Chapter 5

The Political Implications of Playing Hopefully: A Negotiation of the Present and the Utopic in Queer Theory and Latina Literature

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You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen.
—Vida Boheme, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*

It is Vida Boheme, the elegant Southern Belle drag queen played by Patrick Swayze in 1995s cult classic film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, that whispers these words to amateur drag queen Miss Chi-Chi Rodriguez, played by John Leguizamo. In this scene, which takes place in the tiny Midwestern town they are stuck in after a car malfunction, Vida tries to impart some wisdom on the younger, less refined Chi-Chi. Chi-Chi has fallen in love with a local town boy that believes her to be a woman and, overwhelmed by the prospect of being rejected by both him and the elder drag queens she wants so badly to impress, she is feeling hopeless. In response, Vida offers her one simple phrase: "You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen." It is this phrase that I want to examine this chapter.

Vida's advice, though seemingly uncomplicated, represents a fundamental truth of oppressed peoples. When there is nowhere left to turn, one *does* just imagine good things happening and then make them happen. But how exactly does one do this? How does one know what sorts of things to imagine? Or when to stop imagining and start taking action? Furthermore, how does one know what sort of action to take to make these things happen? And what happens if one takes

the wrong action? Or imagines the wrong things? It's all as terribly complicated as it is intuitive, and yet we manage to do it everyday with varying degrees of success. Vida's words to Chi-chi are indicative of an attitude we are all familiar with. They are a roadmap to happiness, where the starting point is unhappiness.

This chapter seeks to draw out the complicated relationship between the various parts of Vida's advice—between imagining and doing—in an effort to answer the following questions as they relate to oppressed subjects: How can we maintain a utopic vision of the future and take concrete steps in the present to enact it? How is it possible to be both present in the moment and imagine the best for ourselves? How can we accept the moment we are in and envision/remember a time of equality? These questions are as intrinsic to holistic living as they are to social activism, and yet they ask us to do something seemingly impossible—posit a mode of being in the present even as we exist simultaneously in the nontime of utopia.

This chapter attempts to answer these questions by taking queer theory as its case study, primarily because queer theory as a discipline has been at the forefront of theorizations of utopia in the past ten years. Put simply, queer theorists such as José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam have given serious thought to how utopic creations—such as theatre, art, or even children's animated films—can have an important function in social change. What queer theory has done less successfully, however, is articulate the relationship between utopia and the vast majority of queer and feminist scholarship, which looks at social activism as a matter of resisting oppression by taking concrete action in the present. I am referring here, for example, to the US Third World Feminist scholarship to which many queer theorists of color are openly indebted. Articulating this link—between the present and utopia—is neither a simple nor a trivial matter, nor is it sufficient to just assume it exists. Furthermore, the actions associated with these states—*resisting* the present and *creating* a utopia—interact in ways that have not been completely explored. If, as queer theory has suggested, creating utopias is important for queer subjects, then how do these utopias engage with the everyday business of resisting oppressive social norms?

This chapter argues that theorizing creation without also theorizing resistance is not only fruitless, it is dangerous. It is this last clause—the notion of danger—that I am most interested in. I propose that many theorizations of queer activism that have been made from within queer theory in the past quarter century have been nothing short of dangerous to the queer cause. I argue that thinkers who look

at only one half of the equation—either only at resistance or only at creation—are putting queer activism in a precarious place: a non-place. By this I am referring to the erasure of queerness that occurs in modern society and politics, and that is reinforced in the theoretical world, when scholars choose to look at queerness only in opposition to present-day conditions, or to set queerness apart from these conditions in an imaginary future or past. The danger, to be clear, is the following: imagining is precariously close to pretending, and opposition is perilously close to hopelessness.

This conflict plays out in two schools of queer theory (existing also in feminist theory) that I will label "present-based resistance" and "utopic creation." The first part of this chapter takes the writing of feminist philosopher María Lugones as emblematic of the present-based approach, and analyzes how her theorization of "playfulness" offers a methodology for resistance in the political climate of the early twenty-first century. It then turns to the work of queer performance theorist José Esteban Muñoz, to look at how his conceptualization of "hope" represents a utopic approach, and as such offers a technique for creating queer spaces in an otherwise hostile environment. By examining how these two schools rub up against, interact with, and at times violently refuse one another, I propose a version of queer theory and activism that combines present-based resistance and utopic creation dialectically, in which utopic creation becomes the mechanism that guides all present-based resistance. This section ends with a reading of feminist theorist Chela Sandoval's notion of "oppositional consciousness" as a starting point for a dialectic that allows us to ***just imagine good things happening and make them happen.***

The latter half of this chapter takes up the thesis that some of the most effective interventions in queer theory today are being made in the realm of fiction, and specifically queer Latina literature. If the dialectical movement between resistance and creation has been posited in theory, then it is being enacted in queer Latina literary production. As such, it analyzes the work of one Puerto Rican-American writer/performer/graphic novelist—Erika Lopez—whose a-typical use of humor exemplifies the use of play to deal with issues of queer Latinidad.

The Present vs. Utopia

Feminist political philosopher María Lugones states in her 2010 article "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" that in order to intervene in the

modern gender system, decolonial feminists must "figure out how to think about intimate, everyday resistant interactions to the colonial difference" (743). We can take this statement as a starting point for the kind of work Lugones is interested in doing. Throughout her career, Lugones has consistently positioned herself a "theorist of resistance" (2010, 746), in part because her major project is fighting ***against*** an oppressive gender system, which she eventually terms the "coloniality of gender." In order to do this, Lugones links this resistance to an everyday praxis, as the prior quote's emphasis on "everyday resistant interactions" suggests. Lugones's focus on the "intimate" and "everyday" also alludes to an investment in the present as the domain of social change. In fact, most of the author's oeuvre, from her influential early work "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" to her more recent scholarship on the colonial gender system, centers on the importance of coalition to the resistance movements of women of color. For Lugones, the key to resisting oppression has always been in the pilgrimage—as the title of her signature book suggests—that is, the act of moving from one social space into another. This movement, for her, must take place in the lived worlds of oppressed peoples. At its most basic, it is a rethinking of social relationships as a form of political resistance, through lenses such as love and friendship.

In "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception" Lugones introduces her notion of "world"-traveling, which argues that visiting the "worlds" of those different from you is a form of decolonization. That is, that one must leave the comfort of home to experience the simultaneous lived experiences of those around us, in an effort to break down the categorical divisions imposed by colonialism. In her definition of the term "world," Lugones states:

> I can offer some characteristics that serve to distinguish between a "world," a utopia, a possible "world" in the philosophical sense, and a "world" view. By a "world" I do not mean a utopia at all. A utopia does not count as a "world," in my sense. [...] For something to be a "world" in my sense, it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. (2003, 87)

Lugones makes clear, in this excerpt, that the type of resistance she is interested in is firmly tied to the "present" and "flesh and blood people." It is decidedly not utopian, inasmuch as Lugones is concerned with everyday acts of resistance, not imaginary futures.

This is a theme she takes up in several of her works, including "Toward a Decolonial Feminism" where she writes:

> What I am proposing in working toward a decolonial feminism is to learn about each other as resisters to the coloniality of gender at the colonial difference, without necessarily being an insider to the worlds of meaning from which resistance to the coloniality arises. (2010, 753)

We can read this project of knowing each other as "resisters to the coloniality of gender" as a form of world-traveling with the express purpose of using coalition as a meeting place to swap and share tools of resistance. The "worlds of meaning" that Lugones is interested in here are those rooted specifically in "resistance to the coloniality." Again, we see a pairing between resistance and a material present. While Lugones does not push for insider status in other worlds, she does suggest that feminists must be present in the worlds of others in order for coalition to occur.

It is not that Lugones's relationship with resistance is uncomplicated, however. The author herself states that she does this work "not because [she] think of resistance as the end or goal of political struggle, but rather as its beginning, its possibility" (2010, 746). We see here a Lugones aware of the fact that resistance is not the sole project of a feminist movement, but also intimately aware that resistance must predate other forms as their "beginning." This temporal alignment, which places resistance as the site of possibility that can later give way to other formulations, brings us back to our central problematic. It is not that utopia has no place in Lugones's decolonial feminist movement, but rather that utopia comes ***after*** the execution of everyday resistance. If utopia is a possibility that she does not foreclose upon, then it is also one that must come, chronologically, after the "beginning," which is resistance.

In her definition of "worlds" from "Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," which we have already examined, Lugones also makes some room for utopian ideas. Even though she carefully states that she is not interested in utopian worlds, and instead interested in "flesh and blood people" (2003, 87), Lugones goes on to say: "It may also be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants in this 'world' met in some other "world" and now have this 'world' in imagination" (2003, 87). By including imagination in her definition, Lugones opens herself to the possibility that the worlds may also be inhabited people that are not there in the flesh and blood. These people, however, serve a secondary function. While they may "also" be there as representatives of a utopian imagination, they must be preceded by the flesh and blood inhabitants of

the world. Once again, it is not that Lugones leaves no room for utopia, but rather that this utopia is secondary to the present.

We might look at an earlier essay, "Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models," to elaborate on this further. In it, Lugones theorizes this process of world-traveling through the lens of friendship, writing:

> Friendship is a kind of practical love that commits one to perceptual changes in the knowledge of other persons. The commitment is there because understanding the other is central to the possibility of loving the other person practically. Practical love is an emotion that involves a commitment to make decisions or act in ways that take the well-being of the other person into account. (1995, 141)

Inasmuch as friendship and love are two concepts that lend themselves to utopian thinking, we might expect Lugones's thinking here to also be utopian. She avoids this, however, through an emphasis on the "practical." Her repeated usage of the term—three times in this short excerpt—is noteworthy, as it reinforces Lugones's aversion to utopian or abstract notions of love, instead favoring a model of love that takes into account the everyday business of "decisions or act[s]."

In contrast to Lugones's insistence on dealing with the lived realities of oppression through literal and figurative traveling, we find José Esteban Muñoz's ideas in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity.* In this latest work, Muñoz argues for a version of queer politics that looks toward the future rather than the present. Muñoz believes that utopic versions of queer politics are more productive than present-based formulations, such as those that prioritize the legalization of gay marriage or the inclusion of gays in the military. The author pushes for a "rejection of the here and now and an insistence of potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (2009, 1). Though he employs the word "world," Muñoz's understanding of world is different than Lugones's. Although both theories suggest moving out of one's comfort zone toward another space, Lugones's movement is a horizontal push, whereas Muñoz argues for a forward push. In other words, Lugones maintains that one should travel to "actual" worlds that exist concurrent to our own. Muñoz, on the other hand, wants queers to envision a forward jump, to a world that does not yet exist.

Muñoz's scholarship on utopia advances queer of color critique in important ways. Building from Jill Dolan's notion of the "utopian performative" as the element of theatrical performance that inspires

hope both within and beyond the space of the theatre, Muñoz elaborates utopian hope as a methodology for escaping or surpassing the oppressive realities of queers of color.[1] What concerns me about this type of work, however, is the difficulty of applying these findings to political and social action. Muñoz contends, "turning to the aesthetic in the case of queerness is nothing like an escape from the social realm, insofar as queer aesthetics map future social relations" (2009, 1). The question I am interested in is—how? The "how" is, admittedly, not Muñoz's project. Nonetheless, I believe we as academics need to carefully think through the relationship between utopia and the everyday business of survival, not only to avoid charges of frivolity in our scholarship, but also because our own history in Latin America reminds us of what happens when we get so lost in utopia that we can no longer handle the business of feeding our own people.

As such, I want to read Muñoz's work as an examination of what I have called "utopic creation" in an effort to better articulate the relationship between what could exist and what actually does. It is not that this relationship is completely absent from Muñoz's work, but rather that exploring the tension between his own utopian readings of poems and gay club spaces and the present-based resistance we see in Lugones's writing can help us better understand how potentiality and reality fit together.

One useful place to start is with Gloria Anzaldúa's theorization of "conocimiento," which both theorists take up in noteworthy ways. In "Now Let Us Shift," Anzaldúa understands conocimiento as a seven-step process for enacting "inner reflection and vision" and linking it to "social, political action, and lived experiences in order to generate subversive knowledges (2002, 542). It is what she calls a form of "spiritual activism" that uses inner work to fuel social change. Although Anzaldúa does not address the role of utopic creation overtly, her understanding of "time" is a good place to start. I would argue that implicit in the process of conocimiento is an escape from linear time, into a realm of nontime where healing occurs.

The first step of conocimiento is what Anzaldúa calls an "arrebato" (earthquake), which:

> Jerks you from the familiar and safe terrain and catapults you into nepantla, the second stage. In this liminal transitional space, suspended between shifts, you're two people, split between before and after. Nepantla, where the outer boundaries of the mind's inner life meet the outer world of reality, is a zone of possibility. (2002, 544)

For Anzaldúa, Nepantla represents this nontime, in which the self is able to exist in both the "before and after," both the past and the future. Muñoz seems to echo this in his idea of "ecstatic time" (2009, 32), although he does not cite her prior understanding of this phenomenon. He writes:

> To see queerness as horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signaled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present or future. (Muñoz 2009, 32)

For Muñoz, "ecstatic time" is the experience of removing oneself from linear time and instead being able to move backward and forward on the time continuum.[2] This is necessary, he maintains, in order to access utopia, which is, by nature, displaced temporally. For both theorists, what is at stake is a timelessness or state of in between, which Anzaldúa sees as the moment one is "split between before and after" (Anzaldúa 2002, 544), and Muñoz sees as "looking back at a scene from one's past, present or future" (Muñoz 2009, 32).

Where ecstatic time distinguishes itself from nepantla is in the catalyst. Muñoz believes that it is ecstasy "perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure" that pushes one into timelessness. Anzaldúa, on the other hand, sees it as an "arrebato," which she explains only in terms of negative life events: "a violent attack, rift with a loved one, illness, death in the family, betrayal, systematic racism and margialization" (2002, 546). The difference here—between orgasm and death—is stark. What is at stake, however, is the link to social action. Muñoz does not articulate how exactly a grunt of pleasure, beyond helping one escape from straight time, results in a new queer activism. For Anzaldúa, the link between the arrebato and social action is clearer. Conocimiento takes us through a process of healing and transformation, in which the seventh stage is activism. Where both are invested in inhabiting a liminal space Anzaldúa calls a "zone of possibility" (2002, 544) and Muñoz calls a "horizon" (2009, 32), the difference is in what happens after this liminality.

Let us look now at Lugones's treatment of Anzaldúa's same concept. For Lugones, world-traveling does require an escape from one's own time, inasmuch as it acknowledges that, concurrent to the temporal world one inhabits, there are other simultaneous worlds. In

"Playfulness, 'World'-Traveling, and Loving Perception," Lugones encourages "us" to visit other worlds in an effort to "explore the logic of resistance in its multifarious concreteness" (2003, 29). That is, for Lugones, resisting oppression does not require a jump to timelessness, but rather an understanding of the present. Just as Anzaldúa writes, "conocimiento is about relatedness—to self, others, world," Lugones's project argues for relating to others by visiting their worlds (2002, 570). Unlike Anzaldúa, however, Lugones maintains that she is "against utopianism" (2003, 5) because her interest is in visiting worlds that are "possible" (2003, 27). In this way, Lugones rejects the idea of an "arrebato" that propels one into the nontime, or "zone of possibility," that is nepantla (Anzaldúa 2002, 544). Rather, her interest is in preserving the present moment, even at the expense of the inner work that can be accomplished through nepantla or utopia. We see this in "On Borderlands/La Frontera: An Interprative Essay," where Lugones responds to Anzaldúa's pivotal text *Borderlands*, in part critiquing her for focusing more on the inner work of nepantla than on the resistance movements that it spurs. She writes, "maybe because the Coatlicue state and the state of intimate terrorism are described as states of the inner life of the self, because Anzaldúa is describing states in the *psychology* of oppression and liberation, she does not reveal the sociality of resistance" (Lugones 1992, 36). It is not that Lugones is not interested in how nepantla functions to disrupt linear time, but rather that her project is focused on crafting a "sociality of resistance" that relies heavily on the idea of oppression in the present.

One must wonder why Muñoz and Lugones, both of whom have similar projects to resist oppression, take two strikingly different approaches to the act of exiting one's world. In many ways, this difference relates to the hermeneutic that each theorist espouses. Muñoz believes that the act of imagining utopia must be linked to a hermeneutic of hope. He says we must look at hope as both "affect and methodology" (2009, 4). Muñoz pushes for an understanding of hope as something that one both experiences, and does. For him, in order to access utopia, one must be willing to engage in the act of hoping, as a way to escape the oppression of the present.

On the other hand, we can look at the hermeneutic that Lugones proposes in relation to world-traveling. For Lugones, any form of world-traveling must be accompanied by "playfulness." By playfulness, Lugones is referring to an attitude that is not antagonistic, and that allows one to adapt easily to different worlds. Like Muñoz's understanding of hope as necessary to remove oneself from one's

temporal reality, Lugones sees playfulness as necessary in order for one to travel outside of one's spatial world. The difference between the two, then, is that while playfulness is a way of dealing with conditions as they currently exist, hope is a way of dealing with conditions as you one day wish they will be.

In many ways, Muñoz's theorization of hope picks up where Lugones's theorization of playfulness leaves off. Lugones is able to successfully outline a method for dealing with present-day oppression through world-traveling, a form that opposes the dominant logic that discourages coalition between oppressed groups. However, her hermeneutic of playfulness only allows for the negotiation of what already exists. It stops short of playfully imagining a future, which we might call utopic. This is where Muñoz's hope is useful. Although it does not provide a method for dealing with or healing current oppression, Muñoz's hope does provide a way out of this oppression through a vision of a better future.

How, then, can queer theory successfully bridge the gap between these two methods for negotiating oppression? A useful place to start is with feminist philosopher Chela Sandoval, whose work in *Methodology of the Oppressed* positions her as a theorist of both resistance and creation. Sandoval writes in the introduction to this text:

> It is also imperative not to lose sight of the methods of the oppressed that were developed under previous modes of colonization, conquest, enslavement, and domination, for these are the guides necessary for establishing effective forms of resistance under contemporary global conditions: they are key to the imagination of "postcoloniality" in its most utopian sense. (2000, 9)

In this excerpt, as in many throughout her works, Sandoval calls attention to colonized knowledge as a starting point for globalized resistance in the modern world; in this case, under the rubric of "postcoloniality." More than that, however, Sandoval reminds us that this form of globalized resistance exists in a utopia of sorts, inasmuch as it must be *imagined* by the colonized or subjugated subject. This coupling of imagination or creation with resistance brings up several key points—certainly many forms of resistance are incredibly creative, and certainly the most creative among us cannot help but resist societal norms. The actual relationship between these two concepts, however, is far more complex than a colloquial understanding of the terms. What Sandoval is proposing here is not that either of these terms can be turned into an adjective and placed before the

other—that is, creative resistance or resistant creation—but rather that for oppressed people it is absolutely imperative to inhabit both nouns at once. What she demands of us is, in a rational, Western sense, impossible. Sandoval wants us to be in two places at once. We must do more than simply *act* creatively while in place of resistance, or vice versa. We must *be* in creation and in resistance simultaneously. It is, in effect, a splitting of the consciousness to exist in two places at once—the present and the utopic.

Sandoval lays out a theory of oppositional consciousness, which outlines the five modes of resistance used by oppressed groups in political struggle. The first four of these tropes—the equal-rights form, the revolutionary form, the supremacist form, and the separatist form—represent modes of resistance that can and must be inhabited in the fight for political representation. What sets these tropes apart from the fifth, however, is that, regardless of how often they are employed, oppressed subjects do not reside in them. Rather, these subjects have access to the fifth mode, differential consciousness, which "enables movement 'between and among' ideological positionings [...] in order to disclose the distinctions among them" (Sandoval 2000, 58). The differential consciousness therefore refers to a trope that has the ability to navigate between the others, as Sandoval's now famous analogy explains: "the differential mode of consciousness functions like the clutch of an automobile, the mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power" (2000, 58).

I want to posit a new reading of Sandoval's theorization of oppositional consciousness, in which the first four tropes represent a commitment to present-based resistance, whereas the fifth trope represents a move into the utopic. Specifically, I view the first four tropes as representative of the various ways that subjects, and in this case queer subjects, are able to negotiate the oppression around them. Through a strategy of assimilation (equal-rights form), radical politics (revolutionary form), perceived dominance over the ruling class (supremacy), and removing themselves from society (separatist form), queers are able to resist the many forms of subjugation that are imparted upon them. It is through accessing the fifth form, however, that queers are able to move past the phase of resistance as Lugones theorizes it, and into the realm of potentiality as Muñoz sees it. Through the differential consciousness, queers envision utopic spaces where resistance is no longer necessary. Hence Sandoval writes, "Differential consciousness is described as the zero degree of meaning counternarrative, utopia/no-place, the abyss, *amor en Aztlan*, soul" (2000, 147). It

is through tapping into this soul—which Anzaldúa has theorized as mestiza consciousness, Lorde has theorized as the erotic, and Muñoz has previously theorized as disidentification—that the possibility for radical, utopic change can be accessed.

We must note, however, that in Sandoval's schemata the differential consciousness does not exist alongside the other modes of oppositional consciousness, but rather hovers above them. It is the differential that witnesses the accessing of the other tropes, and that makes their use possible. I want to posit that if the differential is how subjects are able to "'move between and among' ideological positionings," then it follows that the utopic is how queers are able to move between and among present-based formulations of resistance. The utopic, then, becomes a guiding light for all present-based opposition. It becomes the vision that guides concrete actions. Rather than being hierarchical, the relation between the utopic and the present, between creation and resistance, between hope and playfulness, is dialectical. Both work together to create something greater than them sum of their parts.

What Sandoval gives us is a vocabulary for discussing the act of being in two places at once. She describes a system of oppositional consciousness in which one can inhabit one of the first four forms of consciousness, even simultaneously as one inhabits the fifth, differential, form. This formulation is quite a bit more complicated than my choice of the word "inhabit" indicates, however. In the part of *Methodology of the Oppressed* where she introduces the five forms of oppositional consciousness, we see Sandoval engaging in a slippage of terms akin to the slippage between the utopic and the present that I want to posit. Sandoval begins by calling her theory of oppositional consciousness a "five-location topography of consciousness" (2000, 55). I want to draw attention here to the spatial descriptors—"location" and "topography"—which exist alongside the term "consciousness" to posit that, somehow, she is able to create a visual and geographic representation of the nonmaterial.

Sandoval goes on to say that in addition to the first four well-known forms of oppositional consciousness: "the addition of a fifth and differential mode of oppositional consciousness to these has a ***mobile, retroactive, and transformative*** effect on the previous four, setting them all into diverse processual relationships" [emphasis added] (2000, 55). We should pay attention here to the adjectives that Sandoval uses to describe the effect of differential consciousness on the other four forms. "Mobile"—a spatial adjective, which suggests a physical shift in location. "Retroactive"—a temporal adjective, which suggests a movement through time. "Transformative"—a qualitative adjective, which suggests a spiritual or metaphysical shift. The conflation of these three adjectives into one sentence is an indication of a tension that Sandoval is trying to navigate, but never fully articulates. How, exactly, are the five forms of oppositional consciousness both material and nonmaterial at once?

We can view Sandoval's oppositional consciousness as an explanation for how one can be in multiple spaces at once—geographically, temporally, and spiritually. Each of the five modes she describes is simultaneously an ideology, a set of actions, and a form of consciousness (with the exception of the fifth, which Sandoval argues is free from ideological underpinnings). To put it in concrete terms, let's take the example of a protestor outside of a government building in downtown Los Angeles, demanding same-sex partner insurance benefits. Geographically, the protestor is outside of this government building in Los Angeles. He is also, however, geographically in Aztlán. How can he be in both at once? Where Los Angeles exists in the present, Aztlán (which is not a recognized geopolitical state) exists geographically in the protestor's utopic (read: creative) understanding of the geography of the region. He is therefore in two geographic locations at once. The same goes for his temporal state—which may be simultaneously "1pm" in the present, but "timeless" in his utopian understanding of colonized resistance. The example of the protestor, then, exists as much in the "equal-rights" mode/ideological form/state-of-consciousness Sandoval describes, as he does in the "differential" mode/ideological form/state-of-consciousness. He is both present and utopic at once.

What does this mean for the study of resistance and creation? It means that Sandoval's unwillingness to separate time from space, and space from place, is indicative of the necessary fusion between the present and the utopic that occurs in social movements. It also means that when we are able to tap into the present and the utopic dialectically, we are able to bridge divides between the physical, the temporal, and the spiritual—the so-called mind/body divide of Western rationalism—to ends that are both counter-hegemonic and, as we will see in the work of Erika Lopez, playful.

Erika Lopez: Graphic Art Feminism

It comes as no surprise to readers of queer Latina literature that this body of work often crosses the lines of physicality, temporality, and spirituality. Less studied, however, are the methods that queer Latina

writers use to do this difficult work of navigating the present and utopic. This is not so much an oversight as a sticking point in the study of Latina literature at the turn of the twenty-first century. As Latina/os gain both demographic and political power in the United States, the question of how to differentiate within Latina/o groups becomes more pressing. This is equally true in literature departments, which have long struggled to validate the field of Latina/o literature while simultaneously acknowledging that no such monolithic grouping could ever possibly exist. Queer Latina literature becomes a nexus point in this conversation when we think of queerness as we have discussed it so far, as borne out of Western academe and yet profoundly destabilizing of Western rationalism. How do queer Latina cultural producers inhabit this space between resisting the reality of an antagonistic political climate and creating literary works that imagine utopian outlets?

Erika Lopez is a Puerto Rican-American graphic novelist, blogger, and cartoonist whose work includes several books published by Simon & Schuster starting in the late 1990s and a newer collection released by her own publishing company, Monster Girl Media, in 2010. Lopez has enjoyed a sort of cult following throughout her career, due in part to an irreverent writing style characterized by cultural critique in the form of vulgar, sexualized prose and images. For Lopez, as well as for a handful of other queer Latina performance artists and bloggers, complex social issues are most effectively discussed through wit, hyperbole, and a depiction of sexual excess. Indeed, in her work, Lopez has consistently relied on these literary devices to address everything from child abuse to poverty. I want to argue that Lopez makes a contribution to elaborating a queer Latinidad that goes beyond just funny quips, however. If we characterize all of her literary techniques under the category of play—where play is defined as engagement with things as they are through the lens of what they could be—then Lopez's work performs a critique of the present, even as it simultaneously removes its subject from the present and deposits her into utopia.

My use of the term "play" here is intended as a reference to both Lugones's elaboration of "playfulness" in social movements and Muñoz's concern with "hope" as the methodology of the future. Indeed, play exists on both registers. It is simultaneously nonantagonistic and imaginative, malleable and nonconformist. Play shares many similarities with humor, since much play is funny, but yet not all humor is playful.[3] By this I mean that not all humor is engaged with a critique of the present. In other words, some humor is escapist, but

play is necessarily rooted in the present. As we are defining it, play does the difficult work of cultural critique while, simultaneously, not taking it too seriously.

My argument is that through her use of play in the texts that follow, Lopez is able to address the main points of the queer and feminist movements we have looked at, without adopting the more typical genres of poetry, prose, or the testimonial. Her use of the graphic novel format is unconventional in itself, as this genre has not historically been used for activist work within feminism.[4] Lopez's choice to adopt the graphic novel in order to do feminist work is groundbreaking in that the genre is most often associated with humor, but less commonly associated with the kind of play we are discussing.

Erika Lopez's 1997 graphic novel, *Flaming Iguanas: An All-Girl Road Novel Thing*, combines sketches drawn by the author with the story of Tomato Rodriguez, a bisexual half-White Quaker, half-Puerto Rican. The novel follows Tomato on her cross-country road trip on a motorcycle she has just learned how to ride, in an effort to find herself before reaching the West coast. We can begin by looking at Lopez's use of play in her understanding of a rather serious feminist concept, intersectionality. Lopez expresses her take on this issue when she writes:

> I don't feel white, gay, bisexual, black, or like a brokenhearted Puerto Rican in *West Side Story*, but sometimes I feel like all of them. Sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK, experience the brotherhood and simplicity of opinions. Sometimes I want to feel so heterosexual, hit the headboard to the point of concussion, and have my crotch smell like bad sperm the morning after. (Lopez 1997, 28)

In this excerpt, we see Tomato dealing with the many identities she inhabits. As the daughter of a Puerto Rican father and a White, Quaker mother, Tomato inhabits multiple cultural realities. Although she acknowledges that no single identity suits her, she does not feel forced to choose between them. Rather she states "sometimes I feel like all of them." For Tomato, the experience of her Latinidad cannot be prioritized over her whiteness. She goes so far as to state "sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK." Rather than reflect on her personal identity process at length, Lopez uses a shorthand to express her relationship to her own whiteness. When she writes, "Sometimes I want to speak in twang and belong to the KKK," she acknowledges her own relationship to the institution of

whiteness as represented by the KKK and her desire to inhabit that identity by speaking in twang. Lopez does the same for the institution of heterosexuality, which Tomato wants to inhabit by having heterosexual sex that leaves her "crotch [smelling] like bad sperm the morning after." Once again, we see that rather than run away from potentially oppressive identities such as whiteness and heterosexuality, Tomato instead incorporates them into her identity. In the rest of the chapter she later goes on to also incorporate her dark skin color, her lesbian desire, and her nonfluency in Spanish.

In the excerpt above, as in others, we see a Tomato that is able to take on the issue of intersectionality almost exclusively through a playful engagement with cultural norms. This is not, however, intended to avoid the complex identity issues that she struggles with. Rather, it is precisely through her wit that Tomato works out the complexities of her identity, coming to the conclusion that "sometimes I feel like all of them" (Lopez 1997, 28). We might turn here to Joanna Gilbert's work on female comedians in ***Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique***. In it Gilbert writes, "Examining women's humorous performance as a potential site of resistance cloaked in the guise of entertainment can teach us about the power of telling one's own story in a culture that continues to marginalize women" (2004, xvii). Although Gilbert is talking specifically about stand-up comedy here, her point about the use of humor and laughter as subversion rings true to Erika Lopez's work. Lopez's use of play to subvert power relations serves not only as a form of social critique, but also serves to elevate Tomato (and Lopez herself) to a position of power over the object of her criticism. In this way, we might think back to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnavalesque, in which we see literature serving a counter-hegemonic function in humor and satire through the insertion of seemingly grotesque and low-brow elements.[5]

Lopez's work complicates the carnavalesque, however, in that it is significant that the vulgarity of her text comes from not only a female protagonist, but also a female author. Gilbert's work allows us to locate Lopez's use of play within a genealogy of women that undo the norms of patriarchy through an appeal to what has not been a traditionally female form—comedy. The connection to feminism is obvious.

For Tomato, the multiplicity of her identities makes her extended identification with one sole political or social group both impossible and undesirable. As such, her text does more than just posit a gendered critique. She expresses this sentiment upon waking up one morning after having slept with a woman for the first time. In the

prior scene, Tomato has expressed her joy at having had her first lesbian experience, yet upon waking she says:

> To my relief, the next morning I didn't feel like a member of a lesbian gang. I didn't feel this urge to subscribe to lesbian magazines, wear flannel shirts, wave DOWN WITH THE PATRIARCHY signs in the air, or watch bad lesbian movies to see myself represented. No. I wanted a Bisexual Female Ejaculating Quaker role model. And where was she, damnit? From now on I would demand to be represented. (Lopez 1997, 251)

For Tomato, her identification with the act of lesbian sex is not followed by identification with a lesbian identity. She expresses relief that she does not want to be part of a "lesbian gang," as wanting to join such a gang would mean limiting herself to one identity. Rather than inhabit all of the markers of a lesbian identity as she sees them, including wearing flannel shirts and waving "down with the patriarchy" signs, Tomato continues to want a role model that expresses the multiplicity of her identity. When she writes that she wants a "Bisexual Female Ejaculating Quaker role model," Tomato is basically mocking the idea of a stable group identity that would embrace her.

Throughout the novel we also see Tomato engage playfully with notions of time. As she continues her journey to California and becomes more comfortable with the different parts of herself, Tomato is also facing a crushing fear of death that seems to remove her from linear time at certain points during the novel. Her obsession with death also breaks up the linearity of the narrative itself, as she does not experience an evolution on the subject throughout the story. As a result, we have a novel that follows the linear progression of most coming-of-age narratives in terms of identity—she does becomes more comfortable with herself—but at the same time allows the character's fear of death to remain unresolved.

I would be remiss here not to mention Melissa Solomon's application of Tibetan Buddhist scholarship to ***Flaming Iguanas***, where Solomon explores the concept of the "bardo"—a Tibetan Buddhist term for in between or liminal spaces, such as those that occur after death and before incarnation. Solomon contends that, inasmuch as the bardo represents a nonstate, "bardo, as a concept, may be useful for describing the transitional spaces between different and conflicting definitions of lesbian" (Solomon 2002, 203).[6] The bardo serves as a reminder that lesbian identities, or perhaps all identities, are always

located in the process of becoming. In Solomon's reading, then, even the aspects of the story that read as a coming-of-age narrative are located in a sort of bardo state of in between-ness, which ultimately prohibit the kind of resolution that an identity politics would rely upon.

This unresolvability is intimately linked to play, including the play we have already seen in the novel's rhetorical devices. If play occupies a liminal space in between the present and the utopic, and likewise between resistance and creation, then it is by nature opposed to resolution and fixity. In playfully addressing the issue of death, Lopez calls attention to this. Take, for example, a scene toward the end of the novel where Tomato sits watching her laundry dry at a laundromat in San Francisco. Having reached the end of her geographic journey, Tomato is clearly upset by the fact that her father has died before she could see him again. In the three-sentence chapter where we learn of his death, which is labeled "Untitled" and contains only two drawings of an angel and a wilted sunflower, Tomato refuses to address her feelings on the matter. It is later while watching her laundry that she thinks the following:

> We burn people alive and try to hand them at the same time. We rip the fingernails and ovaries out of eighty-year-old women with knives and make them watch as we rape their grandchildren. Suburban kids torture animals on their living room floors and we put cats to sleep if they don't match the carpeting. (Lopez 1997, 240)

This meditation, which is most definitely not humorous, is nonetheless playful in the way it breaks with linear time. Even while located in a commonplace present, Tomato's fear of death acts as what Anzaldúa would call an "arrebato" or earthquake. The daydreaming that follows represents the state of "nepantla," or being between worlds. This is also what Muñoz calls ecstatic time, if we take ecstasy to mean the state of being outside oneself by way of any intense emotion. It is what happens afterward, however, that is surprising. In the rest of this quote, Tomato continues to go through the "Coatlicue state," which Anzaldúa refers to as a period of feeling lost. At the start of the next chapter, however, we see Tomato once again obsessed with sex. This does not follow the rest of the path of healing that Anzaldúa calls conocimiento which, again, ends in activism. Nonetheless, the theorist has accounted for this as well. For Anzaldúa, the different steps of conocimiento can take place in any order, or sometimes not at all. When Tomato becomes sex-crazed immediately after this episode, it

is therefore not a failure. It is in fact just the opposite as she uses play, this time in the form of sex, as a response to her fear of death. By jutting back to linear time after this episode, Lopez confuses our expectations of resolution in fictitious texts. She also forces us to rethink sex as a form of sociality—or perhaps what Lugones would call a "sociality of resistance" (Lugones 1992, 36)—that serves as a possible response in times of crisis.

Tomato's brushes with death are just as likely to result in a sense of profound joy, as they are a sense of profound despair, however. After falling off of her bike on a muddy path one night, for example, Tomato reflects:

> I looked around me and saw only black. I heard sounds like a faraway river, but I knew they were leaves blowing in the sky. For a tea bag moment, everything was as it was supposed to be. I breathed with the trees and felt separated from the collective human consciousness: I didn't want to conquer anything, didn't want to build cheap aluminum developments or shopping centers. I felt I belonged and would've asked for permission to stay if I'd known how. (Lopez 1997, 195)

For Tomato, this moment after falling off of her motorcycle acts as an arrebato, in which she is able to stop her frenzied thinking for the first time since setting out of her road trip and appreciate where she is. She writes, "for a tea bag moment, everything was as it was supposed to be." While still maintaining her humorous outlook by using the phrase "tea bag moment," Tomato recognizes that for once she is fulfilled by the moment she is living. She goes on to commune with nature by breathing in the trees, and ultimately feelings "separated from the collective human consciousness." Although Lopez chooses the words "collective human consciousness" to describe the urge to "build cheap aluminum developments or shopping centers," I believe she is actually referring to the lack of consciousness that surrounds human beings who are obsessed with progress. For Lopez the "collective human consciousness" can be equated to this tendency to displace oneself from the moment one is living, in an effort to progress toward a better future. Tomato feels satisfied once she is able to escape this lack of consciousness, and instead finds herself very much within consciousness, or what Sandoval would call differential consciousness, when she acknowledges "everything was as it was supposed to be." It is in this moment that Tomato experiences healing from the identity processes that she deconstructs throughout the course of the book. By achieving "conocimiento" at this moment, we could say

that Tomato has tapped into a differential consciousness that is able to see the "collective human consciousness" from a distance without participating in it.

Tomato's journey throughout this graphic novel is exemplified best by two of the sketches that begin and end the book. The first sketch, which appears in the prologue entitled "before," is of a woman hanging off of a motorcycle as it speeds away. This woman, who the reader is led to believe represents Tomato, can be seen performing a trick on the motorcycle. However, even as she performs this trick, she is unable to keep up with the fast pace of the motorcycle, and clings to it as it drives off. If we compare this sketch to the book's last sketch, we see a marked difference. The last sketch is of the same woman doing a handstand on a parked motorcycle. Unlike in the first sketch, we can see this woman's face as she is confidently poised on the motorcycle. Rather than looking as though she is not in control of the speed of the motorcycle, she has stopped the motorcycle altogether to demonstrate her control over it. In many ways, these sketches outline Tomato's journey of inner growth throughout the novel. Whereas in the beginning, Tomato is very much a part of linear time, and cannot seem to hold on to the myriad of experiences and identity processes that confront her, by the end she is comfortable with her experience. The fact that the second motorcycle is stopped completely might additionally represent an escape from linear time.

We cannot make the mistake, however, of reading this novel as a progress narrative. While it's true that the character looks more confident in the final sketch, it is also true that just a few pages before there is a two-page spread of sketches of penises. Labeled everything from "chia penis" to "bulemic penis" to "bozo the penis clown," these sketches are presumably ideas Tomato has had at the end of the novel when she accepts a job as a sex toy designer. The return of this obsession with sex and the humorous insertion of penis designs remind us that, above all else, this novel reverts again and again to play as a mode of both expressing and understanding the world.

In general, Erika Lopez's oeuvre concerns itself with issues of the present and the utopic. For example, her more recent collection, *The Girl Must Die*, contains a simultaneously hilarious and harrowing tale of poverty and aging entitled, "The Welfare Queen." The other stories in this collection follow similar themes, including the biographical title story, which touches on issues such as child abuse and close friends committing suicide. Despite this, these tales of resilience often have a hopeful undertone to them, perhaps best expressed in a line repeated over and over again in the collection, and included as

the last line of the publication. It reads: "Whatever doesn't kill you, will eventually turn you on" (Lopez 2010). It is here that Lopez is doing the difficult work of playing hopefully, or maybe hopeful playing, that characterizes not only her work, but an intervention of queer Latina literary production in queer studies at large.

Toward a New Queer Theory

Returning back again to the film *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, we can look anew at Vida Boheme's remark to Ms. Chi-Chi Rodriguez—"You just imagine good things happening and you make them happen" (1995). The wisdom of this line and its echoes in both queer theory and queer Latina fiction are, by now, clear. There is more to this comment, however, since we cannot look at it in isolation from the rest of the film. Right after hearing this piece of advice, in fact, the smart-mouthed Chi-Chi asks the following: "Well, what if what I want to imagine is a boy I want to go out with?" (1995). Chi-Chi's literal take on Vida's advice is a good indication of both the merits and shortcomings of this type of work.

A negotiation of the present-based resistance and the utopic creation results, at its best, in a sense of play that serves to undo social hierarchies even as it uplifts the subject. At its worst, however, one is lost at one extreme or the other—either dreamily deluded or weighed down with antagonism. In the case of Chi-Chi—whose concern with the boy blinds her from the fact that she is in imminent danger of being attacked if she continues to gender-bend in this small town—the former occurs. This is as true on the personal level as it is on the level of academic disciplines, including, but not limited to, queer theory.

Indeed I began this essay with a rumination on the current state of queer theory—arguing that, as a discipline, queer theory has failed to address the schisms between theorists who are interested in resisting the current state of oppression and those who are interested in positing a utopic queer futurity. This failure in queer theory mutually reinforces a similar divide in queer activism between present-based activists—that is, those who resist current legislation to define marriage between a man and a woman—and utopic activists—that is, those that resist the institution of marriage altogether, and as such do not support pro-marriage equality legislation. The effect of this divide, both in activism and in theory, is a queer movement that often lacks the unity to achieve its purported goals, as well as queer theory classrooms that produce scholars who continue to replicate these incomplete notions of subjugation. This split is also relevant to the

lived experiences of queer people—even those whose lives exist outside of the specialized realms of queer activism and theory. For actual queer subjects, the task of balancing the energy required to deal with homophobia and other forms of oppression in the day to day, with the imagination necessary to posit queer-friendly utopias in art, literature, and performance, can often be exhausting. Oppressed subjects, queers among them, must, and do, walk the fine line between present-based resistance and utopic creation in their everyday existence.

I therefore assert that it is queer theory's task to uncover situations in which the present and the utopic are being successfully integrated in the lives of oppressed people, and/or in their art, literature, and theory. I have attempted to do so by arguing in favor of a dialectical relation between these two methodologies. By traveling outside of queer theory to elaborate a notion of how queer subjects exist and thrive in the face of oppressive social norms, I have also hinted toward an important trend in the future of the discipline. That is, we as queer theorists have a responsibility to locate our analyses within the larger corpus of studies on oppression, including work done in other fields and in other genres. The important task of coalition that is so often the focus of queer activism, and much less often the focus of the theory itself, must be completed by those of us who write the theory, in an effort to move past the clearly drawn boundaries of our field. In short, I am calling for a queering of a field that began with multigenre, multidisciplinary work in the 1980s, and has since evolved into an often-impermeable conversation between critical articles published in scholarly journals. My hope is that in positing a mode for negotiating the present and the utopic in queer theory, as well as its ramifications in activism, and its existence in queer Latina literature, I have begun to examine the ways that for us, within the academy, the process of theorizing oppression is in fact intimately linked to the process of contending with it on the outside. As a result, only an analysis of oppression that takes into account the state of our own theorizing on the subject will be useful to the queer cause.

Notes

1. For more on Jill Dolan's "utopian performative," see Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
2. For more details, see Judith Halberstam's "Theorization of the Same Concept," in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

3. Humor studies have a long and rich history of understanding humor as performing a myriad of social functions: from Freud's understanding of humor as an expression of the subconscious, to Henri Bergson's meditations on the social functions of laughter. In more recent years, humor studies have turned away from universalizing theories of humor, such as the superiority, incongruity, and relief theories. While we can certainly read Lopez's work through each of these lenses, I am more interested in the kind of hybrid work done in texts such as Paul Lewis's *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989). Particularly useful to our discussion of *Flaming Iguanas* is Chapter 3, where Lewis discusses the use of humor in coming of age narratives.
4. Many have argued that graphic novels do actually engage in activist work through their inclusion of marginalized characters—often in the form of the nonhuman, such as superheroes or mutants. Still, I argue that Lopez's activist work in *Flaming Iguanas* takes on feminist activism in a much more direct manner than other graphic novels, by using a Latina protagonist and exploring her identity issues. It should also be noted that Lopez' novel does not represent the traditional definition of a graphic novel, in that it does not have a sequential series of illustrations to further the story. Rather, it blurs the line between a graphic novel and a novel with graphics. For more information on the activist potential of graphic novels, see the *MELUS* special issue entitled "Coloring America: Multi-Ethnic Engagements with Graphic Narrative (32.3).
5. For more on Bakhtin's notion of the carnivelesque see his *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
6. An analysis of the overlap between the Anzaldúan adaptation of "nepantla" from Nahuatl and the Tibetan Buddhist concept of the "bardo" would be useful here. While such a reading is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is sufficient to say that the similarities of these concepts in two radically different cultural traditions are a testament to the importance of liminality to the human experience and, by extension, to social justice work.

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To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar. 1995. Directed by Beeban Kidron. Universal Studios.

Chapter 6

Cherríe Moraga's Changing Consciousness of Solidarity

Araceli Esparza

An Introduction: Anthologizing Solidarity and Feminist of Color Activism

In over thirty years since *This Bridge Called My Back* was first published, Cherríe Moraga has continuously reevaluated her imaginary of solidarity, taking into account socio-historical changes and the mutability of her own political beliefs. Moraga's commitment to self-reflexivity, revision, social justice, and activist writing has meant that her contributions to *This Bridge* remain prescient for feminist of color theory into the new millennium. Here, I read Moraga's prefaces, forewords, and introductions to the groundbreaking anthology—including the 1988 Spanish language edition *Esta puente, mi espalda: voces de mujeres tercermundistas en los estados unidos* edited by Moraga and Ana Castillo (1988), and the 1981, 1983, and 2002 English language editions coedited by Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa—as a conceptual map for understanding how she has theorized solidarity and women of color activism in the United States during more than three decades, and as a lens for thinking about ongoing transformations in feminist of color theory. I trace Moraga's imaginary of solidarity from 1981 to 2002, arguing that her perspective regarding the possibility of alliances between women of color was initially US-centric, eventually becoming increasingly hemispheric, and ultimately more global. First, I consider the US-centric concerns posed in the 1981 edition of *This Bridge*. My analysis reveals the pressing political concerns US third world feminists contended with at a time when they were working to produce politicized subjectivities that grappled with questions of privilege and difference within movements for social justice. As I move on to discuss, between 1983 and 1988 Moraga began