"Power to the Panza": Stomaching Oppression in Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues*

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"Su cuerpo es una bocacalle." (Her body is an intersection.)
—Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

In 2004, nearly ten years after the debut of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues,* playwrights Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga set out to create a theatrical performance piece that captured a Chicana experience of the body in relation to race, gender, and class. According to Grise and Mayorga, in a Chicana context, "Before you can get to the chocho," you have to talk about the panza. In formulating a culturally specific expression of how Chicanas relate to their own bodies, they chose the panza (Spanish slang term for belly), rather than the "chocho" (Spanish slang term for vagina), as a core body part that many Chicanas struggle to control, eliminate, or come to terms with. As contemporary Chicana performance, *The Panza Monologues* narrativizes how intersecting oppressive forces are at work on Chicana bodies as they somatize the many daily traumas of living as racialized gendered subjects. Locating the panza as a complex site of discipline and exploitation, the play's Chicana protagonist uses her "panza power" to interrogate ideas of home, generational poverty, and transnational belonging to transform the panza into a site of resistance. The play demonstrates how an intersectional analysis is crucial for leveling a gutsy critique of the historical structures of oppression that have continued to denigrate brown women's bodies.

Intersectionality operates in *The Panza Monologues* at multiple levels—at the level of genre and at the level of embodiment of intersecting identities. *The Panza Monologues* creatively draws on intersecting dramatic genres as well as intersecting cultural markers to dramatize how intersectionality is at work on the Chicana lives performed. To demonstrate how the intersectional informs the play, I will provide a brief production history to contextualize the play and its creators. I then discuss the play's genealogy of genres, followed its intersectional analysis of Chicana lived experience, particularly in terms of race, gender, and class.

For the project's first iteration, Grise, recipient of the 2010 Yale Drama Award, and Mayorga, who studied theater with the renowned Chicana lesbian writer Cherríe Moraga, turned to the stories of Mexican American women in their hometown of San Antonio, Texas, where over sixty percent of the population is Mexican American. They put out a call for Chicanas to share their stories of their panzas for adaption into a performance. They provided writing prompts to respondents who volunteered to share their panza stories, asking them to consider questions such as, "How do you feel about your panza? How does your panza feel about you? How does your familia, your partner, your cultura feel

about your panza? When do you control your panza? And why? When does your panza control you? Why?"

As stories flooded in, Grise and Mayorga recognized resonances with their own personal stories and interwove them into a dialogue, which they first publicly presented in 2003 at Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS), the annual conference for the academic organization founded in 1983 by working-class Chicana, Latina, and Native American activist scholars. After an enthusiastic audience reception at MALCS, the performers developed the piece into a collective performance embodied on stage by one performer, with Grise on stage and Mayorga directing. *The Panza Monologues* has since been published in print form (Evelyn Street Press 2004), staged with different monologues in different geographic locations, and distributed as a multimedia performance DVD. A new print edition is forthcoming from University of Texas Press. The continued success of the performance piece suggests how effectively it speaks to Chicanas and women of color who are not the primary audience of mainstreamed feminist performance theater like *Vagina Monologues*.

The Panza Monologues live performance takes the form of a short play with a series of brief acts, each of which is introduced by a multimedia display of the act's title, projected onto a large white screen mounted on an altar at center stage. The altar is in the style of traditional Chicana/o home altars, typically consisting of such items as photographs, candles, cloths, and offerings of food and drink. While altars are usually erected in honor of a dead loved one, in Chicana/o activist communities, such altars may also be constructed and displayed publicly in honor of a political cause. This staged altar features photographs of young Chicanas bearing their stomachs, a plastic Virgen de Guadalupe light, flowers, candles, pre-packaged foods, and copies of Chicana and women of color feminist texts such as *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *Loving in the War Years*. As Kay Turner notes, a Mexican American home altar typically "assembles a highly condensed, symbolic model of connection by bringing together sacred images and ritual objects, pictures, mementos, natural materials, and decorative effects which represent different realms of meaning and experience." While the screen provides a backdrop, the altar creates an intimate space in which the sola performer, Vicki Grise, directly addresses the audience—casting her both as caretaker of the altar and as cultural storyteller, such as might perform informally at a Chicana/o familial or community gathering.

While one reviewer in *Theatre Journal* (Martinson 2005) describes the staged altar as "festive," I interpret the staged altar, given its scale and public display of personal artifacts, as an homage in the tradition of el día de los muertos, the day of the dead, during which time a feast is prepared as an offering to be placed upon the altar, decorated by photos and favorite objects of the deceased. As a ritual of remembrance, the day of the dead signifies in this

performance a recognition of panzas past and a celebration of living. Indeed, one of the show's first monologues tells an origin story of Chicana panzas that emphasizes their long legacy: "In the beginning when there wasn't/one god but many gods/Las diosas dijeron:/Give me panza/large and round." According to this monologue, goddesses decreed to Mexica/Aztec women that they should "Live your life/without shame," and "so it was written on the bodies of Chicana heavyweights all across Aztlán…Que viva la panza!"

To set the stage for these and other panza histories about to be performed, the performance first opens with a candid prologue, in which the performer explains the play's genre to the audience. In this first scene, *The Panza Monologues* makes a conscious attempt to differentiate itself from the tradition of theater and body writing by and for white women. Specifically, *The Panza Monologues* constructs itself in direct resistance to Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, albeit while paying homage to it and being informed by its form.

Questioning *The Vagina Monologues* and its lack of a "universal" resonance with many women of color and Chicanas, *The Panza Monologues* begins with a critique of the Eve Ensler play. Grise sits on a stool in the middle of the stage and talks about how "There once was this play" in which women sat on stools on a stage and talked about their vaginas. She goes on to say, "But vagina is not what I call it. I call it my cho-cho" (17). Continuing, she explains: "Before I can talk about cho-cho, I need to tell the story of us…Tú sabes, the "us" that uses the word cho-cho, panocha." Depending on how it is deployed and by whom, the term "cho-cho" (or "chocho") in Chicano-inflected Spanish can be considered a child's diminutive word for female genitalia, or it may be a variation on "panocha," a vulgarism referring either to "brown sugar" or "pussy"), or simply a matter-of-fact, slang word for "vagina." That this Chicana work is not called "The Chocho Monologues" is telling—it is not simply the Chicana "version" of *The Vagina Monologues* and so must be taken into account on its own stated terms.

By calling on Ensler's *Vagina Monologues* in the first place, *The Panza Monologues* does connect itself to a larger feminist performance theater, putting itself in context with theatrical work aligned with women's social justice actions such as the Ensler's now widely popular V-Day initiative in which the play is performed by young women on college campuses. Yet, it also works to distinguish itself from Ensler's piece by refusing a single-axis approach to representing a universalized "woman" on stage. By resisting liberal feminist representations of women's bodies, *The Panza Monologues* exposes the binary tensions of invisible/visible, fat/thin, racialized/white, other/woman, poor/middle class, shame/pride and how those binaries are reinscribed in performances inattentive to intersectionality.

Grise and Mayorga declare that "For Latinas/Chicanas, sexuality, race, and gender crosscut differently than what we heard in Ensler's work"

("Introdución" 9). Their use of "crosscut" suggests a cutting or wounding from multiple angles. The authors stress their acknowledgement as well as their difference from Ensler's project: "So, while *The Panza Monologues* owes many props to *The Vagina Monologues* – it should not be seen as merely derivative" (9). Here, the authors specifically resist the way that so many creative productions by people of color get dismissed as derivative, typically in relation to works by white authors, which are often described as "universal" and as always "first" into new territory, thereby setting the terms of engagement in a particular genre without a critical consideration of the economic and political forces that have traditionally allowed more access to production or publication streams to elite white writers and performers.

To situate the play within contemporary theater, Grise and Mayorga have stressed that their concept for this production was largely inspired by the "populist theater" or performance ethnography of Anna Deveare Smith. According to scholar and playwright Joni Jones (1996), performance ethnography "honors the embodied acts of interaction and dialogue." Through embodying multiple Chicanas' narratives of their panzas, *The Panza Monologues* examines "how culture is done in the body" (Jones 2002) and creates what Jones refers to as a multivocality of performance ethnography: "Multivocality helps to mitigate the authority of the ethnographer, and provide varied, even contradictory perspectives that the audience must synthesize. The active process of synthesizing turns the audience into collaborators in the experience as they sift through the different points of view."

While the multivocal ethnographic narratives weave throughout the performance, *The Panza Monologues* structurally follows the genre of the acto in the style of the Chicano theater troupe Teatro Campesino. An acto is a brief dramatic scene that presents and injustice, sometimes didactically and often satirically, with the intent of inciting political action. Yolanda Broyles-González, in her history of Teatro Campesino, describes the quintessential political theater troupe of the Chicana/o movement as using their actos to enact a "theater of the sphere." While most critics, in Broyles-González's view, have touted Teatro Campesino's contribution to genre through developing their own kind of agit-prop called the acto, Broyles-González points out that this genre emerged from the company members' shared political, cultural, and spiritual approach to using theater to impact the well-being of people within their sphere of influence, which troupe members called theater of the sphere. Working within this theatrical tradition, *The Panza Monologues* extends this Chicana/o theatrical genre to embed the performed Chicana body within a folk ritual of communal healing interwoven with a politic of cultural critique.

In this regard, *The Panza Monologues* also draws on Latin American women's tradition of literary testimonio, which Latin American and U.S. Latina activist writers have used to tell their stories of state violence, mapping their

individual experiences onto the structural violences against women and their bodies. As the Latina Feminist Group (2001) notes, "Despite its complicated history, testimonio captures Latinas' complex, layered lives." It can provide "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure."

Following the Chicana literary tradition of employing hybridity of genre (Anzaldúa 1983; Moraga 1987), *The Panza Monologues* merges multiple genres into its own hybrid form. In its engagement with the genres of the acto of Teatro Campesino as well as the performance ethnography of Anna Deveare Smith and the urgent genre of testimonio, the embodied testimonios of *The Panza Monologues* construct a multivocal, collective witnessing of the injustices stomached by Chicana panzas. This interweaving of genre is one of the ways that *The Panza Monologues* situates itself within an intersecting nexus of theatrical performance. In doing so, the play is not just a mixed construction to be noted merely for its creative hybridity, but also a consciously formulated interplay of multiple performative modes that must be called upon in order to situate the socially constructed, racialized, sexed, gendered, classed, and otherwise other-ized Chicana body on stage.

In addition to its performative of intersectionality via the crosscurrents of genre, *The Panza Monologues* also dramatically enacts the intersectionalities of Chicanas' realities. In the acto entitled "Hunger for Justice," Grise performs without speaking aloud, while an audio track of an interviewee shares a panza story about being laid off from a factory. During the narration by the unnamed voice, Grise tends to the objects displayed on the altar by dusting a framed photograph and adding water to the vase of flowers. In what the authors describe as the voice of an "older Chicana, with heavy tejana accent" (28), the overhead voice says, "My grandmother was a fighter, a worker, a strong woman because sometimes the world makes you that way." She continues with her own story and says, "I used to work at the Levi's factory. But then they laid us off, hundreds and hundreds of us lost our jobs." The speaker describes the matters of economic and physical survival that mobilized people to join a movement for labor justice: We had to do something—use our minds. During times like that, we work with our mind more than other parts of the body. We were connecting the movement/struggle with the economy, with the systems." The story points out the relationship between corporate maltreatment of workers and the very real threat of hunger for poor families suddenly without work. It also intimates the history of hunger strikes led by community organizers such as Dolores Huerta and César Chavez of the United Farm Workers during the Chicana/o civil rights movement: "When the plant shut down, what experienced the majority of the pain was the panza because there wasn't going to be nutrition, and we had a hunger for justice."

More specifically, within the context of Chicana history in San Antonio, the story recalls the contentious relationship the Levi Strauss corporation has had with Mexican American workers. One of the most infamously egregious moments of malfeasance took place in San Antonio in 1990 when Levi's laid off thousands of Mexican American seamstresses, giving them only twenty-four hours notice and a paltry severance package. In response, many of the women formed a mutual aid society and political action group called Fuerza Unida (2008). It is within this history of women's organized resistance against the corporations that exploit their labor that the unnamed voice relays her "Hunger for Justice." Situating her story within its Tejana context reveals how race, gender, class, and history deeply intertwine in this Tejana's tale of her panza.

Extending its critique of the impact of poverty on Chicana women's bodies, *The Panza Monologues* includes a monologue that layers Grise's on-stage presence with images and clips of contemporary news media. One of the news briefs that flashes across the screen while Grise speaks says, "The highest increase in obesity has been observed among Hispanics. At 31.1 percent, San Antonio has the highest percentage of obese and overweight adults in the nation." With this information projected onto the screen above the altar behind her, Grise speaks the following lines:

> We are living in the wealthiest country in the world, where the question of obesity largely affects poor communities of color. Coca-cola, Big Red, Kool-Aid, free lunch and breakfast programs/processed food force-fed to our children, diabetes, cancer. They are now killing us in our food.

Listing specific popular drink products with advertising campaigns aimed at children, Grise calls attention to the profound disconnect between the lush excesses of U.S. capitalist consumer choice and the limited options for affordable healthy food available to poor people. Referencing the "processed food force-fed to our children" incriminates the lax regulation of corporate-sponsored meal programs in public schools (recall Reagan's defensive ketchup-is-a-vegetable remark). Completing the list with "diabetes, cancer," links the unhealthy foods provided in free lunch and breakfast programs in public schools in low-income neighborhoods to long-term detrimental and potentially terminal effects on the bodies of young people of color. With San Antonio's disproportionate number of people affected by poverty and obesity, *The Panza Monologues* connects the dots across the structures of poverty that perpetuate a lack of accessible and affordable healthy foods, as well as affordable and reliable healthcare, demonstrating how these systems amount to a form of racialized violence against communities of color.

As the performance consciously constructs its collective "We" of

Chicanas sharing their panza stories, it also gives a name to the "They" mentioned in the line "They are now killing us in our food." *The Panza Monologues* creators make reference to "17 White Men" as one of the powers that be that they use their art to resist. The performers attribute the phrase to "Panza activista María Berriozabal, who served for ten years on the San Antonio City Council and coined this exquisite phrase to describe her experiences with power in San Anto." The phrase "17 White Men" reduces the cultural (il-) logic of capitalist imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy to a figure of the few white men who hold political economic power over the city's predominantly Mexican American population.

The figure of the "17 White Men" reappears symbolically in the monologue "Political Panza." In this acto, the men are imagined as boys being born from women's bodies: "…inside those panzas there are little boys who are going to be men and one day if we raise them by what we know to be true they will love the panzas they came from. And they will bow down to the panzas they are now destroying from golf courses and petroleum wars." Arguing for the presence of a "panza power," *The Panza Monologues* satirically goes so far as to suggest that a pro-panza political platform could facilitate world peace. Riffing on the feminist refrain of "the personal is political," Grise remarks: "Perhaps if our government instituted *Panza Positive Policies* we might have world peace because we can see our humanity by the well being of all our panzas. The panza is political."

After building up the Chicana panza as disenfranchised within the U.S., *The Panza Monologues* dismantles its own illusions by taking the panza across national borders. In "The International Panza," Grise relays a fictionalized account of her actual visit to Cuba. Walking through the streets of Cuba with Mexican compañeras, Grise says, "The Cubanos shouted in the streets as we walked by. Like sports announcers. Mexico! Mexico! Mexico! They recognized us by our nationality before we even spoke." She tries to explain to the Cubans that she is Chicana, not exactly Mexican but of Mexican heritage, but a Cuban man she encounters resists her explanations. Grise offers, "My mom's Mexicana, but her father was Chinese. My father is white." The Cuban man retorts, "So that makes you what?" and says, "Oh, like the gusanos, you mean?"

Gusanos, literary "worms," is typically used derogatorily to refer to "Cubans perceived to have betrayed, opposed, or fled the Cuban Revolution (Allatson 2007). Rejecting this comparison, Grise's companions respond on her behalf, "No, not at all…she didn't have a choice." When Grise and her friends try defining the terms "Tejana" (Mexican Texan) and "Chicana," their inability to translate them effectively reminds the audience that such identity markers circulate mostly within U.S. Chicana/o and Latina/o communities.

This Chicana-Cubano interaction turns to the politics of the panza as Grise inquires how the man recognized the Mexican-ness of the women. When

the man says, “The face of Mexico is much fatter, more round,” he goes on to ask, “Have you noticed that my people aren’t fat? How many fat Cubanos have you seen since you’ve arrived on the island?” Grise does not respond aloud but thinks to herself, “I want to ask, ‘You mean ’cept for Fidel, right?” The Cuban tells Grise, “You eat too much” and expands on this with, “Obesity, he explains, is an illness of capitalism...You Americans are capitalists so you want to take more than you need.”

Although the brutal honesty startles her, Grise considers the weight of the man’s comments by bringing these conversations back to the monologues focused on San Antonio. Grise concludes this monologue with her own confusion, posing the question, “So, if obesity is a disease of capitalism, why is it that San Antonio is one of the largest cities in the nation and at the same time one of the poorest?”

The climactic international interchange in this monologue uses the Chicana panza as an icon of how U.S. capitalist imperialism impacts people’s bodies both within and outside its borders. Using a comical approach to the potential miscommunications across Latina/o and Latin American experiences, *The Panza Monologues* demonstrates how “Chicana and Latina artists deeply rooted in a local context invent and advance a critical transnational and translocal imaginary via performative modes of humor” (Habell-Pallán 2005). Elaborating on this monologue, Grise and Mayorga note, “In Cuba it became clear that as Chicanas, we are living in a state of nePANZAla” (Introdución 8). Playing on the word nepantla, the Nahuatl term for liminal border-crossings, they pun on the in-between state that Grise finds herself in as she crosses from considering panzas within a history of anti-Mexican American sentiment and policies in the U.S. to seeing her own panza within a broader framework of experience. For Anzaldúa, nepantla describes the necessary state of discomfort that accompanies difficult transformations. For the protagonist of *The Panza Monologues,* her own suffering panza history must be analyzed beyond Chicana experience. Her transnational travel forces her to acknowledge the relative privilege of being a citizen-subject in a nation that tends to flaunt its power to engage in over-consumption and how this over-consumption impacts people and the environment across the globe.

The final monologue in the live performance turns to another resistance genre, that of the feminist manifesto, to call for solidarity among “panza activistas.” In the ultimate acto, Grise outlines the tenets of the “Panza Girl Manifesto.” Poking fun at the genre of the manifesto, the audience receives a mixture of statements and demands, along with some practical advice such as, “Don’t trust skinny people, and don’t eat at their houses.” Evoking the feminist declaration oft attributed to Emma Goldman (“If there won’t be dancing, I don’t want your revolution”), Grise confidently declares, “Sin tortillas y frijoles no hay revolución.” (Without tortillas and beans there is no revolution.) Grise punctuates

the end of the performance by raising her fist into the air and shouting, "Power to the panza!"

In their printed introduction to the monologues, Grise and Mayorga claim that the project's conception originated as a private conversation among women describing how they felt about their stomachs. Through such conversations, they began to collaborate as activist artists to make the private panza a public matter. They maintain, "It was never meant to be repeated," thereby revealing the shame and secrecy around women's desire to talk about their panzas. As the on-stage embodiment of the collected narratives of women, Grise makes visible the processes of decolonizing Chicanas' thinking around their racialized, round bodies. Standing before the giant altar, Grise, directed by Mayorga and the commonalities across the Chicana stories, performs what Laura Pérez characterizes as an artistic "…decolonizing, curandera, or healing work" against the "pseudoscientific mystifications [that] have rationalized the brutal racialized, gendered, and sexed rapacity of imperialist wars of conquest and military, economic, and cultural intervention during the last five hundred years in, and then from, the Americas" (2007). Panzas, especially those that do not match Eurocentric standards of "beauty," may be guarded by some as a private matter but become a site of intersectional interrogation and communal healing in *The Panza Monologues.* The piece articulates a call to Chicanas and Latinas not simply to love their own curves but also to question the politics of beauty, health, and consumption as embedded in colonization.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* Anzaldúa says of the Chicana body: "Su cuerpo es una bocacalle." (Her body is an intersection.) The literal translation refers to the place where two or more streets cross one another, and Anzaldúa's classic text metaphorically maps such an intersection of physical and metaphorical boundaries or borders onto the body of her imagined Mexican American woman. However, as the Latina Feminist Group notes, "a more provocative translation of bocacalle as mouth/street evokes images of women shouting in the streets or the assertion of Chicana feminisms as public discourse demanding to be heard" (2003).

Indeed, *The Panza Monologues* enacts this more provocative translation by staging the Chicana panza as a locus of where and how brown women live race, class, and gender and refuse to keep their panza politics silent. Grise and Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues* performs through the body the intersections of identities and social locations. The complexities of genre and intersectional critiques structuring *The Panza Monologues* reveal how many borders are always already crossing the Chicana body.

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