

REVITALIZING POETICS: Latin@s Reshape South Minneapolis

Jessica Lopez Lyman

In this essay I argue that Latin@s in South Minneapolis challenge gentrification and criminalization through economic and cultural revitalization. I define revitalization as a spatial paradigm that accounts for individual and collective actions Latin@s enact to improve urban life. Based on critical ethnographic observations I discuss the economic revitalization of a cooperative, Mercado Central, and cultural revitalization of an erotic open mic hosted by Palabristas (Latin@ poetry group) and Speakers of the Sun (pan-Asian arts collective). Drawing from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde I propose that poetry, as a form of cultural revitalization, works in tandem with economic revitalization to affirm Latin@ identities and transform urban spaces.

Key Words: Audre Lorde, erotic, gentrification, Gloria Anzaldúa, Minneapolis, Minnesota, poetry, revitalization

In St. Paul, it is called Marshall Avenue, but cross into Minneapolis and this main east-west thoroughfare becomes Lake Street. It is a cement borderlands, the heart of South Minneapolis. Miles of commerce interspersed with residential housing, South Minneapolis's Lake Street is known throughout the Twin Cities as one of the major hubs for the Latin@ community.² The above poems from members of Palabristas, the first and only Latin@ spoken word collective in the state of Minnesota, create vivid images of the area. Sanchez-Chavarria writes, "This is our city. / That we built over your ruins. / That we colored with our shades," referencing the physical and demographic changes that South Minneapolis has experienced in recent decades. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, prior to the influx of Latin@s, the area experienced an economic shift. The departure of corporate retail stores, such as Sears Roebuck and Company, coupled with divestment by local

government generated a vacant corridor for drugs, sex trafficking, and aesthetic despair. The businesses that remained and the residents who lived in the various neighborhoods along Lake Street were dedicated to reclaiming their spaces.

Today, Lake Street, as Palabristas member Emmanuel Ortiz suggests, rumbles with intercultural urban life. Bicyclists dodge between cars, parents push strollers, young students sing to music at corners waiting for the number-21 bus to arrive against the backdrop of murals and graffiti. On Saturday mornings, a line of mainly white patrons waiting to buy pastries from Ingebretsen's Deli, one of the last remnants of Scandinavian retail extends out the door and wraps around the corner. Mercados are present on every other block, sprinkled among phone repair shops, second-hand stores, and the occasional botánica. Scattered between Latin@ retail and service stores are Somali markets and restaurants. Besides these, there is still the occasional vacant building and, as in any major inner city around the country, corporate fast-food restaurants and liquor stores peddle poor-quality food and quick escapes via the bottle. It is this collision of cultures, commerce, and creativity that births Lake Street's energy.

This essay explores how Latin@s in South Minneapolis employ economic and cultural revitalization to challenge criminalizing discourses and growing gentrification. I posit that revitalization is an entirely different worldview to unearth the cultural, political, and economic factors that shape communities (Zielenbach 2000). Local residents have the power, insight, and skills to imagine alternative spaces, both discursive and physical (Johnson 2013). Revitalization is a multipronged process that relies both on *individual* and *collective* action that function simultaneously in non-linear modes to impact each other. Individuals undergo a revitalization of the self, what community organizers term asset-based community organizing (Kretmann and McKnight 1993), Gloria Anzaldúa (2002) terms "inner works, public acts," and Audre

Lorde (2007 [1984]) outlines in “erotic as power,” that may be achieved through community relationships and art making, in this case poetry. Collective action generates alternative spaces where people come together, such as Latin@ owned business cooperatives and poetry open mics, that affirm Latin@ heterogeneous identities. I argue that revitalization is an important spatial strategy for reconfiguring urban life that honors the economic and cultural contributions Latin@s provide in South Minneapolis.

The project derives from an eighteen-month critical ethnographic study of Palabristas, a multilingual, intergenerational, interethnic poetry collective.³ After Minneapolis hosted its first National Slam competition in 2002, Margret Wander, who goes by her stage name Dessa, and Emmanuel Ortiz founded the collective. “Palabristas,” loosely translated by the group to mean “word slingers,” refers to the poets’ belief that language is a powerful tool for creating social change. Over the past decade the group has published two chapbooks and individual members have published books, produced plays, and released hip-hop/poetry albums. To illustrate both economic and cultural aspects of revitalization, I discuss the establishment of Mercado Central, a business cooperative on Lake Street, and an erotic poetry open mic hosted by Palabristas and Speakers of the Sun (a pan-Asian collective).

Miracle City? Minneapolis Gentrification and Criminalization of Latin@s

In February 2015 *The Atlantic* published an article entitled “The Miracle of Minneapolis,” which highlights the progressive legislative tactics of the early 1970s that have created a city where the dissemination of wealth, affordable housing, and higher education fostered a “miracle” city. Compared to other places such as San Francisco, New York City, and Detroit, the article states that Minneapolis shines because it “sprinkle[s] business taxes across a region in order to keep the poorest areas from falling too far behind” (Thompson

2015). This article however fails to recognize the immense educational, economic, and healthcare disparities affecting People of Color and Indigenous populations in the state. Numerous factors foster the socioeconomic gaps between Minneapolis residents.⁴ I focus on the criminalization of Latin@s and growing gentrification that create challenges for Latin@s in the area working toward revitalization.

Compared to other cities across the country, Minneapolis remains a majority white city. However, in 2010 Latin@s became the fastest growing population comprising 10.5 percent of Minneapolis.⁵ Exponential demographic change nationally, as well as locally, has fueled a fear-based discourse that criminalizes Latin@s. In 2006, the Minnesotano Media Empowerment Project conducted a study of Latin@ representation in newspapers across Minnesota. The group found that most news stories about Latin@s referred to crime-related events and the majority of Latin@ sources were criminals. The study concluded that the hyper-criminalization of Latin@s by Minnesota newspapers failed to recognize positive Latin@ contributions to the state and perpetuated problematic stereotypes about the population (Gavrilos 2007).

In 2010, after Arizona passed SB 1070, an anti-immigrant law that invested local authorities with the power to investigate immigration status, Minnesota followed suit two weeks later with a copycat bill (Magaña and Lee 2013). State Representative Steve Drazkowski stated, “We’re paying to educate, medicate and incarcerate illegal immigrants. I think [the Arizona bill] is a great idea. You know, I wish I would have thought of it” (Kass 2010). Even though the bill never made it to the floor, the view of Latin@s as “illegal immigrants” who abuse resources as opposed to providing value dominates narratives, extending to all Latin@s regardless of immigration status. For example, in 2012 in Gaylord, Minnesota, Jesus Mendoza Sierra was unlawfully arrested and detained during a traffic stop

because police assumed she was undocumented. The American Civil Liberties Union worked with Sierra to fight her case, and in February 2015 they reached a \$40,000 settlement to be paid to Sierra along with required diversity training for Sibley County and Gaylord police departments. The case sets an important legal precedent for national racial profiling and police brutality. Despite this victory, criminalizing discourses foster a cultural milieu that constructs Latin@s as not-belonging, disposable, and a burden to the miracle city.

In addition, Minneapolis is one of the fastest gentrifying cities in the nation (Maciag 2015). Newly built sports stadiums, light-rail transit, and growing investment in downtown since the early 2000s have created a trend for suburbanites to return to the city. In South Minneapolis, neighborhoods along the Lake Street corridor experience some of the highest shifts in affordable living. Gentrification is not a new phenomenon for major cities on the coasts.⁶ In a study on San Francisco's Mission District Raquel Mirabal states that gentrification prioritizes "creating spaces where white bodies and desires and, most importantly, consumption, dominate and shape the neighborhood" (2009, 17). In Minneapolis, the "miracle city" is true for white, educated, middle-class or wealthier property owners who do not have to contend with precarious minimum-wage jobs, rent increases, and fears of displacement.

"Keep the Church Lights On":

Latin@ Economic Revitalization at Mercado Central

To counter the criminalization of Latin@s and growing gentrification, Minnesota born Chicano and long time community organizer Salvador Miranda states:

There is a chronic message that immigrants are criminal, we got to protect the borders, their [Latin@ immigrants] smuggling, they're

part of the cartel. If it wasn't for the immigrants, Minnesota would be in dire straights. Economically, our institutions, like schools and churches, would be dying because that was the case in the 90s when immigrants came and began to put more money in the denominational baskets on Sundays and Saturdays and Fridays to keep the church lights on and the roof patched.⁷

Miranda reframes Latin@s as economic contributors to Minnesota who bring life to decaying spaces, contributing to local churches and schools.

Small in number in the 1990s, the Latin@ population in South Minneapolis was making a large imprint on the community.⁸ Families organized to establish the first Spanish-language church in Minneapolis, La Comunidad Católica del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús. As the pews filled each Sunday to the point of standing room only, Latin@ worshipers remained afterward, selling tamales, partaking in conversations, and building relationships with one another. The growing Latin@ community and organizing efforts at the church gave way to Latin@ community leaders, Deacon Carl Valdez, Salvador Miranda, Juan Linares and others to learn about asset-based community development. The organizing model insists that all of the resources and talents to create a healthier community already exist *within* the community. This strategy counters charitable or advocacy-oriented strategies that create hierarchies; organizations provide services and dictate the agenda for community members who are believed to be in need (Kretmann and McKnight 1993). Asset-based community organizing functions as a vehicle for the revitalization of the self because the method invites community members to process their desires and dreams introspectively. By looking inward and then sharing publically with others the issues and agendas for a community are then determined.

After years of building interpersonal relationships, exploring one another's aspirations and talents, the Latin@ community realized a common desire in the economic sector. In partnership with other community organizations and neighborhood development centers, a fourteen-week Spanish-language micro-entrepreneurial training program geared toward new immigrant Latin@ entrepreneurs was created (Sheenan 2003). In 1999 Mercado Central—a permanent entrepreneurial cooperative space—opened at the intersection of Lake Street and Bloomington Avenue. Today, there are forty-three businesses, including ten of the founding owners. The Mercado generates more than \$1.2 million in annual sales and has created nearly ninety jobs.⁹

A bright-blue painted building with a white sun logo on the awnings, Mercado Central is an instrumental resource for South Minneapolis communities. Previously, residents had to travel to other cities to purchase their products, but now may walk conveniently to buy homemade tortillas, carne, pan dulce, fresh flowers, fútbol attire, and satisfy their cravings with homemade pozole and menudo at one of the many restaurants housed within the mercado. As a business incubator, Mercado Central continues to offer entrepreneurial trainings and commits to keeping rental space affordable for tenants. Besides retail, Mercado Central houses law and tax services. During Día de Los Muertos, Mexican Independence Day, and Cinco de Mayo the retail stales and common areas are decorated, ofrendas are created, and music and poetry are performed. Most important, however, it functions as a community networking space. People hold meetings, birthday parties, and other celebrations in the Mercado's space. The Latin@ community now has a venue for organizations to hold public forums on immigration, the census, and other neighborhood issues.

Theorizing space, Mary Pat Brady writes, “The processes of producing space, however quotidian or grand, hidden or visible, have an enormous effect on subject

formation—on the choices people can make and how they conceptualize themselves, each other, and the world” (2002, 10). Mercado Central, as an economic space, shines as an important story for how organized people, ideas, and eventually money can empower a community to materialize its members’ dreams. Revitalization—individual introspective work gained through asset-based community organizing coupled with collective action—propels Latin@s to formulate a subjectivity that challenges criminalization and enhances the local economy.

Poetic Space When There is No Place

The poetry collective Palabristas has never owned or rented a property. Instead, the group relies on community spaces—libraries, coffee shops, restaurants, bookstores—and members’ homes to meet, write, and host readings. Latin@-specific geographic and institutional places traditionally have been limited in Minnesota. Unlike Chicago, which has historically heavily concentrated areas of Puerto Ricans in Humboldt Park and of Mexicans and Chican@s in Pilsen, Minneapolis’s Latin@ presence along Lake Street is fairly recent (Arredondo 2008; Rivera-Servera 2012). St. Paul’s West Side is the oldest geographically concentrated Chican@ and Latin@ area in the state, thanks to a history of Mexican sugar beat and railroad workers migrating to the area in the early twentieth century (Valdés 2002). However, because the Mississippi River divides the Twin Cities, the West Side is difficult to access for many Minneapolis residents by public transit. Institutionally there are only a few Latin@ specific entertainment places, and not a single theater or cultural center dedicated to the community. Institutions in other cities, such as Self Help Graphics in Los Angeles or the Nuyorican Café in New York City, serve as a meeting ground for creative exchange and relationship building (Algarín and Piñero 1975; Noel 2014).

Despite these physical limitations, Latin@s continue to generate discursive spaces through cultural productions, in the case of Palabristas, specifically

with poetry. Chican@ Studies scholars have argued that poetry captures historical, cultural, and political realities, while simultaneously envisioning new possibilities for the community (Bruce-Novoa 1982; Sánchez 1985; Rafael Pérez-Torres 1995; Arteaga 1997). In a similar vein, Urayoán Noel's study of Nuyorican poets from the 1960s to 2000s contends that "poetry in its various forms" becomes "a means of institutional critique and engagement" (2014, 12). He writes that "the poem is a snapshot but also a score, a social text, completed in and as a community that is always evolving, always performing the terms of being and belonging always in movement" (Noel 2014, 17). I posit that poetry serves as a tool for cultural revitalization that works in tandem with economic revitalization to create individual and collective action. The following sections highlight an erotic poetry reading hosted by Palabristas and Speakers of the Sun at a local coffee shop, Café SouthSide, a few blocks south of Lake Street.

Struggles of Celebration:

Café Southside a Home for Cultural Revitalization

To some it's a gash
 Others a stitch
 This panorama of barriers and bridges
 Struggles of celebration
 Of collisions, communities, cross streets, come-togethers, common
 threads and
 Contradictions.
 Where the queer flag flies higher than the stars and stripes
 Where the sign says "art and cultural center"
 But no matter whose art is on the walls,
 White culture is still at the center.
 —Emmanuel Ortiz (2003)

When one walks into Café SouthSide, an eclectic array of music from Earth Wind and Fire to Lauryn Hill can be heard blasting from the speakers. With a small staff, owners Anna Meyer, a mixed-race queer photographer, and Roxanne Anderson, a queer Black events producer, work daily at the café, juggling their other commitments in between making lattes and sandwiches for customers. Café SouthSide is housed in the same building as two non-profit organizations, Minnesota Transgender Health Coalition (MTHC) and Transgender Youth Support Network (TYSN). Together the nonprofits and the café share a front community room, the Exchange, which is used for meetings, workshops, and art events.

The interstices of art and community have become Café SouthSide's cornerstone and a material symbol of revitalization. In Minneapolis, People of Color, especially queers of Color, have limited opportunities to exhibit their work, since often museums and galleries disproportionately feature white, heteronormative artwork. As E. Ortiz's stanza in "Frontera Lake Street" suggests, "No matter whose art is on the walls / white culture is still at the center." Under these conditions, Café SouthSide is more than a coffee shop. It is one of several independent places that aid in culturally revitalizing the neighborhood. The café functions informally as an art gallery, community center, library, afterschool program, and office space. Publically displaying queer and transgender safe-space signs, the café is currently one of the few locations in Minneapolis that is geared toward these communities. Knowing that free space is difficult to acquire, Anderson and Meyer often remain open past business hours and do not charge for space, which allows for emerging musicians, poets, and visual artists to exhibit their craft. It was in this welcoming space that Palabristas and Speakers of the Sun hosted an erotic poetry open mic.

Breaking the Ice with Erotic Haikus

On Saturday, February 16, 2013 sixty-nine people gathered at Café SouthSide for an erotic poetry open mic reading co-hosted by Palabristas and Speakers of the Sun (SOS), a pan-Asian spoken word collective from the Twin Cities. I arrived early to the café to set up recording equipment.¹⁰ Despite performing poetry for more than a decade, this evening was one of my first experiences observing a reading as a researcher. The café's co-owners, Anderson and Meyer, were finishing the day's work. Within a few minutes of my arrival, members of SOS arrived along with Emmanuel Ortiz from Palabristas. E. Ortiz, a self-proclaimed Mexirican (mother is of Irish heritage and father is of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage), was born in Indiana and moved to Minneapolis in the 90s to attend college at the University of Minnesota.

Since we were over an hour early, everyone present was given an opportunity to introduce themselves and discuss the evening's event. Erotic readings were not commonplace for the people present. One SOS member, Kurt Blomberg, commented that as an Asian American and Korean adoptee, he found erotic spaces empowering, yet challenging. He described often feeling like mainstream society asexualized and emasculated him because of his Asian identity. Being part of an erotic open mic was important to him because it provided space to talk about sexuality and desire. The conversation continued as other individuals shared personal experiences around eroticism. Several people reiterated the political importance for Asian Americans and Latin@s to write about erotic themes in order to reflect on their experiences, challenge stereotypes about their sexualities, and affirm their multiple identities.

Afterward, with plenty of time remaining until the event, E. Ortiz suggested that the group do writing exercises to prepare for the evening. He explained that the day before, a group of Latin@s wrote erotic haikus. It was agreed that

each person would choose one word and that everyone would have to write an erotic haiku based on the word selected. After some laughter and a few people blushing, we formed into a small circle and began the erotic haiku challenge. The words for example, “salad,” “numbers,” “hair,” were not sexual in nature, but became erotically charged when written in haiku form. After writing for a few minutes we went around the circle and shared our poems. In the midst of the haiku challenge more individuals arrived at the café. Anderson began to set up for the event, bringing large speakers and a microphone over from the Exchange room next door. We stopped our writing game to help them move additional furniture.

The open mic was scheduled to begin at 7:00 pm. At the top of the hour not everyone from Palabristas or SOS had arrived. Unlike a staged performance that begins promptly or a Slam competition with a strict set of rules, the atmosphere was casual as people slowly entered the café (Somers-Willett 2009). By 7:15 the café’s chairs and tables were filled. La Lupe Castillo, Teresa Ortiz, and David Mendez (members of Palabristas) arrived along with a few other members from SOS. Sensing that the crowd was eager to begin, La Lupe in tall black leather boots walked to the microphone and welcomed everyone to Café Southside. Born in Harlingen, Texas, La Lupe moved with her family to rural Minnesota in 1963 after her grandparents were recruited to work in a turkey plant. A self-identified Xicana/Indígena lesbian with bisexual tendencies, mother and grandmother, La Lupe is an active organizer in the Twin Cities. To set the tone and explain the premise of an erotic poetry open mic night, La Lupe told the audience:

I want to take away the mysticism and romanticism of reading poetry and reading erotica. It’s our lives, it’s our everyday lives, and every moment that we think about and share our lives we are

creating that intimacy. There is an intimacy with sharing yourselves with us and us with you. Each and everyone one of you are going to experience something tonight that no one else will.

La Lupe's welcoming words framed eroticism similarly to the evening's previous conversations during the haiku challenge. Erotic poetry is about "everyday lives" and the sharing of intimate experiences that are not necessarily connected to explicit sexual acts. Her welcome was a precursor to the evening's cultural revitalization where individual poets shared work with the collective audience.

Anzaldúa and Lorde's Invitation for Individual and Collective Action

Asset-based community organizing is one tactic for individual and collective action that was beneficial for economic revitalization at Mercado Central. In the case of poetry, the work of Anzaldúa and Lorde illustrate how creative acts may cultivate cultural revitalization. Anzaldúa's (2002) "inner works, public acts" and Audre Lorde's (2007 [1984]) "erotic as power" are useful for fleshing out revitalization. Poetry readings bring into partnership individual writing and collective sharing to facilitate a revitalization of the self and community. First, the "inner work," the act of writing and reading poetry facilitates a self-reflexive process, a revival of the self if you will, for the individual poet. Second, the "public acts," the exchange of poetry serves as a medium to share intimate moments between individuals. Poetry readings, as one discursive strategy, are not automatic but *potential* spaces, or as Anzaldúa refers to them, "zones of possibility" to maintain previous relationships and cultivate new ones.¹¹

In her groundbreaking 1978 essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde insists that the erotic is an empowering tool for critical change. Her conceptualization of the erotic counters the conflation of eroticism and pornography. According to Lorde, the erotic offers an opportunity to relish in

the pleasures of everyday acts and share joy with one another. She states, “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (Lorde 2007, 57). By the same token, Anzaldúa’s concept “conocimiento,” like Lorde’s use of “erotic knowledge,” calls for a transformation of knowledges. Anzaldúa writes, “Skeptical of reason and rationality, conocimiento questions conventional knowledge’s current categories, classifications, and content” (2002, 541). Both Anzaldúa and Lorde urge us to question the types of knowledges we’ve been conditioned to uphold. In order to accomplish an unlearning of such knowledges we must look inward.

Anzaldúa and Lorde assert that external factors hinder our abilities to look inward to form deep connections with the self and others. External factors imposed on the self or the larger community is counter to revitalization of the individual and collective. To subvert external factors, both Anzaldúa and Lorde suggest an inner exploration of the self. This “path of conocimiento” for Anzaldúa moves us into the direction of “spiritual activism.” For Lorde, spiritual and political realms are connected by an erotic “bridge” from deep within the self.

The journey to move inward is reached through creative expression. Anzaldúa refers to this pathway as a “creative act” and Lorde names “creative energy.” Building on Anzaldúa and Lorde’s work, Marivel Danielson’s study of Chicana/Latina cultural producers argues that the erotic functions, “as a tool with which to negotiate difference, to subvert societal norms, to shift or delete boundaries, and to envision new worlds and new possibilities for queer Latinas in the United States” (2009, 3). Danielson contends that the writers and performers she studies “illustrate treatments of the erotic that extend beyond

the realm of physical pleasure as they delve in the depths of colonization, conformity, and identity” (2009, 143).

Poetry for Palabristas and SOS becomes a doorway to the inner workings of the self. Their work engages with pleasure but also, as Danielson suggests, identity and power. Members from the group during the reading mentioned the challenge in writing erotic work, but confirmed the necessity of naming desires not often expressed. The process of writing, sitting with the self, reflecting on experiences, operates as a mode for inner work. The practice of self-work, like the craft of writing, becomes an ongoing process of naming and reworking ideas and feelings into actions. For poets, the personal practice of inner work is manifested in the product of the poem and the sharing of the work with others.

Poetry readings present spaces to transfer from inner reflection to public connection. Anzaldúa writes, “Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet” (2002, 552). Likewise Lorde states, “The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference” (2007, 56). As separate racial/ethnic based collectives, Palabristas and SOS use poetry to carve out coalitional networks. Read aloud, the spoken words form bridges between the writer and the listener. This type of intimate sharing insists on a thoughtful approach to structuring the space in which poetry can be exchanged. The Palabristas, as experienced open mic hosts, cultivated a reading that invited not only the collective members of both groups, but the larger community in attendance to participate in the event.

Drawing Names from a Hat: Palabristas and SOS Set the Stage

Normally, open mic practices have a numbered list that is controlled by the host MC. Participants sign up on the list in the order that they arrive to the venue. Once the list is full, unless the host makes an exception, the list is closed and no one else may read that evening (Damon 1998). Palabristas demonstrate an alternative to traditional open mic sign-up practices. After La Lupe's introduction on eroticism, E. Ortiz stood in the middle of the café, among the crowded chairs and tables and asked for volunteers from the audience to read. Palabristas and SOS members along with a few local poets raised their hands. To determine the reading order E. Ortiz placed the poets' names into a hat and selected names one by one. Each time his hand reached into the hat, murmurs, laughter, and a few handclaps could be heard from around the room. The selection process was suspenseful. At the same time, the experience countered normative open mic practices.

Palabristas is committed to horizontal decision-making practices. It does not matter if someone is a reigning National Slam poet (a few were present that evening) or reading for the first time, everyone is given the same respect and opportunity to perform. The random selection set the tone for the rest of the evening. It was playful, even joyful, as Lorde says, but it also diffused hierarchies between experience levels. Poets who had not arrived on time to be part of the selection process were later added to the list. Fourteen people read during the open-mic—five Palabristas members, two SOS members, and seven community members, including me. The poets shared original work as well as read other people's work for example poetry by Chicana feminist Alicia Gaspar de Alba.

Café Southside has no formal stage area. For the reading, Anderson placed a microphone, music stand, and speaker in front of the large window overlooking

Chicago Avenue. By the time the first poet, La Lupe, was set to read the crowd had grown past the café's capacity. Meyer brought in patio furniture that was in storage and additional chairs from the Exchange room. During the reading, there was a constant shuffle. The stage area grew smaller and smaller. Young people moved to the floor to give up their chairs for elders. Tables were pushed aside to make room for those standing along the periphery. Narrow pathways to the bathroom and café counter were carved out between the masses of winter jackets, bodies, and furniture. Compared to formal theater spaces that have a fixed stage and chairs, the café's random and limited physical space caused an immediate closeness. Finding room to listen required individuals to acknowledge their bodies as well as the bodies next to them. If only for a brief moment, people were forced to touch one another. The shrinking stage added to the intimacy. Besides the microphone, there was not a formal divide separating the reader from the audience. Poets sat among the audience, stumbling around the crowd as they made their way up front. Erotic themes of desire and pleasure coupled with the density of people generated body heat. The opening and closing of the front and side door of the café let in crisp February Minnesota winds and random snowflakes that quickly melted inside the room.

The poetry ranged from intimate experiences with lovers to radical politics fighting against imperialism. The haiku challenge became a through-line for the evening. Many poets read the haikus they created during the writing exercise. Some poets, who were not present during the writing session, were inspired and wrote on-the-spot haikus, which they shared with the growing crowd. The common theme was the use of the erotic as a discursive space to address the love of self and community. While there were many memorable moments of the evening, my reading focuses on one poet reading for the first time, the use of Spanish-language and Latin@ culture, and three poems that exemplify Lorde's "uses of the erotic." Throughout these moments I trace spaces for potential cultural revitalization.

Reading for the First Time

The majority of readers—Palabristas, SOS, and Louis Alemayehu, a local elder and environmentalist—were seasoned poets. Despite the experience in the room, one Latin@ community member read poetry publically for the first time. Sylvia Gonzalez, a young Chicana from the Midwest and active in the community as a union organizer and son jarocho player, walked slowly to the front of the cafe. Arriving late and missing the random hat drawing, she was called out by E. Ortiz to read. Placing her poetry on the music stand, she quickly stuffed her hands into the pockets of her purple down vest, while smiling widely and taking a deep breath to calm her nerves.

The first three haikus about food, yoga, and bicycling were supported by the audience's laughter. By the last poem, Gonzalez's face began to blush. Sensing her nervousness and playing into the theme of eroticism, E. Ortiz waved a notebook in front of her face, a comical gesture to cool her off. The act caused an eruption of laughter. She chuckled and began to read in a slow steady voice, "It's going to explode/ I could feel it swelling now/ !Viva la Huelga!" Immediately following "huelga" audience members chanted "¡Huelga, qué viva!" and a few whistled between applause. The reader translated the word "huelga" into English as "strike." She explained that the poem was inspired by SEIU local 26, a union where janitorial staff were contemplating a strike. As she left the microphone the crowd applauded and more individuals screamed, "¡Viva la huelga!"

The final haiku serves as a poignant example of how, according to Lorde, the erotic functions as a bridge between pleasure and politics. Set in the context of an erotic open-mic, each word read became charged with potential inferences to desire and sexuality. In this case, the poem insinuates a growing and potential explosion of something that can be read as sexual. Gonzalez's vocal choice to

read soft and sultry taking long pauses between the words heightened the playful nature of the work. When she reached the climax of the poem, the haiku took a drastic turn with the last line, “¡Viva la huelga!” The initial implied pleasure becomes political with the calling of a strike, shifting the message for the listener. The poem exemplifies the process of cultural revitalization. Gonzalez’s “inner work” (confronting her fears of reading poetry aloud) provided an opportunity for a “public act” (sharing with the audience) that educated the collective about an important labor issue impacting the local community.

Spanish-Language Poems and Latin@ Cultural References

Anzaldúa (2002) and Lorde’s (2007 [1984]) work emphasizes the importance of digging deep within and sharing your whole self to enact change in the world. Language, as one critical marker of identity, provides a channel for expression (Pérez 1991; Hurtado 2003). The use of code switching between Spanish, English and Spanglish has been an important writing technique for Latin@ poets.¹² At the open mic, the majority of poems were read in English or Spanglish; only two were read entirely in Spanish.

Neri Díaz, a Honduran-born father and social worker, fumbled with his papers and grabbed the mic saying, “I’m going to read in Spanish. Is that ok?” The crowd, cutting off his next words, began to clap and whistle in affirmation. His poem, “Señorita Juárez,” discussed the gendered violence against women in Juárez, México. Díaz personifies the city, making connections between the violence the city experiences to the violence inflicted on women in the city. He describes how the city and women are labeled “tan joven, tan bella, tan inocente, tan exótica, tan dulce, tan llena de experiencia” [so young, so beautiful, so innocent, so exotic, so sweet, so filled with experience]. In the piece he argues that we need to fight to bring back dignity to women in Ciudad Juárez. He concludes with the line, “ellas están como usted, usted está como

ellas” [They are like you, you are like them]. Díaz’s poem, read in Spanish, serves as one example of many throughout the night where Spanish-language and Latin@ cultural references illuminated the complicated, heterogeneous identities of the Latin@ community.

The second poet to read in Spanish was also born outside of the United States. Palabristas member Teresa Ortiz (no familial relationship to E. Ortiz) was born in Mexico and moved to the United States as an adult in the late 1970s. Prior to her arrival in the U.S., T. Ortiz was a survivor of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre in Mexico City, where hundreds of protesting students and community members were killed and wounded by the government. The experience along with her work with Maya women in Chiapas and Guatemala shapes much of her writing. Her poem “Fantasma de la noche” describes a young woman struggling to overcome her fears of the dark. Díaz and T. Ortiz’s decision to not translate their poems countered the dominant English-language atmosphere. The poetry affirmed language identity for Spanish speakers. Those who were not Spanish-proficient, including some Palabristas members, never received an explanation. Yet, the body language of the poets, their tonal changes, hands in motion, sent out creative energy that was readable to the crowd. Spanish-language was not divisive. It brought a sense of harmony into the room because the audience, rather than requesting translation or demanding English only, welcomed the poets’ to read as themselves.

Along with two Spanish-language poems, Latin@ ethnically specific cultural references illuminated the heterogeneity of the community. While some references, such as “Huelga” became chants for solidarity unifying Latin@s, Spanish-speaking people, and socially conscious individuals familiar with the term, other cultural references created moments of heightened awareness of ethnic difference. Before reading his poetry, E. Ortiz shared a Puerto Rican

joke. “What did the platano say when it lost its cell phone? Where’d mofongo!” The joke received no laughs. The audience, unaware of the term mofongo, a Puerto Rican plantain dish, did not have the cultural knowledge to understand the joke. A similar experience occurred with Palabrista member Rodrigo Sanchez-Chavarria, a Peruvian-born father of three who moved to Minnesota as a child because his mother was enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Minnesota. Sanchez-Chavarria recited an erotic haiku about “Lomo Saltado,” a beef stir-fry dish popular in Perú, while rubbing his tummy and smacking his lips. Even though Latin@s were in attendance, Spanish-language speakers were not a majority. Furthermore, ethnically specific references outside of Chican@ or Mexican culture were unfamiliar to most of the audience members, and became teaching moments for not only non-Latin@s but Chican@s as well. After the joke and haiku, E. Ortiz and Sanchez-Chavarria explained to the confused crowd the meaning of their poems. A few audience members chuckled while others said, “Oh, I get it.” These two incidents illustrate the heterogeneity of the Latin@ community in Minneapolis and the rich diversity necessary for cultural revitalization. In order to have collective action, individuals must be able to exchange with others their experiences without shame. Palabristas’ ethnic differences encourage its members to continuously build inter-ethnic coalitions with one another.

The Politics of Erotic Poetry

I choose to highlight work by three poets who did not define their work as erotic. Their poems expand dominant understandings of the erotic as solely limited to sexual pleasure. The first poem by T. Ortiz, entitled “Shaokatan,” describes the Minnesota rural prairie lands and exemplifies the individual inner journey of self-transformation that aids in cultural revitalization. The poem’s descriptions of the body and landscape, based on Lorde’s understanding of eroticism, can be read as a “self-connection” and “a

reminder of [our] capacity for feeling” (2007, 57). T. Ortiz recites in a quiet almost whisper tonality, “All day my ears can be used to the noise/ like waves breaking the sea/ my body used to the constant rhythm of everything around me/ to the tightness of my skin.” Here the connection of earthly elements and images of the body (ears, skin) illustrate the interconnections between nature and human existence.

The poem continues to describe the moment in the prairie when everything becomes still. “This is a time of day in the summer prairie when the heat rises and dampens my eyes/ waking up feelings long gone/ the memories come tumbling down like weeds in a dirt road/ like tears rolling down my face/ as I see watching my life going by in the prairie.” The voice of the poem is in a state of self-reflection. The listener becomes witness to the poet’s inner workings, as she contemplates past life moments. T. Ortiz’s smooth tone adds to the deep reflection, provoking a meditative feeling, her voice like wind rustling prairie grass spreads over the crowd. The poem ends with the voice stating, “I am in peace.” T. Ortiz’s poem represents the importance of being in relationship with the self in order to enact the necessary and continuous “inner work” required for cultural revitalization. Individuals who know themselves enhance the quality of the collective.

Along with building relationships with the self, two men of color wrote poems about gender violence that impact women of color. Their pieces illustrate potential for coalition across gender and love of another that goes beyond romantic sentiments. The first poet, Chaun Webster, a father, founder of Free Poets Press publishing company, and co-owner of Ancestry Books with his wife Verna Wong, stepped to the mic. Before he read, Webster said, “Most of my work doesn’t deal with the erotic. Perhaps this is off-topic, but let’s consider this my love for a particular woman, Marissa Alexander.” With a

small afro, large black-rimmed glasses, and plaid button-up shirt, Webster read in quick sharp phrases, “I wonder what words to conjure in order to spit out this bitterness/ these twenty years of mind ribbed steal/of walls screaming dirty things such as/woman guilty/ guilty woman/ and I am lost/stuck in this world wind of attacks on bodies shrouded in Sojourner, Tubman, Assata/ find myself only willing to speak in tongues of trickster tales and escape routes.” His poem honors Marissa Alexander, a Black mother of three who was sentenced to twenty years in prison after firing a warning gunshot at her ex-husband in Jacksonville, Florida.¹³ Webster illustrates the prison environment that Alexander endures. His voice ringing in the air like a gavel striking in the court, “woman guilty/guilty woman.” He writes about famous Black women leaders (Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Assata Shakur) who have challenged white supremacist patriarchal systems of power throughout history. In referencing these women, Webster draws a link between the violence they experienced as Black women to the continued violence Alexander experiences as an incarcerated woman by the state. Moreover, placing Alexander in relationship to these women illustrates her resiliency and strength in the face of injustice. As a “love poem,” Webster’s work transcends romanticized versions of love poetry, by politicizing and extending love beyond a single intimate partner. Having no personal relationship to Alexander, the “love” between Webster and Alexander is the love of Black people, the love of fighting oppression, the love of community.

Palabristas member David Mendez, reading “Back When She Had Curves,” was the second man of color to read about the violence inflicted on women of color. Raised on St. Paul’s West Side, Mendez, wearing a men’s driving cap, stepped to the music stand. A repetitive phrase “back when she had curves” connects the images of nature, spirituality, and destruction that women of color experience through interpersonal relationships and systemic violence. In

“Curves,” a physical body part functions as a symbol for feminine strength. Mendez traces the idea of curves to indigenous images of sacred goddesses and earth’s energy. His work speaks to Lorde’s notion of the erotic as “the life force of women” (2007, 55). Throughout the piece Mendez documents how women of color have internalized the hatred of their curves (a symbol of femininity). He writes, “Back when she had curves she paid no time to beauty magazines that insulted her skin tone or ideas that starved her spirit.” The line references the immense pressure women of color experience to meet unobtainable mainstream standards of beauty, specifically standards that uphold whiteness in the form of skin tone and thinness. Women of color’s bodies are not only physically forced to conform but so are their spirits. To counter these narratives, Mendez speaks of the past: “Back when she had curves she was an equal/ The streets were her frontera and no border would cut her.” This line and others like it remind the listener that present injustices did not always exist. In the past, before national borders ripped apart land, divided families, split the bodies of women of color apart with border violence, they were “equal.” The poem concludes with the lines, “She still keeps her curves/... she is still energy, radiant of the sun, she is still *mujer*.” Despite the attempts to erase women of color, including their curves, Mendez ends with a celebration of women of color empowerment. Women of color, particularly Latinas as indicated with Mendez’s use of the Spanish word “*mujer*,” exist, they are “still energy.” Like Webster’s love poem, Mendez’s piece, dedicated to women of color, speaks to the love of community.

All three poets, T. Ortiz, Webster, and Mendez push the boundaries of erotic understanding. Even at times not considering their own work to be “erotic,” their words indicate the power poetry has in documenting self-reflective moments, naming injustices, and reclaiming stories often silenced. Lorde writes, “Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to

pursue genuine change within our world” (2007, 59). By reading these pieces in alignment with Lorde’s use of the erotic and Anzaldúa’s *inner works, public acts*, the words become more than well-crafted stanzas. They become potential invitations to learn, grow, and eventually enact cultural revitalization.

Creating Altars, Moving Forward:

Continuing Revitalization in South Minneapolis

Near the end of the reading, a small altar and lending library built in memory of Palabristas member Brandon Lacy Campos was revealed to the crowd. Lacy Campos, a self-identified Afro-Boricua, African-American, Ojibwe, Euro, queer performance poet and organizer tragically passed away in New York City in 2012. Café SouthSide was a special place to Lacy Campos, who worked with Anderson and released his first chapbook, *It Ain’t Truth If It Doesn’t Hurt* at the café (2011). Sanchez-Chavarria read one of Lacy Campos poems, “Love Poem,” to honor his life. Normally reading with high, intense energy, Sanchez Chavarria’s performance was controlled; his body still and his voice clear as if in a conversation with only one person, not the public. “Poetry was the only way to reconcile love without lust/ desire to have and to be without desire to be with/ for her I used to write love poems/ I could not write for myself.” Never shying from a subject, Lacy Campos was known for his poems that pushed all boundaries, especially around issues of sexuality. His quick wit, high energy, and contagious laughter brought liveliness to Palabristas. “Love Poem,” tells the negotiations of the poem’s speaker to accept self-love, something that Lacy Campos openly struggled with and shared in his writing.

When Sanchez-Chavarria completed the poem and the altar was revealed, the reading concluded with a final applause from the audience. People stood up but did not leave. Small group conversation formed plotting the next activity for the evening. Some people zigzagged strategically to talk with a poet whose

work moved them. Members of both collectives helped Meyer and Anderson clean up the café, putting chairs and tables back in order, throwing away forgotten coffee cups, and wiping down café tables. The evening concluded with a group of us eating at a taquería a few blocks away on Lake Street.

As previously discussed, revitalization asserts that the advancements of a community are made possible by the tools and resources that already exist within the community. Individuals conduct inner work simultaneously as they build collectively. One outcome of revitalization, as illustrated by Mercado Central, is the establishment of economic spaces to financially and relationally build Latin@ power. In congruence, cultural revitalization, such as the erotic poetry open mic, engage world-views, exchange ideas, and affirm identities as poets share intimate moments with one another and the audience. It is the woven tapestry of economic and cultural revitalization that propel the Latin@ community to new heights in South Minneapolis.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my dissertation committee Aída Hurtado, Chela Sandoval, and Stephanie Batiste for their guidance, my writing group for their support, and to Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz for her time and energy providing feedback on this essay. Lastly, thank you to the Palabristas for their poetry and performances, which make this work possible.

Notes

¹ Throughout the essay I do not use accents on Spanish names in order to respect the person's preferred spelling.

² I use the "@" symbol to acknowledge that gender is non-binary and to be inclusive of multiple gender identities. In addition, I use the symbol to honor the Palabristas who refer to themselves as a collective of "Latin@ spoken word artists." For further explanation see Aldama, Sandoval, and García (2012).

³ For discussion on critical ethnography see Madison (2012).

⁴ A compelling report on poverty, health, education, incarceration, and LGBTQ issues by the Minnesota Department of Health highlights the immense racial inequities within the state (2014).

⁵ In 2010 Minneapolis had a total population of 392,880 with whites comprising 60.3 percent of the population. Blacks and Africans accounted for 18.6 percent, Asians 5.6 percent, and Native Americans totaled 2 percent. Minnesota has one of the largest urban American Indian populations, the largest Somali population, and the second largest Hmong population. For more information see Advocates for Human Rights (2006) and U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

⁶ See Davis 2000; Dávila 2004; Fuentes-Mayorga 2011.

⁷ Interview with Salvador Miranda conducted by the author in Minneapolis, Minnesota, January 16, 2013.

⁸ Between 1980 and 1990, Minnesota's Latin@ population increased by 68 percent, much higher than the national average and the highest of all Midwest states. Despite the increase, the Latin@ population was only 1.2 percent of the state's total population. US Census, "Quick Facts," 1990.

⁹ "Cooperative Mercado Central," Neighborhood Development Center, www.ndc-mn.org/mercadocentral

¹⁰ Prior to the event, I asked the owners of Café SouthSide and Palabristas permission to record the evening.

¹¹ According to Anzaldúa's pathway to *cococimiento* is a seven-stage journey. Anzaldúa argues that the second stage, "nepantla," is a "zone of possibility," a liminal stage of transformation. Poetry readings operate in a similar manner when thinking of revitalization. They are the liminal, in-between space, of individual work and organized, direct action. The ephemerality relies on individuals to be present, creating potential, but not definitive relationships to form (2002, 544).

¹² See Bruce-Novoa 1982; Anzaldúa 1987; Rafael Pérez-Torres 1995; Arteaga 1997; Noel 2014.

¹³ Marissa Alexander's case became nationally popularized as an example of continued racism and sexism within the criminal justice system. A month prior in February 2012, George Zimmerman, a mixed-race man shot and killed Trayvon Martin a young, unarmed Black boy. Both Alexander and Zimmerman used the "Stand Your Ground" defense however; Zimmerman was acquitted in July 2013, while Alexander was sentenced to twenty years in prison. February 26, 2013 Florida's First District Court of Appeals ordered that Alexander be given a new trial.

References

- Advocates for Human Rights. 2006. "The Facts: Immigration in Minnesota Report." Minneapolis, MN.
- Adama, Arturo J., Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García eds. 2012. *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Algarín, Miguel and Miguel Piñero. 1975. *Nuyorican Poetry: An Anthology of Puerto Rican Words and Feelings*. New York: Morrow.

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- . 2002. "Now Let Us Shift...The Path of Conocimiento...Inner Work, Public Acts," In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating. New York: Routledge.
- Arredondo, Gabriela F. 2008. *Mexican Chicago: Race, Identity, and Nation: 1916–39*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Arteaga, Alfred. 1997. *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brady, Mary Pat. 2002. *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bruce-Novoa. 1982. *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Damon, Maria. 1998. "Was that 'Different,' 'Dissident,' or 'Dissonant'? Poetry (n) the Public Spear: Slams, Open Readings, and Dissident Traditions." In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 324–342. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Danielson, Marivel. 2009. *Homecoming Queers: Desire and Difference in Chicana Latina Cultural Production*. New York: Rutgers University Press.
- Dávila, Arlene. 2004. *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, And The Neoliberal City*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Davis, Mike. 2001. *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*. New York: Verso.
- Fuentes-Mayorga, Norma. 2011. "Sorting Black And Brown Latino Service Workers In Gentrifying New York Neighborhoods." *Latino Studies*. (9)1: 106–125.
- Gavrilos, Dina. 2007. *Media Empowerment Report: An Analysis of Minnesota Newspapers' Portrayal of Latinos in 2006*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Hurtado, Aída. 2003. *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Johnson, Gaye T. 2013. *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kass, Dustin. 2010. 2 May. "State GOP plans to introduce Arizona-style immigration bill; DFLers: Illegal aliens not a top state priority." *Winona Daily News*.
- Kretmann, Jody and John McKnight. 1993. *Building Community from the Inside Out*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University.
- Lacy Campos, Brandon. 2011. "Love Poem." In *It Ain't Truth if it Doesn't Hurt*. Bar Harbor, Maine: Rebel Satori Press.
- Lorde, Audre. 2007 [1984]. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.

- Maciag, Mike. 2015. "Gentrification in America Report." *Governing Data*.
- Madison, D. Soyini. 2012. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Magaña, Lisa and Erik Lee, editors. 2013. *Latino Politics and International Relations: The Case of Arizona's Immigration Law SB 1070*. New York: Springer.
- Minnesota Department of Health. 2014. *Advancing Health Equity in Minnesota: Report to the Legislature*. <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/healthequity>
- Mirabal, Nancy Raquel. 2009. "Geographies of Displacement: Latina/os, Oral History and the Politics of Gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District." *The Public Historian*. (31)2: 7-31.
- Noel, Urayoán. 2014. *In Visible Movement: Nuyorican Poetry from the Sixties to Slam*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Ortiz, Emmanuel. 2003. "Frontera Lake Street." In *Word is A Machete: Post-Pochol/Puerto Rican Poems of the Personal and Political*. Minneapolis: Self Published.
- Pérez, Emma. 1991. "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes From a Chicana Survivor." In *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*. edited by Carla Trujillo, Berkeley: Third Women Press.
- Pérez-Torres, Rafael. 1995. *Movements in Chicano Poetry: Against Myths, against Margins*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rivera-Servera, Ramón. 2012. *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, and Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sanchez-Chavarría, Rodrigo. 2010. "South Minneapolis." In *Writing Life... St. Paul, MN: Self Published*.
- Sánchez, Marta E. 1985. *Contemporary Chicana Poetry: A Critical Approach To An Emerging Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schmidt Camacho, Alicia. 2008. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the Mexico-U.S. Borderlands*. New York: New York University Press.
- Sheenan, Gerylyn. 2003. *Building Mercado Central: Asset-Based Development and Community Entrepreneurship*. Chicago: ACTA Publications.
- Somers-Willet, Susan B.A. 2009. *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Thompson, Derek. 2015 Feb. "The Miracle of Minneapolis." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/the-miracle-of-minneapolis/384975/>
- U.S. Census Bureau. 2010. "Minneapolis State and County QuickFacts."
- Zielenbach, Sean. 2000. *The Art of Revitalization: Improving Conditions in Distressed Inner-City Neighborhoods*. New York: Garland Publishing.