at that damn lesbian.’ And she said, ‘These lesbians and gays,’ and, you know, she just went on about them” (2012, p. 9). Nonetheless, Michael uses camp when recollecting his personal history. He recalls an instance in which he went to the hairdresser and got a perm and bangs that were flamboyant; upon arriving back home, his father “grabs my bang and he tries to cut my hair with these hedge clippers. And I’m hollering like a girl, ‘Daddy, Daddy, you know, what you doing? You’re messing up my hair.’ [Laughter]” (2012, p. 8). Irony and camp are the strategies most frequently used to ameliorate the tragedy of the life of many gay characters.

The play acquires a more political tone with R. Dioneaux, who extensively discusses issues of empowerment and advocates for the end of the closet blaming society for pushing black men into it and suffering the life-threatening consequences of their discrimination and silence. R. Dioneaux is 42 years old and acid and sagacious in his political views. After retelling an anecdote of his school years, when he learned that his intelligence would prevent people from abusing him, he plunges into the issue of the closet underpinning its negative effects: His thesis is provoking, “the African-American community does not hate gay people. We hate those who we think are gay. We don’t ostracize gay folk. We never have” (2012, p. 11). However, he blames the black

community for fostering double lives, “But we all but told folk, ‘Be in the closet. We don’t care what you do, just get married, have some children, adopt if necessary”” (2012, p. 11). His reasoning is that the lack of support for the LGBT community and the encouragement for them to stay in the closet fosters dishonesty, the spread of HIV/AIDS, and deceit. In a pedagogic turn of the play, R. Dioneaux elaborates on the dangers of denying AIDS: He points out that sexism is partly to blame – especially sexism in women who do not want their lovers to use a condom. He presents his own ideas about the disease, “My worldview is assume everybody’s HIV-positive and conduct yourself accordingly” (2012, p. 12) and blames the silence in society for fostering the spread of the disease, “You know, ACT-UP says, “silence equals death.” I think lying equals death for the African-American community. And we have been involved with this vicious, understood lie among each other and it’s time to start telling the truth” (13). As in other cases, R. Dioneaux’ ideas are interspersed with campy references to pop music and pop icons such as Oprah, which provide – as Sontag has defined it – “a contrast between silly or extravagant content and rich form” (Sontag, 1961/2001, p. 282). His final peroration presents an optimistic view of what society would be like “if there were no recrimination” (2012, p. 15), an optimistic view that could only be possible if the black community – and society at large – were more accepting, honest and fair with its queer community.

C.C. is a 43-year-old man raised as a Catholic Methodist. His views add a novel perspective to being gay and black in the South as he discusses Church life and faith. Surprisingly, C.C. considers that “the church was like a safe haven, especially for gay people. People still try and deny it, but the church is still full of gay people” (2012, p. 17). The idea of the church as a safe space for homosexuals to interact and to feel accepted, as long as they did not express homoerotic desire, at first sight upsets traditional expectations (see Foucault, 1978/1990; Boswell, 1980; D’Emilio, 1998). Nonetheless, critics such as Michael Bronski (1998) believe that “Contemporary ideas and stances about homosexual behavior are an outgrowth of a long history of deeply entrenched, often contradictory, beliefs” (2012, p. 17). This apparent contradiction is supported by C.C.’s idea that:

There are more gay people in church than at the bars. So even as a young child, you begin to like put two and two together. [Chuckle] So it’s not like anyone would have any bad experiences up in churches. (2012, p. 17)

C.C. discusses the sanctuary that the Church represented to many a gay man when he was growing up, in spite of the hate talk that was promoted by preachers:

I never understood what I called those ‘church sissies.’ And what I mean by that is they’re everywhere. [...] I never understood that concept of people going places where you were going to be bashed? How could you find Jesus up in there? So I, on purpose, avoided what I called ‘church sissies.’ (2012, p. 17)

It is in the character of C.C. that Johnson tackles a key institution like the Church, especially in the so-called Bible Belt, the most conservative region in the United States. Through the reaffirmation of certain traditional values and the observation of certain silent practices, again the author pulls down stereotypes regarding gay life in the South.

Larry J. is another character in his forties who builds on the concept of promiscuity, a topic traditionally associated with homosexuality and chastised by heteronormative behavior. As the narrator of the play, Johnson the character justifies him indicating that “He survived several abusive men in his mother’s life, which may have something to do with his own search for love through sex encounters” (2012, p. 19). Larry J.’s speech is the most graphic in the play, sparing no detail regarding his sexual awakening. There is a profusion of words connected to the male sexual organ, homoerotic desire, and gay sexual practices. Nonetheless, his speech may be viewed as a reaffirmation of his sexual identity. Critics such as Jeffrey Weeks (1998) believe that “historically gay men far from being hyperactive have been sexually deprived so that the 1970s celebration of promiscuity was by way of a historic compensation” (1998, p. 317) (see also Turner, 2000; Moore, 2004). When playwright E. Patrick Johnson justifies the character’s behavior in the repeated abuse he experienced in life, he is understating that the hardships suffered at home prevent him from his self-realization as a queer individual; for this reason, he seeks these instances of identification with the gay identity in public places through promiscuous sex encounters.

Pouring Tea is rich in the expression of the diversity of black queer individuals. Chaz/Chastity and Countess Vivian, the most extensive speeches in the play, are two characters that represent the least assimilationist stances regarding gay life, as they are a pre-op transsexual person who decides to abandon the treatment, and a 93-year-old drag queen. These two characters epitomize transgression as a lifestyle and stand well within the queer continuum far from heteronormative mores as they select their own gender/sexual identification. In that respect, they embody the empowerment of the LGBT group that has been a leitmotif throughout the play. As Judith Butler believes,

“Within queer politics, within the very signification that is ‘queer,’ we read a resignifying practice in which the de-sanctioning power of the name ‘queer’ is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy” (1993a, p. 23). Both characters choose to legitimize their existence regardless of society expectations.

Chaz/Chastity was a pre-op transgender person who early in her life knew that she was meant to be a woman and was trapped inside a man’s body. Chaz learned about gay life when he was a young man in rural North Carolina. He did so from two drag queens incidentally in town. The play, then, takes a didactic turn to illustrate the differences between a drag queen and a female impersonator:

Well, a drag queen is, a quote unquote, a man, who dresses in an effeminate way, but it is more so for the theatrical aspect of it, or for the entertainment factor of it. A female impersonator is one who also is a male, but conditions their body, or conditions their look, to emulate femininity in its most, in its truest essence. To pay compliment to what it’s like to be effeminate, or a woman, as opposed to make mockery of it. (2012, p. 24)

As with many queer plays, didacticism plays an important role, be it to instruct the LGBT community and society at large – hence the importance of performances at educational institutions – on certain aspects such as HIV prevention or AIDS detection or to teach mainstream society about certain aspects of gay life for the purpose of gaining acceptance for the community. In this case, Chaz/Chastity’s explanation may serve the dual role of explaining two forms of non-assimilationist stances – both in heteronormative as in homonormative terms – as well as expanding the range of potential self-realization. Chaz/Chastity is diagnosed as a pre-operative transsexual. However, she finds that at the gay club they believe she will assimilate to female life and forget about her friends, “Because in the gay community they saw transgendered people as almost a totally different lifestyle, because then you’re no longer considered just, quote unquote, a man, or a woman. And you’ve not crossed over to the straight side” (2012, p. 25). Johnson’s presentation of Chaz/Chastity contribute to outline the plurivocal queer world and expose discrimination in it, too. The lack of idealization of the LGBT community also contributes to humanize the group by highlighting difference. In the end, Chaz/Chastity has an epiphany and decides to interrupt her pre-operative transsexual treatment and learn to accept himself as he was born:

I’ve finally learned to embrace everything that makes me who I am. All of my indifferences, all of my attributes, all of my qualities, as well as my faults, and to realize that God has made no mistakes in making me, that his

words said, I was fearfully and wonderfully made. Who am I to say anything different? (2012, p. 28)

As the most didactic character in the play, Chaz/Chastity ends her speech in a positive tone of inspiration for gay and heterosexual readers/audiences:

Hopefully, I've been able to let someone know that being gay is not all bad, that they're just people too, that, being gay possibly is their choice, maybe it's their birthright, maybe it was just a cruel joke played on them by their higher power, I don't know. But they're still people. (2012, p. 30)

This message of hope is later reinforced by the account of Countess Vivian, the oldest character in the play, not so much for what the Countess can teach, but because of all that she has lived in her life: having been born in 1912, she has been a witness to the Prohibition and Segregation as well as to the black and LGBT liberationist movements.

As pointed out, at 93, Countess Vivian is the true survivor of this ensemble of survivors. Her speech appeals to sentiment that springs not from the intention to touch but due to her candor and naiveté, “at that time I did not know or realize that they had white sissies, [laughter] ‘cause all the ones that I ever saw were over on that side of the tracks” (31). Her speech is characterized by a strong New Orleans accent as well as sociolect markers such as stutters or false starts and idiolectal expressions like “Ooh I hope to tell you” repeated throughout her soliloquy. These features – which to a lesser extent all characters share for character building – allow her to deliver her lines in a matter-of-fact tone: as her sing-song and speech pattern carry the weight of attention, the contents of what she says are addressed directly, and the issues she discusses are harsh memories of 20th century American history: the Prohibition, Segregation, prostitution and crime. Thus, the form of her discourse ameliorates the uncomfortable weight of her words, which are not delivered with sentimentality; rather, these sentiments are meant to naturally spring in the reader/audience.

The following character in the play is the youngest character in the lot, 22-year-old Stephen. This character tackles the issue of concealment and assimilationism and the dangers it poses to the gay man's psyche. As Stephen was very effeminate when he was a young boy, his mother would tell him:

“Don't you grow up to be no faggot.” I vividly remember hearing that. And, you're getting beat up at school ‘cause you are a faggot, you're a little girl, you're a little sissy, and she was like, “Everybody is telling you this is wrong.” So, I was gonna fix it. I'm gonna fix it. (2012, p. 37)

The solution the youngster found to overcome these hardships was pretense: Acting straight so as to avoid abuse. So effective was the demeanor with which he posed that “I got to college, and I was known as the only straight guy in the theater department. [laughter] I became really good at it, became really, really good at it” (2012, p. 38). However, the web of lies that he concocted to please his family, his Church and society led him to self-hatred for pretending to be somebody he was not, leading him to consider suicide, “I fixed what I thought people thought was wrong about me and what I thought was wrong. [...] And, it got to the point where I struggled, and I hated myself for it” (2012, pp. 38-39). In order to find solace and peace of mind, in college he felt the urge to pull away from his mother, his sisters, his Church and all the other institutions that originally made him change. Interestingly, with Stephen, the playwright introduces not only the dangers of concealment or assimilation, but the eventual results of pretending, “It makes me now wonder because I’m still looked at as being straight acting, masculine, although I’m out. And, sometimes, it makes me wonder how much of this is really me, and how much of it is something that I’ve changed myself to fit in?” (2012, p. 38). Stephen’s plight of self-discovery led him to a spiritual search in order to come to terms with his sexuality, with his identity and with desire. Johnson finds in Stephen a story that is the reverse of Countess Vivian’s in the sense that the latter lived through the policy of “separate but equal” and Stephen lives in a heteronormative society that prizes differences only when they are inconspicuous.

The final character in the play is Duncan Teague, who is another man in his forties, “*the only narrator in Sweet Tea who insisted that I use his first and last name. He’s just that fierce!*” (2012, p. 41). Duncan Teague is an AIDS activist who fights because of the losses that he has had in his life, such as his friend Crawford, “That’s the impact of AIDS on my life. ‘Cause that would be a twenty-something year friendship now. And multiply that by a hundred. And that’s what AIDS has done to my life” (2012, p. 42). However, true to the camp that Susan Sontag believes is “the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality,’ of irony over tragedy” (1961/2001, p. 283), Duncan Teague masters the style and even when describing the darkest hour of the disease, he finds comic relief in irony:

And so what would the community have been like if we had never had AIDS? Can you imagine the Broadway shows we’d have had without AIDS? That I would have been star of? (Chuckle) And the fashions ... I

mean we would be wearing different clothes. If Willie Smith was still alive? Child, please. (2012, p. 42)

His final speech somehow has echoes of the inspirational tone in *Angels in America*:

If this tape gets struck by lightning right now and I accidentally get struck too—‘cause it would be an accident—you know the memorial service is going to be humungous, because I’ve accomplished a few things in this skin. And the program won’t just focus black and gay but, you know, if you need to print in there ‘kind of sissified’ and ‘a little soft around the edge’ and, you know, ‘occasionally a vicious Miss Thing’, yes. Yeah. And sometimes in drag. Sometimes pretty in drag. And not just in drag. Yeah. (2012, p. 44)

The final ideas expressed in the play serve the purpose of recapitulating many of the concepts upheld throughout the different speeches: the rejection of assimilationism, the support of multiplicity and diversity of sexual identities, and the importance of understanding the intersections between gay and black individualisms. The final peroration, “So no, I have no regrets. For you see, I am black. I am gay. And I am the South. MISS South” (2012, p. 44) rounds up the camp and the inspirational tone the play embodies.

Final Comments

Pouring Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales is a play that defies the canons of traditional drama: it lends itself to performance in unconventional venues; it lacks a dramatic structure where dialogue advances action and instead offers nine monologues, and it is a one-man-show whose protagonist is its playwright. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that it has action, and that this action, embodied in the nine character’s that confess their life stories, is meant to showcase a sample of the history of black gay men in the American South.

The nine black characters that tell their personal stories range in age from 22 to 93, with a great majority of middle-aged characters. Their expression of homosexuality is as diverse as their lives, and go from femmes (effeminate men), to a straight-looking gay man, to a drag queen, to a pre-operative transsexual person, for example. This diversity in gay “types” fosters the ideas against assimilationism that pervade the play. At the heart of this rejection of assimilationism lies the idea that, whether assimilating to heteronormative behavior or homonormative behavior – that is, conforming to the acceptable mores of mainstream society – undermines one’s personal identity: Johnson believes that homonormative attitudes mimic heteronormative white customs. Thus, the

playwright denounces the dangers of homonormalization as conducive to the obliteration of black identity. In that respect, it is possible to observe the intersections between racial and sexual identity here.

Interestingly, opposed to the idea of assimilation, Johnson sees self-reliance, self-realization, independence and empowerment. In spite of the didactic tone that the play occasionally takes, the playwright indicates no particular path as best conducive to happiness. From promiscuity to church going, the possibilities presented are left to the readers/audience to decide. Rather, Johnson reserves his criticism of mainstream society when he alerts on the dangers of bullying, abuse, chauvinism – as external factors to gay individuals – and the closet and insecurity – as internal ones.

Pouring Tea is highly political in its appreciations but also in its layout as a queer play: not only does it put forth the lives of its nine characters as exempla, but also builds a dramatic text appreciating the lessons learned from the early manifestations of queer Performance Theater of the 1960s and 1970s. In that, the play succeeds not only by creating a gay black history but also writes a new history for LGBT drama.

Conclusions

A Language of Their Own, *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* and *Pouring Sweet Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales* span over the two decades that have elapsed since *Angels in America* placed gay drama center stage due to its inception among the most influential literary works in Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon*. Much has occurred in queer history in these twenty years, among other issues: the normalization of homoeroticism in mainstream media, the passing of same-sex marriage acts in some central countries and in different American states, the election of gay individuals to the House of Representatives and the Senate in the United States, and the repeal of the infamous "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy for the military. Nonetheless, most of these impressive social conquests in this period of LGBT liberation fight go in tune with gay assimilation mores. In pushing the limits of acceptability in heteronormativity, many LGBT attitudes have come to conform and remain at the center of culture.

Assimilation poses, then, the danger of leaving behind belligerent stances in favor of a more subdued, less feisty existence. American drama has been both a precursor of many gay activist movements and a reflection of the social trends they produced. Yet, *Angels in America* represents the white elephant of gay theater: The normalization of homoeroticism for mainstream America is proof that conforming, white, upper-middle class, educated gay men have a voice in the theater, a voice that – while concealed – has always existed since the times of Tennessee Williams. The voices in Tony Kushner's play are those of assimilated gay men.

However, the three plays analyzed in this study contest and defame assimilation. From different perspectives, they uphold the voice of alterity with a particular tone, with a specific aim, in a nonconformist way and from a distinctive background. Camp, a certain didacticism – particularly regarding HIV issues –, unconventional theatrical structures and a strong ethnic mark are features shared by the three plays.

My objectives at the head start of this analysis were to study new forms of representation of queer characters in drama; to identify the idea of queer as the search for subversion; to ponder on the representation of queer characters upholding non-white ethnic identities and thus detect new parameters of queer theater, and to revise innovations in LGBT drama from the point of view of dramatic structure.

Homosexuality was once a private practice performed by individuals beyond the watchful eye of Church or State. Through the consolidation of Papal power in the 12th century, a policy of persecution of gays and lesbians started in the Western world. This

persecution found in the 20th century specific forms of discrimination and, in many cases, attempts at the annihilation of the LGBT collective. However, with the conformation of organized liberationist groups, a trend that had spanned over the better part of eight centuries managed to subvert the course of history. Nonetheless, the scars left on queer individuals have oftentimes been tragic. In the face of these hardships, gay men have responded being, precisely, gay: happily enthused, cheerful, and keenly flamboyant (as the term “gay” was generally understood until the 1950s). Camp discourse is a constant in the three plays analyzed. In the face of adversity, in order to overcome difficulties, to lessen the blows of reality and to put on a brave face, the characters in *A Language of Their Own*, *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* and *Pouring Sweet Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales* choose to express themselves through camp.

Ethnic queer drama finds in camp a discursive style to overcome the tragic existence of the marginalized and celebrate differences. Gregory Woods (1998) adheres to this vision, “Let the comedies represent the central truth of the ‘gay tradition’ I have been outlining. Desire and laughter belong in the same place as revulsion and grief. Any drag queen knows this. It is worth remembering” (p. 374). Camp becomes a common denominator for these plays through the playful treatment of serious topics in order to mock established norms with ridicule.

Although it is arguable that camp language embodies a novelty as a form of representation of LGBT characters – given that many milestones in gay theater (such as *The Boys in the Band* or *Torchsong Trilogy*) make extensive use of it –, it is true that, in the last 20 years, camp has heavily resorted to pop culture as a source of inspiration, and metalanguage as postmodern scaffolding. Queer cultural outputs prove diverse in themes, eclectic in form and marginal in message nowadays. In turn, they have recaptured the spark of independent queer productions of the 1960s and 1970s, shows that were intimate, transgressive and flamboyant; performances that defied hegemonic thought and vilified normality. The new development lies in that queer drama now exposes its defiance in mainstream theaters and even in educational institutions, criticizing all that has come to be deemed as sacred at present.

The campy tone of these plays sometimes finds a pause and acquires seriousness to pursue another goal of queer drama: the education of the population in issues of clear interest to the LGBT collective. From the very beginning of the HIV epidemic, queer theater has used didacticism to foster understanding of the LGBT community and to

fight discrimination but also, in particular, to stress the fact that HIV is a danger for all, more so for heterosexuals who still consider the disease a pink plague. Judith Butler (1993) has analyzed the turn that the word “queer” has undergone indicating that “sometimes the very term that would annihilate us becomes the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political signification: I think we have seen that quite clearly in the astounding transvaluation undergone by ‘queer’” (1993a, p. 22). In this light, it is possible to assert that the HIV-AIDS pandemic has become the ultimate equalizer of humanity and a topic of resistance, a common tragedy of both LGBT and “straight” individuals. In this respect, queer drama has taken over the task of reminding the world that AIDS can kill us all regardless of the sexual partners that we choose. In the 21st century, this is the new message that plays such as those studied here offer. In many queer plays, didacticism plays an important role, be it to instruct the LGBT community on certain aspects such as HIV prevention or AIDS detection or to teach mainstream society about certain aspects of gay life for gaining acceptance in the community. As André Helbo (2012) believes, the history of drama is a long process of appropriations and socializations (2012, p. 59). The didacticism that queer drama acquires when tackling the issue of HIV-AIDS is a form of socializing information and a characteristic of the new queer drama.

Another crucial point of interest when studying these three plays that span over the 20 years after *Angels in America* is that the attitudes towards HIV/AIDS have changed. In *A Language of Their Own*, Oscar dies of AIDS in silence. *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* presents a character who dies to the disease but another one who strenuously fights for awareness at a Health Center for the benefit of heterosexuals as well as gays. The third play analyzed, *Pouring Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales*, pays homage to those who have passed away to AIDS and mourns their loss, but puts on a message of hope. Perhaps this trend, at a time when HIV has become mostly a chronic disease, will persist in the future, with plays focusing on prevention, with stories about living with HIV, or with plots revolving around the problems experience by the HIV indetect population. If these three plays are a sign of the times, then the direction of the new queer drama may be toward life.

Traditional dramatic structures mean conforming to tradition and upholding the value of standardization. In this respect, in order to preserve its belligerence, ethnic queer drama cannot abandon transgressive forms, plots and voices. Experimentalism remains as a haven for the ethnic queer dramatist and a springboard for the new political

fighths to come. Its novel stage layouts help audiences focus on message, on the idea of drama as artifice and on the need to raise awareness for their political ideas. The non-traditional stage becomes the symbol for non-traditional lifestyles in society.

It is interesting to note that there is another trend observable in this short sample of contemporary queer drama: The writers are also sometimes the performers of their works. *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* and *Pouring Tea: Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales* are dramatic works written and performed by the actors themselves. This issue gains interest as it harkens back to the queer theater of the 1960s and 1970s. The strategy undoubtedly contributes to the confessional, personal-experience or witness-account tone of the stories enacted, while it engages both actors and audience in a more experiential theatrical event. Contrary to the small groups of mostly gay individuals who attended the performances of the 60s and 70s, these plays gather more diverse crowds and offer new venues where to take their infringements to heteronormativity.

Additionally, another novelty brought about in LGBT theater is the intersection between sexuality and ethnic identity. The new ethnic queer theater transgresses the limits of assimilated behavior, be it concealed or exoticised, finding a new springboard to voice militant concerns. In this regard, I believe that ethnic queer theater can truly break new ground and reinvent itself. As a source of transgression and a weapon to fight prejudice, dramatic language finds in the intersections of sexual and ethnic identities uncharted territory. Ethnic queer drama is a theater that by definition rejects assimilation not only by opposing white middle-class ideals and aspirations, but also criticizing them harshly.

The crosses between race and sexuality, the dangers of not speaking out and the perils of uniformity for queer values, all these issues build walls against assimilationism so as to preserve personal and group identities. Assimilationist practices are seen in these plays as pernicious for the realization of the queer individual as they curtail differences by standardizing what it is to be, for example, a gay individual within the LGBT collective.

In the 20 years that have elapsed between the three plays analyzed, there seems to be a trend that recuperates the idea of the early gay liberationist fight of making alliances with other cultural groups. In this particular case, at present, it is the voices of the once disenfranchised ethnic minorities that highlight their marginal status as both queer and racial groups. The plays under study here reject the idea of gay culture as a univocal type of subculture that fosters assimilation to heteronormative mainstream

culture. Seidman underscores that “individuals whose experiences and interests were not represented in the dominant gay identity constructions criticized the ethnic model as exhibiting a white, middle-class bias” (1993, p. 117). When the issue of assimilationism is tackled in ethnic queer theater, there are two different forms of assimilation under discussion: conforming to the mores of heteronormativity and fitting within the stereotypes of white hegemonic society. LGBT ethnic drama poses the dilemma of conforming; yet, the two separate but intertwined identities, queer and Asian-American, queer and Chicano, or queer and African-American pull to defend their diverse identity: as they are intrinsically united, the perspective toward assimilationism is rejected.

Queer theater is meant to use shock tactics, to tell truths about reality and to scorn the world around it, but it constantly runs the risk of falling into comfort zones, of forgetting its principles, of accommodating to mainstream tastes and, in the process, of obliterating all that is sacred to it. Merging sexuality, gender and sex together with ethnic identity issues avoids the path of assimilationism: The dangers of assimilationism outweigh its benefits in the plays, and so assimilationism is discredited. The playwrights studied denounce the dangers of homonormalization as conducive to the obliteration of their own personal identities. In that respect, it is possible to observe the intersections between racial and sexual identity in all three plays.

As opposed to the idea of assimilation, the authors present self-reliance, independence and empowerment. The rejection of assimilationism, the support of multiplicity and diversity of sexual identities, and the importance of understanding the intersections between LGBT and ethnic individualisms is a constant in the new queer ethnic theater.

Perhaps many of the new trends, structures, voices and forms of characterization are not novel: As we have seen, the new queer ethnic theater tends to resort to dramatic strategies typical of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture. It is possible that the AIDS pandemic and the crisis that ensued sent queer drama into the less threatening territory of gay culture in the 1980s. Feeding off the underground theater of those decades may imply a new impetus and direction still to come in queer art.

This study has meant to offer a contribution to contemporary theater studies and gender studies by shedding some light on the intersections between sexual and ethnic identities in contemporary American drama. In that sense, I believe that my findings may prove a stepping stone for others who may want to revise the impact of racial identity upon other groups within the LGBT collective such as lesbians, or of the new

drama that other marginal groups may be producing on the borders of culture. The road travelled may seem awe-inspiring, but the destination has been but a flimsy line that, as I finish these words, blends into the sidelines of the past of a rich heritage, but that undoubtedly needs to find new unchartered lands to explore, new territories to transgress.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1. *A Language of Their Own*

Appendix 2. *Mission Magic Mystery Tour*

Appendix 3: *Pouring Tea. Black Men of the South Tell Their Tales*