LAS MUJERES DE TEATRO IZCALLI: TRANSFORMATIVE STORIES
OF HEALING AND RESISTANCE

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DEDICATION

To all who inspire and work to make this a more just world.
This study is a feminist oral history project, which narrates, chronicles, and examines the experiences and activism of nine women teatristas (theater artists) who are current or past members of the Chicana/Chicano comedy troupe Teatro Izcalli based out of San Diego, California and founded in 1995. The primary objective is to show the multiplicity of ways these women theater artists healed and empower(ed) themselves and their communities by employing decolonizing feminist perspectives through their participation in Teatro Izcalli. Grounded in Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories of “mestiza consciousness,” “path of conocimiento,” and “spiritual activism,” this thesis is a backstage pass into the lives of women who enact “la cultura cura” (culture heals) through their Chicana theater performances.

Las Mujeres de Teatro Izcalli is organized into five distinct chapters. Chapter one is an introductory chapter that provides a brief overview of my intention for conducting this oral history project. Furthermore, chapter one delineates the purpose of my research and discusses my own positionality as well as literature on healing and curanderismo. Chapter two historically contextualizes Teatro Izcalli by addressing the development of Chicana/Chicano theater as an art form of resistance and empowerment in the 20th and 21st centuries. A brief history of Teatro Izcalli is also provided in this chapter. Chapter three includes the qualitative methods that I utilize, which include oral history, testimonios, and the use of “pláticas” (heart to heart talks). My methodology consists of an Indigenous ceremonial process that also centers a Chicana Feminist Epistemology. Chapter four includes the analysis of the eight interviews and provides insight to the women’s memories, experiences, and challenges during their time in the troupe. I also interweave my own testimonio and insert my own reflective story into the analysis. My final chapter summarizes my findings and presents possible directions for other scholars interested in writing about Chicana/Chicano theater as a means for personal, social, and cultural healing.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: TEATRO IZCALLI,
STORYTELLING, AND HEALING

It was the spring of 1995 when I joined with nine other motivated Chicanas and Chicanos to found Teatro Izcalli in San Diego, California.¹ We believed, as the teatristas of the Chicana/Chicano Movement of the 1960s did, that it was necessary to educate our community and society at large about critical issues such as xenophobic immigration policies and attitudes, sexism, racism, violence, and the lack of quality education for working class youth. Our intention as a teatro group was, and continues to be, to inspire people into social action. Like many of the theater troupes of the Movement, we were also composed of both women and men who through the collective activism of the group took our stories to the stage to promote community dialogue and social justice consciousness.

However, as a post-Movement teatro we also have unique characteristics. While we emphasize the importance of educating our audiences, Teatro Izcalli differentiates itself from many teatros of the Movement by the number of years we have been in existence and in how the group operates. After 17 years of bringing performances to the community and traveling throughout the United States, the group has primarily remained a volunteer based effort with the majority of monies raised used for future productions and to fund youth programming provided by Izcalli.² Without a doubt, engaging in this type of collective work is a challenge as we negotiate our lives as students, employees, and family members with many responsibilities, which for some, includes being parents. However, the long-standing existence of the group exemplifies the commitment by the women and the men of Teatro

¹ The founding members of the group are Iyari Arteaga, Macedonio Arteaga Jr., Olympia Andrade Beltran, Victor Chavez Jr., Luis Gomez, Abel Macias, Benny Madera, Alejandro Ochoa, Maria Santos-Ochoa, and I.

² Izcalli is a Nahuatl word meaning “house of re-awakening.” Izcalli is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1993. Teatro Izcalli is a component of Izcalli.
Izcalli to bring healing to the community and to continue to oppose hegemonic capitalist, sexist, and racist ideologies.

Another distinct aspect of our work is that we enact feminist themes that address the intersectionality of gender, class, race, sexuality, and immigration status, which challenge the notion that we live in a postcolonialist society (Crenshaw). Although not all of our work reflects this intersectionality, our uniqueness does lie in the participation of the women who have insisted that a distinct women’s voice be represented on stage. To quote long-time Teatro Izcalli member Cristina Nuñez-Medina, “I always felt like we had an extremely important role of balancing out the different actos and the scripts by bringing a different voice and a different experience into the equation” (Nuñez-Medina). Through this thesis, I am working to provide a space where the women of Teatro Izcalli may share their stories and truths, which for many has remained untold until now.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH**

This research on the women of Teatro Izcalli is significant in various ways. Empirically, it will be the first to document and exclusively analyze the experiences of Teatro Izcalli’s women performers. By doing so, this research centers Chicanas within the history of teatro, answering the call by feminist scholars like Yolanda Broyles-Gonzales to contest their erasure. She powerfully asserts:

> As in other realms of history, women in performance have been erased. And the erasures and distortions born of gender discrimination are intensified in the case of Chicanas, where race and class discrimination have made their reality appear triply insignificant to mainstream keepers of the historical record, in this case theater historians. (“The Living Legacy of Chicana Performers” 46)

This master’s thesis is an opportunity to do just that as I center the voices of the women of Teatro Izcalli and add to the historical record of the group.

This thesis is also significant in that it builds on literature about performance and healing. The essay “The Historian as Curandera” (1998) by Aurora Levins Morales prompted

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3 In 2007, a study on five of Teatro Izcalli’s members was conducted through a western mental health lens looking at the use of Chicano theater as a therapeutic process for actors (Cuevas). Anonymity was maintained in Cueva’s study, but one interviewee was female and four were male. My project differs in that it is explicitly presenting a gender and healing analysis by documenting the women’s experiences via oral history method, feminist methodology, and the decolonizing methodology of curanderismo.
me to explore the relationship between what happens when Chicana teatristas embody the stories of our community. Levins Morales states that the curandera historian has the power to heal and decolonize by relating the untold stories of a community. She writes, “Interest in history lies in its medicinal uses, in the power of history to provide those healing stories that can restore humanity of the traumatized” (Levins Morales 25). As teatro artists we interpret our communities’ stories of resistance and survival in order to educate others and to transform our reality. As we perform the stories of our communities we embody struggle, which is both painful and transformative (Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift”). If we know that stories heal, decolonize our way of thinking, engage us, and prompt us to think critically, how does this concretely affect the Chicana teatrista who embodies these struggles and truths on stage?

Chicana playwright Cherríe Moraga theorizes in her latest book, *A Xicana Codex of Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010* (2011) that through the enactment of historical oppression in performance, a space is created where the pieces of ourselves shattered by racist and colonial assaults are then re-collected and reconfigured (39). Moraga sees teatro as “an art of resistance or a literature toward liberation” that facilitates social transformation (*A Xicana Codex* 35-39). Moraga offers an account about one of her student’s healing experience after he performs a piece he wrote about the one-hundred year legacy of machismo in his family. She writes that this experience should not be perceived as “therapy” since “therapy is a privatized gringo concept that our illness is somehow individual, as is our cure” (*A Xicana Codex* 40). Rather, she perceives his healing as the following:

> His writing and enactment, even beneath the shadow of Stanford’s colonial archways, reflect a contemporary curanderismo. It emerges from an ancestral knowledge that a story told with the body can cure and create great warriors of heart on the cultural battlefield. “Word Warriors,” the author Denise Chavez has called them. (*A Xicana Codex* 41)

I agree with Moraga. I also see our teatro work as curanderismo embodied on stage since it requires the totality of ourselves as teatristas: it takes our body, mind, and spirit to perform decolonizing and healing stories of resistance. In portraying our collective stories of race,

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*A curandera is a female practitioner of curanderismo. In curanderismo there is no severing between the emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual totality that makes up a person (Avila 16).*
class, and gender oppression, a potential for healing is imparted for both the audience and teatrista alike.

Therefore, my intention is to demonstrate the multiplicity of ways women teatristas heal(ed) and empower(ed) their communities and themselves by engaging in decolonizing and feminist work through their participation in Teatro Izcalli. I specifically pose the following questions: How has being in Teatro Izcalli affected teatrista women’s personal growth and their academic lives? How has performance in Teatro Izcalli contributed to a healing of the women’s “bodymindspirit,” here defined as a holistic approach of honoring the wisdom of the whole self, bodymindspirit, which critiques the way dominant western culture splits body, mind, and spirit into separate, fragmented pieces (Lara, “Healing Sueños for Academia” 436)? How has Teatro Izcalli contributed to community healing? What do teatrista women think about Teatro Izcalli as a means for the promotion of social justice? To answer these four questions I rely on oral histories collected from eight women who are current or past members of Teatro Izcalli and also integrate an analysis of my own testimonio as a founding and ongoing member. For it is only through the telling of lived experiences that the women of Teatro Izcalli may provide the answers to such questions in tandem with my analysis and interpretation of their stories.

In this study I use a qualitative research design in order to further our understanding of teatrista subjectivity and practice. Feminist qualitative methods allow for a deeper engagement with a “truth” that is jointly constructed by research participants and researcher. It is a truth that is “partial, situated, subjective, power imbued, and relational” (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser 13). The questions I pose to the women teatristas draw out their experiences and give voice to their thoughts about performing in a co-ed community-based theater group in the post Chicana/Chicano Movement era. Furthermore, it is an opportunity to publicly acknowledge the women’s participation and their contributions to the development of Teatro Izcalli.

**MY POSITIONALITY AND STORY**

This thesis is a deeply personal story, as it involves my experiences as a Chicana and a founding member of the group, but it is also a larger story of the way women in teatro
attempt to educate, empower, and raise consciousness through their involvement in Teatro Izcalli and how this affects them as well.

I can speak from my own experiences that teatro has had a profound impact on my life. By incorporating my own autobiographical component in the form of a testimonio (The Latina Feminist Group), I am also providing a unique standpoint as an “insider” which is significant in this research (Zavella). However, I do understand that it is important to not make assumptions about my positionality as either being hindering or advantageous. I am fully aware that part of being a researcher is being open to the story unfolding before me including my own. I am also a middle-aged woman of color who has returned to academia to be re-immersed in this world. It has not been easy. At times I have questioned why did I choose to return to higher education? Why write a thesis? Is this work really of any significance? My impression has been that academia does not value writings that highlight healing or spirituality. Even internationally known Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa speaks about the resistance to the spiritual components of her work in Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas:

The ‘safe’ elements in Borderlands are appropriated and used, and the ‘unsafe’ elements are ignored. One of the things that doesn’t get talked about is the connection between body, mind, and spirit. Nor is anything that has to do with the sacred, anything that has to do with the spirit. As long as it’s theoretical and about history, about borders, that’s fine; borders are a concern that everybody has. But when I start talking about nepantla—as a border between the spirit, the psyche, and the mind or as a process—they resist. (Keating 7)

So, why have I decided to push back and write about teatro, healing, and spirituality through a decolonial lens?

My decision to write about teatro and healing, without a doubt, was greatly influenced by my personal relationship with Elena Avila who was a curandera. Her insights and teachings are directly interwoven into this thesis since-I am proud to say-she was my teacher. From Elena I learned about curanderismo and this medicine’s incredible power to heal and transform our lives.5 As recounted in her book Woman Who Glows in the Dark, Elena believes that the reason curanderismo was developed was to “heal the pain and

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5 In these paragraphs of my thesis that are a part of “my story,” I refer to Elena by her first name since this more warmly reflects my personal relationship with her.
immense susto, our soul loss, that resulted from the cultural destruction, enslavement, and rape that occurred during the Spanish Conquest of the Americas” (Avila 28).

As also related in her book, Elena was also a teatrista and a gifted poet who brought healing energy to all that she did. Her creative spirit was very much a part of her curandera work, especially in her “soul retrievals,” which incorporated “elements of theater and mystery” (Avila 259).6 I had the opportunity to see her perform teatro at the University of California, San Diego in 1992. This was the second time I met her and she was staying with my husband and I during her visit to San Diego. Now in reflecting, I can clearly see how experiencing Elena perform teatro and recite poetry and learning about her identity as a college graduate, a Chicana, a mother, and a curandera all had a profound effect on me. The impact that she had on my life-and I am certain on others-is beyond measure. She transitioned into the spirit world last year and I have deeply felt her loss. But I am comforted in knowing that her legacy will live on with her teachings and her writings that uphold the importance of addressing the body, the mind, the spirit, and the soul in order to bring healing into our lives. She will never be forgotten.

I also think of Elena as I remember the time when I was in a graduate school program many years ago that frankly, was a disappointment. I recall having a conversation with her about my unhappiness in this particular program and how intuitively I knew it was just not the right place for me. After agonizing over my decision I finally left the program uncertain about my future and disillusioned with my graduate school experience. I went back to work in a community based clinic as a health educator and continued my activism with Teatro Izcalli (and Izcalli). However, in the back of my mind, the unsettling experience of graduate school gnawed at me. With faith and trust in the course of life, I applied to the Master’s program in the Department of Women’s Studies and was accepted. An elder once told me, “Creator puts you in the places where you need to be.” Without a doubt, I feel my journey in Women’s Studies has been a positive one, although challenging at times. Aside from growing intellectually and developing new relationships, I have had the opportunity to reflect

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6 Avila defines soul retrievals as a very old practice that aims to bring back those pieces of our “lost” soul that has gone through an injury, a violation or a trauma and has been repressed (191).
and take inventory of my own life. There were adjustments that I needed to make. Within this last year alone, I have experienced the “empty nest syndrome” as my only child has gone off to college and I have skimmed down on my responsibilities within Teatro Izcalli (and Izcalli). I prioritized my graduate studies but certainly felt the constant negotiation of my time, energy, and loyalty. Thankfully within the university I found refuge in the CuranderaScholarActivist (CSA) seminar directed by Irene Lara. It became the sacred place where we all could talk about our research, honor our bodymindspirits, laugh, cry, and heal the pains as we did the work to get through higher education.

During these past two years of graduate school, I have struggled to embrace the scholar within me; most definitely the imposter syndrome has been in full effect. It has been through the process of writing my thesis, speaking with others about it, and being in the CSA group that I now clearly see the importance and power of engaging in scholarship. It is a transformative process. I now recognize the bias that I had towards scholars. I had internalized what many community activists say about academics-how they are so disconnected from the community-and here I was one of them? Indeed I resisted and grappled with being a part of the academic world.

Graduate school has been two years of heightened emotions as I have embarked in new directions in my mothering, writing, and activism. Anzaldúa posits a challenge that resonates deeply with me when she writes, “To bring into being something that does not exist in the world, a sacrifice will be required of you, sacrifice means to make holy. What will you give up in making holy the process of writing?” (“Putting Coyolxiahqui Together” 243)7

There have definitely been sacrifices I have made to accomplish this manda to write.8 I have sacrificed afternoon walks with my dog Tonalli, time with my family, dinners with friends, my participation in ceremonies, and even my partaking in teatro performances that I could not commit to due to rehearsal schedules. Yes, I have felt left out but I have also gained

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7 To read more about Anzaldúa’s writing process see “Putting Coyolxiahqui Together: A Creative Process” in How We Work edited by William F. Pinar et al (1999). Coyolxiahqui is the Mexico (Aztec) Goddess of the Moon who was dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochtli. Anzaldúa also describes the concept of Coyolxiahqui as the “process of emotional psychical dismemberment, splitting body/mind/spirit/soul, and the creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form” (“Now Let Us Shift” 546).

8 A manda is a “spiritual vow.”
much in the solitude of reading and writing. Graduate school has been a path to a deeper conocimiento as to why I engage in teatro and why I believe in its power to heal. Again, I ask what motivated me to write this scholarship and what is its connection to healing for me? What I know now is that my story does not begin in graduate school or even in 1995 when Teatro Izcalli was founded. It begins in the tomato laden town of Clarksburg, California and when I entered kindergarten. My story is rooted in my painful experiences going through the K-12 educational pipeline as a Chicana from a working class background. Ultimately, it has been this pain that has fueled my work with teatro and now my desire to tell this untold story. It has not been in vain.

My decision to undertake this project embraces a knowing that there is something to be learned from these testimonios. What is learned is not about me as an individual. What is learned is larger and has a greater purpose. I am simply the vehicle to bring forward our Teatro Izcalli stories. Our testimonios validate our existence and uphold the knowing that teatro is not only meaningful but essential for the humanizing of our people. Teatro is spiritual work. It has been more than 500 years that we, Chicanas and Chicanos, have been told that our stories are wrong, that they are less than, and have no value. When we step onto the stage we are challenging this, asserting that we are still here, and our ancestors live on. Chicana/Chicano theater is a breathing and living embodiment of our 500+ years of resistance to colonization and a conduit for healing the cultural susto that has resulted from it.

**CURANDERISMO AND HEALING**

In analyzing the healing of the bodymindspirit of the women teatristas, I am utilizing the decolonizing methodology of curanderismo, which does not create a split between one’s body, mind, and spirit. Curanderismo is a holistic healing tradition that seeks to keep all of the elements of our being in balance. To further understand this approach to healing and well-being I quote traditional curandera and psychiatric nurse Elena Avila from her book *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*:

> As the “science” of medicine has gone forward in this century, the care of the human has become very compartmentalized. The body goes to the doctor, the

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9 Conocimiento is “a way of knowing or insight” (Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift” 541).
mind to the psychiatrist, and the soul and spirit to the church or synagogue. It is my belief that you cannot divide yourselves into pieces that way. If we want true and lasting wellness, we cannot leave the soul outside the hospital and the doctor’s office. I carry my soul and my spirituality with me everywhere I go, because I know that I am more than a body. (171)

Avila asserts that in order for healing to take place all elements of our being must be engaged in the healing process. Western medicine privileges the mind or the body and leaves the spirit out of the equation. In curanderismo all elements of our being are addressed in the healing process.

Avila’s book presents a personal account of her journey to becoming a curandera and offers an informative historical background on this traditional Indigenous medicine. She elaborates on her personal training within the Mexica (Aztec) tradition and illustrates curandersimo’s holistic approach to healing and care for the body, mind, spirit, and soul. Furthermore, Avila documents the illnesses, tools, and ceremonies most commonly utilized by curanderas.curanderos, which include the use of herbs, counseling, soul retrievals, psychodrama, rituals, spiritual cleansings known as limpias, referrals to medical doctors, and most importantly the use of pláticas (Avila 17). Pláticas are deep “heart to heart talks” that allow the curandera/curandero to get to the root of a problem and not what the person thinks is the problem (Avila 213). According to Avila, “Every illness has its story, and the job of the healer is to uncover that story” (Avila 19). I utilized pláticas during my interviews with the women. This allowed for them to storytell about their Teatro Izcalli experiences and in this way, I also directly incorporated a component of curandersimo into the research process itself.

In Red Medicine: Traditional Indigenous Rites of Birthing and Healing (2012), scholar and traditional birth assistant Patrisia Gonzales writes about the use of storytelling to impart knowledge and as a conduit for healing. She provides an examination of Indigenous medicine, oral traditions, storytelling, and various rites of renewal that she coins as “red

10 Avila acknowledges curanderismo having elements of African, Spanish, and Indigenous medicine. However, she was trained in the Mexica (Aztec) tradition and it was in this tradition that she taught her students.

11 Avila differentiates between the spirit and the soul in that the sprit is considered “the envelope that protects the soul from harm” (172).
medicine.” This book is her “response to the numerous articles and books written about curanderismo that minimize its content, its foundation of Indigenous knowledge, or its content as a tributary of Indigenous knowledge” (Gonzales 3). She further asserts how Indigenous knowledge systems understand the role of stories and storytelling as a medicinal practice and a form of traditional knowledge” (Gonzales 39). I also draw from Gonzales’ work to shed light on the healing power of storytelling that is enacted by Chicana/Chicano teatro when we portray our own perspectives, truths, and myths on stage.

Additional scholarship also links curanderismo with activist and artist work. As an example, anthropologist Elizabeth De La Portilla presents an excellent blend of scholarship and personal storytelling in her book *They All Want Magic: Curanderas and Folk Healing* (2009). De La Portilla presents curanderismo’s “underpinnings in community activism through the arts, social justice, new healing modalities, and in mending the deep wounds of historical transgressions” (5). De La Portilla argues the case that those individuals who engage in community activism are vehicles that are “doing work that matters,” which is healing work (116). As an academic curandera she herself asserts that her intention is to heal the wounds of colonialism by upholding the notion that there are other ways of knowing beyond the western-based construction of knowledge (De La Portilla 37-39). Teatro Izcalli’s work correlates with this view by centering other ways of knowing such as Indigenous epistemologies and “pedagogies of the home,” which are cultural knowledges shaped by collective experiences and community memory including the storytelling tradition (Delgado-Bernal, “Learning and Living Pedagogies of the Home” 624).

There are also a number of Chicana/Latina scholars who have now compared the work of artists, writers, revisionist historians, and activists to curandera or healer work. Irene Lara, Aurora Levins Morales, and Laura E. Pérez are a few who have theorized this link. In “Latina Health Activist-Healers Bridging Body and Spirit,” Lara illustrates this connection by utilizing interview based analysis on four women who “engage in health activist-healer work” (21). Most significantly she demonstrates how these women address spirituality and sexuality in feminist and decolonizing ways that are empowering to themselves and to their communities (Lara, “Latina Health Activist-Healers” 36). Similar to this, in the book *Chicana Art: The Politics of Spiritual and Aesthetic Altarities*, Chicana scholar Laura E. Pérez theorizes on the concept that Chicana artists and writers engage in “curandera (healer)
work” that seeks “to reclaim and reformulate a spiritual world view that is empowering and reimagines a more serious social role for art and the artist as well” (21). She writes how it was during her research in the mid-90s that she began to see works by Chicana literary, visual, and performance artists that depicted a “culturally hybrid, often do-it-yourself, noninstitutional spiritualities” that were motivated by personal empowerment and social justice (Pérez 2). Pérez articulates the different ways that “la cultura cura” is enacted in Chicana Art and how this is a conscious act of healing the cultural susto resulted from colonial and neocolonial subjugation (21). I expand on her theorizing to also include the women of Teatro Izcalli as also engaging in curandera work as a conscious act of healing that is empowering and dedicated to social justice.

Lastly, in “The Historian as Curandera,” Levins Morales provides a “curandera handbook” of historical practice that demonstrates how to re-write history from a women-centered position. She upholds the necessity of telling the stories that have been erased or buried throughout time. Her process is an opportunity to unearth “medicinal histories” that provide healing, new direction, and insight (Levins Morales 24). This thesis intends to contribute to their scholarship by unearthing untold teatro stories and investigating how enacting la cultura cura and engaging in this type of curandera work may also create a decolonizing healing for the teatrista as well.

**BRAIDING ANZALDUAN THOUGHT**

Any research that addresses Chicanas and healing must of necessity include the paradigm shifting scholarship of Chicana queer writer Gloria Anzaldúa. My first interaction with her work was as an undergraduate student many years ago. I still remember how reading Anzaldúa’s words made me feel validated as she gave voice to numerous thoughts, emotions, and experiences that I had never articulated. After so many years, sus palabras me siguen conmoviendo. It is specifically her writings on “mestiza consciousness” (Borderlands), “the path to conocimiento” (“Now Let Us Shift”), and “spiritual activism” (“Now Let Us Shift”).

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12 La cultura cura is a Chicana/Chicano colloquial expression meaning “culture heals.”

13 Sus palabras me siguen conmoviendo meaning “her words still move me.”
that provide the theoretical framework for this thesis. Here I provide an introductory
definition of each of these foundational concepts. I begin with her theory of mestiza
consciousness, which describes a transformational awareness that embraces a “tolerance for
contradictions and ambiguity” in relation to the multiple internal and external borders that
contribute to one’s identity (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 101). As early as *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa
also names the “spiritual borderlands” in her foreword and conceives a spiritual worldview
which is threaded throughout these three theoretical concepts that ground my work.

Secondly, her path to conocimiento describes a process of awareness that is the result
of intentionally taking a path to engage in consciousness work (“Now Let Us Shift” 202).
Anzaldúa elaborates on conocimiento:

> Conocimiento is my term for an overarching theory of consciousness, of how the
mind works. It’s an epistemology that tries to encompass all the dimensions of
life, both inner—mental, emotional, instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, bodily
realms—and outer—social, political, lived experiences” (Keating, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 177).

Anzaldúa makes explicit the connection between “the inner life of the mind and spirit to the
outer worlds of action” (Keating, *Interviews/Entrevistas* 178). It is then that the path to
conocimiento leads to engaging in spiritual activism. Scholar AnaLouise Keating states,
“Spiritual activism begins within the individual but moves outward as these individuals (or
what Anzaldúa calls “spiritual activists”) expose, challenge, and work to transform unjust
social structures” (“I’m a Citizen” 57). Anzaldúa asserts that when we engage in internal
work coupled with our commitment to struggle for social transformation, there is a shift
within us which is then reflected in the world (“Now Let Us Shift” 574). By braiding
Anzaldúa’s three theoretical concepts of mestiza consciousness, path of conocimiento, and
spiritual activism into my analysis, I will demonstrate how engaging in social justice work as
Chicana teatristas has indeed facilitated a healing transformational process for us as well.

**ON LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE**

In reading this thesis, my distinct use of language will become evident. In solidarity
with Gloria Anzaldúa’s writings, I too interchangeably use my code switching abilities and
integrate words in Spanish, English, and Nahuatl. Furthermore, in the style of Teatro Izcalli’s
performances, I am also breaking the “fourth wall” here and am speaking directly to you as
the reader of this thesis. I invite you to listen and to connect with my words. My intent is not to frustrate you, but to write and present my work in my own authentic voice. This is how I speak, live, and dream. It is who I am, unapologetically. For this reason as well, I have chosen not to translate or italicize every single word within the text that is not in English because doing so “others” these words and thus my writing. This is a conscious decision that I have made, perhaps from a bilingual privileged position but, I see it more as an opportunity for all of my non-Spanish/English readers to be open to a new way of relating to a text that yes, may be challenging at times. I respectfully then ask you to honor the fact that I too am free to write bilingually like Anzaldúa “since ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity - I am my language” (Borderlands 81). Without a doubt writing and speaking in this way is central to my being and to my way of life. For my bilingual readers, I also respectfully invite you to engage with this text that hopefully will resonate with some aspects of your life.

Lastly, how I write this thesis is most definitely a direct reflection of how Teatro Izcalli writes, speaks, and performs. By writing in this way I also honor this link and enact my whole identity by bridging my academic and teatrista self/voice in this text.

Las Mujeres de Teatro Izcalli is organized into five distinct chapters. I begin with an introductory chapter that provides a brief overview of my intention for conducting this oral history project. Furthermore, chapter one delineates the purpose of my research, my own positionality, and includes literature on healing and curanderismo to further understand my research. Chapter two historically contextualizes Teatro Izcalli by addressing the development of Chicana/Chicano theater as an art form of resistance and empowerment in the 20th and 21st century. Here, I also provide a brief history of Teatro Izcalli to document some of the work we have accomplished since 1995. Chapter three provides an account of the different methods I utilize and how my methodology is a direct extension of my positionality. In chapter four, I delve into the analysis of the eight interviews and provide insight to the women’s memories, experiences, and challenges during their time in the troupe. I also interweave my own testimonio and insert my own reflective story into the tapestry. My final chapter summarizes my findings and presents possible directions for other scholars

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14 In theater, the fourth wall is the invisible wall that exists between the audience and the stage/actors.
interested in writing about Chicana/Chicano theater as a means for personal, social, and cultural healing.

In this chapter I have presented an introduction to my thesis topic, my own positionality in the research, and a brief description about the power of Chicana/Chicano theater to relate stories that educate, heal, and empower. Additionally, I presented my theoretical framework that interweaves curanderismo studies and Anzaldúa’s thought, which allows me to articulate the women’s healing and/or empowering experiences while in Teatro Izcalli from a decolonial lens. In the next chapter to further ground my storytelling about teatro work, I present a brief history of Chicana/Chicano theater and provide an insider’s account on the history of Teatro Izcalli.
CHAPTER 2

CHICANA/CHICANO THEATER: ROOTS IN ACTIVISM

Chicana/Chicano theater is a creative art form infused with political activism. It was born out of the need for Chicanas and Chicanos to assert a cultural and political identity within the sociopolitical discourse of this country (Huerta, *Chicano Theater* 3). It aims to provide educational, cultural, and politically charged performances in a way that differs from what is perceived to be “proper” commercial theatrical work. Indeed as described by one of the premier Chicana/Chicano theater scholars Jorge Huerta, it is considered to be the “people’s” theater (*Chicano Theater* 3). Over the past 40 years this genre of Chicana/Chicano theater has grown in new directions. My intention here is not recount a 40+ history of teatro since this has been addressed by Chicana/Chicano theater scholars such as Jorge Huerta, Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez, Elizabeth C. Ramirez, Alicia Arrizón, and others. It is however my attempt to historically situate Teatro Izcalli within the Chicana/Chicano theater’s historical continuum in order to demonstrate our direct link to the Chicana/Chicano Movement’s teatro legacy. I begin by providing a review of literature that historically relays the development of Chicana/Chicano teatro. I then focus on the historical legacy of El Teatro Campesino followed with examining some of the shifts in the production of Chicana/Chicano teatro. I conclude the chapter with a historical account of the creation of Teatro Izcalli and provide a glimpse on some of our work from the past 17 years.

A historical account of the history of Chicana/Chicano theater traces its roots back to Pre-Columbian rituals, Spanish folklore theater, and to the Mexican tradition of “la carpa” (Huerta, *Chicano Theater*; Ramirez, *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre*; Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*). Other scholars have suggested its lineage to Bertolt Bretchian aesthetics or to Russian “agit prop” theater that emphasizes a connection between

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15 Carpas were popular “tent show” productions in Mexico. In chapter one of her book, Broyles-Gonzalez theorizes the influence of the carpa tradition in the creation of El Teatro Campesino (1994).
theater and social change (Garza 10; Arrizón 24). What scholars have agreed upon is that Chicana/Chicano theater presents a means to go against the grain and gives voice to stories rarely heard. It is in teatro where our experiences as Chicanas and Chicanos are validated which is also imperative for bridging understanding with other communities in this country.

Jorge Huerta’s *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* (1982) is a foundational text that defines Chicano theater and explores its development and critical themes dramatized beginning in 1965 during the era of the Chicano Movement. He argues that Chicano theater incorporates distinct elements from this history, including six themes: worker struggles, the search for identity, the effects of war, community politics and education, social justice, and Indigenous roots. It is important to note that *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* was published prior to the initial Chicana writings on theater and Huerta does not directly address Chicana feminist voices or experiences. In his later writing, Huerta addresses this point. He says in *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society, and Myth* (2000), “I could not have written about Chicana (read: female) plays and playwrights because there was only one Chicana playwright in print, and unfortunately, the Chicano Theatre Movement was male-dominated” (11). In this book he further elaborates by addressing Chicana/Chicano theater from 1979 to 1999 and includes an analysis on plays by Chicanas/Chicanos that also address gender and sexuality. Additionally, he provides in depth informative biographies on each of the female and male playwrights including Josefina Lopez, Milcha Sanchez-Scott, and Cherríe Moraga.

In *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* Huerta describes the collective nature of Chicano theater and affirms that the majority of teatros remain people’s theaters since they are rooted in the oral tradition that avoids formalized scripts because the plays are based on improvisations of the moment (3). Most definitely, this speaks to the beginnings of Teatro Izcalli where we, the founding members, worked collectively to develop our teatro productions. Without formal training in theater, our teatro work was a direct extension of our activism and passion to raise consciousness in the community. Such was the story of El Teatro Campesino which is now recognized as being the impetus for the creation of many teatro groups during the Chicana/Chicano Movement and to this day.

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16 The one Chicana play in print at the time was *Day of the Swallows* (1972) by Estela Portillo-Trambley (Huerta, *Chicano Drama* 142).
The Chicana/Chicano Movement in the 1960s joined other civil rights movements to demand the respect and the dignity of Chicanas/Chicanos living in the United States. Central to the development of this movement was the work of labor union leaders Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez from the United Farm Workers Union. It is in the fields of Delano, California where the creation of Chicana/Chicano theater came to fruition with El Teatro Campesino. To quote Teatro Campesino’s playwright Luis Valdez, Chicano theater’s purpose is to “abrir los ojos y para airear la conciencia del mundo” (Garza 10). El Teatro Campesino utilized actos to convey its messages to the farm workers in the fields and wherever else they gathered. Actos are short dramatic forms which intend to: inspire the audience to social action, illuminate specific points about social problems, satire the opposition, show or hint at a solution, and express what people are feeling (Valdez 12). Long time El Teatro Campesino actor, Diane Rodriguez states the following about her teatro experience, “The Teatro Campesino used theater to inspire and challenge a community hungry for leadership and identity” (315). El Teatro Campesino filled this void by dramatizing a new form of cultural expression that combined art and activism.

By 1980, El Teatro Campesino had international acclaim and was known as the “symbol of Chicano’s theatrical expression” (Huerta, Chicano Theater 1). El Teatro Campesino’s success became the inspiration for many other teatro groups throughout the country dedicated to exposing the sociopolitical conditions of the Chicana/Chicano community. To name a few, in 1970 El Teatro de la Esperanza was established by a group of students led by Jorge Huerta at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Here in San Diego during the 70s, Teatro Mestizo and Teatro Chicana were created. Many of the teatro groups that were formed throughout the Southwest became involved in TENAZ (El Teatro Nacional de Aztlan) after its creation in 1971. TENAZ served as a national network of teatro groups and held yearly festivals that hosted artists from Latin America, Mexico, and other communities within the United States. The motivating factor for TENAZ was to foster and promote works by Chicanas/Chicanos. Unfortunately, TENAZ gatherings over the years

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17 Abrir los ojos y para airear la conciencia del mundo meaning “to open eyes and air out the conscious of the world.”
dwindled and the last documented festival was held in 2002 at the University of California, Los Angeles (La Prensa San Diego, June 21, 2002). Also notable about this gathering is that not one woman’s play was selected to be a part of the “Chicano Classics Teatro Festival.” Cherrie Moraga boycotted the event and expressed her discontent with the organizers choice in “only featuring plays written and developed by men or male-centered teatros” (“An Irrevocable Promise” 50).

Chicana scholar Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez’s book, El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement (1994), was the first to document exclusively the experiences of the women within the acclaimed theater group. Her departure from the conventional version of the male centered story of El Teatro Campesino was notably challenged by Valdez himself and by other scholars (Broyles-Gonzalez, El Teatro Campesino xv). In her study, Broyles-Gonzalez writes about how the combined effects of male domination and Chicano nationalism shaped the company’s productions and ultimately the documentation of the group’s history (Arrizón 78). She critiques El Teatro Campesino’s productions – the exception being La Virgen del Tepeyac- as having males as their focus. In these male-centered productions, the world is not seen through the eyes of women and the female figures were relegated to playing dichotomized roles of virgin or whores (Broyles-Gonzalez, El Teatro Campesino 135-136). In the end, El Teatro Campesino’s repertoire, with its strong commitment to labor issues, Chicano culture, and historical issues, consistently revealed its’ deficit approach to the treatment of women (Broyles-Gonzalez, El Teatro Campesino 140).

Broyles-Gonzalez’s work is significant in that it elucidates what was missing at the time: writings about women’s involvement in Chicano theater. Indeed, Broyles-Gonzalez consistently upholds the importance and urgency of preserving Chicana theater performance history through oral history projects by centering the lived experiences of women, such as in the case of the women of El Teatro Campesino (1990, 1994).

**Shifts in Chicana/Chicano Teatro**

During the Chicana/Chicano Movement women found themselves to be left out of the decision making process and this included their involvement in co-ed Chicano theater groups. As a result, women formed their own groups such as Teatro Chicana, which exclusively gave voice to the experiences of young Chicana student activists. Teatro Chicana
was formed at San Diego State University in 1971. Over the years Teatro Chicana—also known as Teatro de las Chicanas—changed its name to Teatro Laboral, Teatro Raíces and even transitioned into being a community-based theater group. But its commitment to centering the experiences of women always remained the same. In 2008, Teatro Chicana published their memoir *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays*, which documents the interviews, images, archives, and original skits and plays by the Chicana theater activists. Written as a collective memoir by 17 of the teatristas, it presents these women’s experiences during the Chicano Movement and afterwards. Their personal narratives illuminate their commitment to social change and provide a glimpse into the larger sociopolitical landscape of that time. It is a prime example of the value of documenting the lived experiences of women. My hope is that my thesis also contributes to scholarship that presents Chicana teatrista experiences along with providing a window into the sociopolitical climate of our own time. Teatro Chicana’s final performance was in 1983.

In *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre: A History of Performance* (2000), Elizabeth C. Ramírez’ study demonstrates how Chicana/ Latina theater in the United States may trace back its roots to Pre-Columbian times, the Mexican Revolution, and the Chicano Movement. Her work centers the experience of women within Chicana/Latina theater and demonstrates how women become involved in teatro “during moments of political crisis” in order to shape and create a cultural record of historical significance about a people (Ramírez xiv). Ramírez’ provides a history about the involvement of Chicanas/Latinas “on the American stage” prior to the new millennium but most importantly notes how it was during the 1970s when a distinct voice of Chicanas/Latinas began to emerge on the stage:

> Women soon became prominent participants in the teatro movement, shaping their roles in all aspects of production. Chicanas/Latinas began to explore serious issues about gender and sexuality within their own community. Making their marks as playwrights, directors, actors, producers, or behind the scenes, as well as influencing and nurturing audiences, women in performance offer a long-standing history worth examining (xix).

By the 80s women’s involvement in teatro expanded to more independent work as also documented by Huerta. There was a move away from the traditional teatro collectives and collectively created pieces. He states that it was the playwrights who then became the hope for a new era in Chicana/Chicano theater (Huerta, *Chicano Drama* 13). This shift led to an
emergence of Chicana playwrights in the 80s and 90s who began to write and produce their own stories for the stage. Works by Cherrie Moraga, Edit Villareal, and Josefina Lopez were produced along with the development of one-woman shows most notably by Chicana/Latina queer performers such as Monica Palacios and Marga Gomez. The 90s also opened up the lines of communication between artists and organizations and increased attention to women’s roles in plays written by men. As a result, better opportunities for performance in teatro resulted for women (Ramírez 153).

It was in 1984 that the now widely popular male trio Culture Clash was founded as a performance troupe in San Francisco, California. By the mid-90s they transitioned from exclusively focusing on their sketch comedy work -they even had a short run comedy variety television show in 1997- to producing ethnographic based works (Culture Clash). Although race remained the central line of critique in their new work, Culture Clash expanded to include a more serious consideration of issues of sexuality and gender, global capitalism and class (Kondo 91). The influence of Culture Clash is quite evident in Teatro Izcalli’s history since it was in the 90s when many of us, the founding collective, were inspired to do teatro in the first place after seeing their shows.

**Teatro Izcalli**

Teatro Izcalli was founded in 1995, but in order to trace its history it is important to include a brief account of the history of Izcalli, which is the parent organization of Teatro Izcalli. This also allows for the historical contextualization of the sociopolitical forces in San Diego that informed the founding of Izcalli and later of Teatro Izcalli.

It was the spring of 1993 when a group of college students gathered in my family’s small one bedroom apartment to talk about the idea of starting a Saturday school program where Chicana/Chicano youth could learn about their history and culture. There were about a dozen of us who met on that night. We each brought our love, different experiences, and backgrounds to the table in the attempt to create something new for the youth in our community. We felt the need to create this space in order to address the lack of culturally relevant material that was being offered in the school system to Chicanas/Chicanos. This is

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18 I lived with my husband and newborn daughter.
how the seed for Izcalli was planted. Izcalli which means “house of re-awakening” in Nahuatl, is a cultural arts non-profit organization that has been providing community based programming in San Diego since 1993.\(^{19}\) The organization has grown much from the original idea of a Saturday school program but it continues to be dedicated to its mission, which is to transform the lives of Chicana/Chicano and Indigenous communities by promoting cultural consciousness through the arts, education, and community dialogue.\(^{20}\)

In recollecting our first meeting, there are several aspects about those individuals who were present that clearly stands out to me. Firstly, we were all friends who identified as Chicanas/Chicanos. We were also first- generation college students, under 25 years of age, involved in MEChA at one point or another in our academic trajectory, and had all organized/participated in the protests against the 1992 Quincentennial celebrations honoring the arrival of Columbus to the Americas.\(^{21}\) Additionally, we were all actively involved in reconnecting with our Indigenous heritage by being involved in Danza Azteca and/or participating in Native American ceremonies at our local Indian reservations. Clearly our Chicana/Chicano identity was also informed by taking Chicano Studies courses at our different respective college and university campuses (San Diego State University, University of California San Diego, University of San Diego and San Diego Mesa College). As a result, we each brought to the meeting our own diverse knowledges from our different academic majors including, Ethnic Studies, Psychology, Liberal Studies, Philosophy, History, and Social Work.

Through our activist work on our college campuses, such as organizing high school conferences, we continually heard the stories about Chicana/Chicano youth being pushed out of the educational system at an alarming rate. At that time, the drop-out rate for Chicanas/Chicanos was at about 45.9% in the San Diego Unified School District (Chavez 7).

\(^{19}\) Interestingly, in the book *Chicano San Diego* (Griswold del Castillo, 2007), Izcalli’s founding is credited to one person (Ortiz 153). The founding of Izcalli, as well as Teatro Izcalli, was certainly a collective effort by many and cannot be attributed to just one person.

\(^{20}\) Izcalli was granted federal non-profit 501 (c) 3status in 2004. Its four components are: Teatro Izcalli, Hombre Noble, Cihua Ollin, and Proyecto Ollin. For more information about Izcalli visit www.izcalli.org

\(^{21}\) MEChA is the acronym for Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán. It is a student organization focused on promoting higher education, culture, and history that can be found on high school, college, and university campuses throughout the United States.
We weren’t sure how we were going to combat the staggering statistic but we knew we had to do something about it. Our primary objective then became to conceive a program that targeted the retention and eventual graduation of Chicana/Chicano high school students in San Diego. Our belief was that one of the reasons why students were disengaged in school was because of the lack of identification with, and interest in, the school curricula. This was partly due to our own experiences in school and in seeing this disconnect with our own families and friends. We recognized that the school system was not providing a forum for the encouragement and pride in Chicana/Chicano history and culture and as a result we sought to create a space in the community where this could be fostered. Although we were also cognizant of the many other problems that may influence a student to drop out of school, such as, family predicaments, substance abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, institutional racism, and poverty, creating Izcalli was our own humble attempt to combat the rampant issue. We believed that when Chicana/Chicano youth learn about their history and culture it becomes a vehicle of empowerment, which increases the likelihood of their graduating from high school. Indeed, scholars have documented the ways culturally relevant curricula positively impacts Chicana/Chicano students and can be linked to retention and increased graduation rates (Yosso). This position was directly correlated to our own experiences of feeling empowered after learning about our own history and culture in college. We wanted students to have this opportunity as well. By acting on our desire to create change in the educational system we were engaging in what is now known as “transformational resistance” (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal). Transformational resistance occurs when students work for social justice after becoming aware of the interlocking systems of oppression that exist in our society.

Currently, the median age of the Chicana/Chicano population in the United States is 24 years-old and one of every ten Chicanas/Chicanos lives in poverty (Yosso 3). The educational opportunities made available to Chicanas/Chicanos will directly “yield societal

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22 Education scholars Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal define transformational resistance “as a form of student behavior that is accompanied with a critique of domination and a desire for self or social liberation. In other words, the student must hold an awareness of domination and the student must be motivated by a sense of social justice. With a deeper level of understanding and social justice orientation, transformational resistance offers the greatest possibility of social change” (319).
repercussions as major cities across the nation reveal demographic patterns already evident in California” (Yosso 3). Unquestionably, the potential outcome from more Chicanas/Chicanos graduating from high school clearly benefits all of society since “the economic and social condition of the entire Chicana/Chicano population is unlikely to improve until their educational status improves” (Rumberger and Rodriguez 139). As discussed by many scholars, the educational status of Chicanas/Chicanos has not improved much over the decades (Covarrubias; Delgado Bernal “Chicana/o Education;” Solorzano and Delgado Bernal; Yosso). Delgado-Bernal, for example, articulates that many of the educational issues affecting the Mexican/Chicana/Chicano community have remained the same since before the turn of the century. She suggests several actions to improve school retention: improvement of inferior school facilities; removal of racist teachers and administrators; elimination of tracking; and inclusion of Mexican history, language, and culture (Delgado Bernal, “Chicana/o Education” 77). Research also demonstrates the significance and influence of community-based resources, including community-based organizations that can enhance the prospects of Chicana/Chicano youth in ways that benefit the entire community (Rumberger and Rodriguez 130). We knew well that our creation of a cultural arts Chicana/Chicano Studies based program in the community was not necessarily a new strategy to employ since we had heard of similar projects during the Chicana/Chicano Movement such as with the Royal Chicano Air Force in Sacramento, California. However, this was our opportunity as young enthusiastic and idealistic college students to also engage the powerful legacy of community activism that had informed our own empowered paths.

After almost two years of year-round programming for Izcalli’s Saturday school program known as the “Escuelita” we decided to form Teatro Izcalli as a Chicana/Chicano comedy troupe. It was the spring of 1995 when once again my husband Macedonio, my daughter Iyari, and I gathered with seven other Izcalli activists in our apartment to discuss the creation of the theater group. This was months after California voters passed Proposition 187, also known as the “Save Our State” initiative, which aimed to deny undocumented persons state-funded services, including public education and non-emergency health care. Needless to say, living in the largely conservative city of San Diego, the anti-Mexican sentiment was still very much palpable. Many of us had been involved in organizing and protesting against the proposition and felt a great disappointment over its passing. As we gathered to discuss the
formation of the teatro, we saw it not only as a means to raise consciousness about Chicana/Chicano issues, identity, and culture but also as an opportunity to raise funds for Izcalli’s Escuelita, which operated solely on out of pocket donations. Hence we followed in the tradition of El Teatro Campesino, Teatro Chicana, and Culture Clash to give voice to our own stories, history, traditions, challenges, struggles, and opportunities.

When we first started Teatro Izcalli it was through the collective activism of the group and improvisation that scripts and characters were fully developed. After months of rehearsals we held our first show in June of 1995 at the First Annual Chicano Youth Leadership Camp at San Diego State University. This is where we first brought to life our original actos including *Mariabertos*, *Bosque Gump*, *Real Real Stories of the Higüey Patrol*, *Chicano News*, and others. Most of our actos have been inspired directly by our families, the entertainment industry, from working with youth, and our own educational experiences. In 2009, we self-published a book titled *Teatro Izcalli Presents: Nopal Boy & Other Actos*, which includes some of our work from 1995 to 2005. Jorge Huerta writes about our use of language in the introduction, “The actos are all bilingual, an important premise of Teatro Chicano, for the combination of Spanish, English, and even calo, give the Mechicana/o audience members a feeling of superiority because they can understand the language” (“Introduction” 10). Our use of language and the stories being presented is what makes our performances accessible and relatable for our audiences. However, not all of our actos are recorded in this book since many did not have formalized scripts or have long been forgotten, especially those from the first years of teatro. Unfortunately, our documentation from those beginnings is also minimal since those were the days before digital cameras, cell phones, or the internet. I share here a brief synopsis on three of our most popular actos from over the years that address the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The acto *Escuelita* has gone through several metamorphoses over the years. It was fist entirely improvised on stage at a show that we did in November of 1995 at the Hazard Housing Projects in Los Angeles, California. This was our fourth show as a teatro group and our first appearance outside of San Diego. We were invited to perform in Hazard by Benny

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23 I recall vividly one night Macedonio and I went out to dinner and wrote the draft scripts of *Mariabertos* and *Bosque Gump* on napkins.
Madera who was acting in the teatro group and wanted to bring our stories to his hometown neighborhood. Attendance was low but we took it as an opportunity to create something new while on stage. *Escuelita* personifies the struggle of Chicanas/Chicanos in high schools who have been negated the truth and power of their history and culture as a means for self-empowerment. The acto is about the importance of writing ourselves into history, demanding our inclusion in the history books, and exercising our power to make this change. The first time the acto was performed the protagonist “Cuauhtemoc” has his name changed to “Tim” by a deficit minded teacher and is subjected to ridicule in the classroom. However, after this show in Los Angeles we re-worked the acto and changed the gender and name of the lead character to “Coyolxianqui” who subsequently has her name changed to “Shelley.” We see in the acto how “Coyolxianqui” must also resist the male teacher’s sexist and demeaning rants while in the classroom. “Coyolxianqui’s” path to healing commences when she is visited by a female ancestral spirit who calls out her name in order to re-integrate those pieces of her soul fragmented from the susto she experiences in school. The ancestor imparts wisdom and connects “Coyolxianqui” to the healing power of her roots and history. The ancestor represents an embodiment of resistance to colonization and patriarchy on stage. In the end, “Coyolxianqui” exercises her agency and confronts the sexist racist teacher by personifying transformational resistance.

The acto *Escuelita* has changed many times over the years with different female and male historical figures mentioned, new lines, and different student characters. Interestingly, for a number of years this acto was not performed and was recently revived for our *Anthology* production in 2009. In addition to this, the version that is recorded in our book is a re-written script of “Cuauhtemoc’s” story since the “Coyolxianqui” version has not been performed in many years. It has been through the process of this research that I have unearthed “Coyolxianqui” from the Teatro Izcalli archive. Most importantly, I recognize that it is time to bring “Coyolxianqui” back to the stage for a new generation of young women to hear her story since it is the version of “Coyolxianqui” that addresses the intersectionality of

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24 As previously discussed, susto is “soul loss.” In curanderismo, this can result from experiencing a traumatic experience (Avila 64). Here I am comparing the negative experiences that Chicanas/Chicanos experience in the educational pipeline as susto.
race, class, and gender that is not presented in the “Cuauhtemoc” version. Ultimately, the underlining message of this acto has remained the same, the importance of engaging Chicana/Chicano students in culturally relevant instruction and to get them successfully through the educational pipeline. This has always been our position since the beginning as a teatro group and as an organization.25

The acto Educación Más Alta is about a high school student who gets accepted into the University of Southern California, but her father opposes her leaving home. This acto is clearly about “Tina” resisting patriarchy, her father’s enforcement of binary gender roles, and his underlining fear of her sexuality. Through the use of comedy the characters negotiate this very real life dilemma as “Tina” resists being silenced. Unfortunately, a very important part of this acto is also missing in our book. Cristina Nuñez-Medina is the actor who played “Tina” and wrote a very significant poem titled “Chicana Con Carne” that she performed at the end of the acto. Several of us have searched through Teatro Izcalli archives to locate this poem but have been unsuccessful. I have not given up in the hope that I will come across it one day to ensure that it will also be included in our next edition of Nopal Boy & Other Actos.

Chicano Rehab is a comical enactment of Chicana and Chicano activists trying to “out Chicano slash Chicana the world” (Arteaga and Teatro Izcalli 90). In Teatro Izcalli Presents: Nopal Boy & Other Actos, Huerta writes:

> It is to the group’s credit that they critique the Chicano Movement itself in such actos as ‘Chicano Rehab,’ in which they ridicule various stereotypes of Chicano activists. From the super-feminist to the paranoid “veterano,” the characters in this acto evoke types familiar to any Chicana/o activist and if they can laugh at themselves, perhaps they might take away some wisdom. (“Introduction” 9)

In Chicano Rehab, the lead character “Frida” is the therapist who embodies different aspects of each of the four activist characters entering rehab. As the acto progresses, Frida challenges the four activists to go within and search for meaning as to how being involved in the Movement and in their personal quest for empowerment and liberation has affected others in their lives. The characters are: “Cristina Estudianada” the perpetual MEChA college student

25 To read more about the importance of cultural proficiency in schools see The Cultural Proficiency Journey: Moving Beyond Ethical Barriers Toward Profound School Change (Cambell Jones, Cambell Jones, and Lindsey 2010).
activist who struggles with negotiating her activism, schoolwork, and lack of finances; “Raul Muchasarmas” the anti-capitalist revolucionario; “Moctezuma” the spiritual activist who follows Indigenous ways as the means for liberation from colonization, and “Susana Odiahombres,” who is perceived as the angry feminist whose unspoken queer subjectivity is also questioned by the audience. The idea for this acto goes back to the days when we first formed the teatro. For many years we talked about the idea, improvised characters, and built on the concept but never formalized a script. Finally, in 2001 Macedonio Arteaga Jr. wrote a draft of the script and each of us further developed our own characters with additional lines and quirks to bring them into full embodiment on stage.


El Nopal Boy deals with identity, internalized racism, and healing. Huerta writes, “Ultimately, Nopal Boy is about cultural redemption, a demonstration of the joy of recognizing one’s Mexican heritage. It takes the journey back to Marcos’ grandmother’s home in Mexico to reveal his Truth as a Mexican” (“Introduction” 9). When we first produced the play in 1999, I played Marcos’ grandmother. When Marcos arrives in Mexico, his grandmother heals Marcos’ susto from internalized racism by performing a limpia.26 The healing and spiritual overtones of the play are evident and although Marcos is the protagonist of the play, it is his grandmother who embodies resistance to colonization and patriarchy by invoking a centuries old tradition of curanderismo to symbolically heal his fragmentation. She is the keeper of traditional knowledge and central to the development of the story: without her, the healing would have not taken place. This scene provides a cultural representation of la cultura cura that also engages the audience in the healing by witnessing

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26 A limpia is a “spiritual cleansing.”
the act and in having the opportunity to connect and recognize their own internalized oppression from being marginalized as Chicanas/Chicanos or Mexicanas/Mexicanos in this society.

In addition to staging these productions we have been fortunate to have been contracted to work on various education-related projects over the years. Teatro Izcalli did receive funding for these particular projects and due to the many hours of work they entailed, people outside of the performance troupe were also brought in to act. In the year 2000, we were hired by the City of Chula Vista to create work that promoted and demystified the many misconceptions about the census in the Chicano/Latino community. We performed street theater and had over 60 performances throughout the city. The following year in 2001 we produced a video with high school students about sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy prevention. Following these two projects, we were contracted by the City of San Diego to teach theater classes to elementary school students in the “6 to 6” after-school program in the San Ysidro School District, who serves a large majority of Chicana/Chicano and Mexican students.

In 2003, Teatro Izcalli was granted funds from the First Five Commission in collaboration with the Chicano Federation for our 0 to 5 Project. We produced an educational staged comedy and video for parents with children from zero to five years old and performed over 15 shows throughout San Diego. We addressed some of the following themes in the sketches: pregnancy, healthcare for babies and children, immunizations, parenting skills, discipline, gender roles, and child proofing the home. This project is also very significant for us because beloved Chicano activist and musician Ramon “Chunky” Sanchez acted for the video and in many of the shows with us. Most recently, in 2008, we received funding for two years to mentor and teach teatro to the next generation of teatristas at Patrick Henry High School and Clairemont High School in San Diego. We had approximately 40 students participate in the program and now three of our students have been integrated into Teatro Izcalli as actors and as an assistant sound technician.

Teatro Izcalli has grown immensely over the years and we have now performed hundreds of shows throughout the United States at numerous schools, university campuses, community spaces, and theatrical venues. Notable shows and trips include performing at: Chicano Youth Leadership Camp (1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001), Centro

In these times of anti-immigrant/anti-Latino legislation, such as Arizona’s SB1070 passed in 2010 and the dismantling of Ethnic Studies based programs, Chicana/Chicano theater provides a bridge that can foster dialogue amongst different communities. This is most significant when considering the growing demographic of Chicanos/Latinos in the United States. As determined by the 2010 Census, more than half of the growth in the total population in the United States between 2000 and 2010 was due to an increase in the Latino population, this is a 43% increase. Latinos now account for 16% of the total population in the United States (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, and Albert).28 Historically, Teatro Izcalli has acted on the conocimiento that the arts, with theater at the forefront, must also be employed to alleviate some of the tensions, fear, and ignorance surrounding the growing number of Chicanos/Latinos in this country.

In this chapter I presented a brief overview of the history of Chicana/Chicano theater which includes the significance of El Teatro Campesino and important shifts in the expansion of Chicana/Chicano teatro work. Additionally, I provided a history on the development of

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27 To view photos of Teatro Izcalli’s performances from over the years, log onto www.izcalli.org.
Teatro Izcalli and included a summary on some of our work over the past 17 years. In the next chapter, I will present the methods and the methodology that I utilized to conduct my research on *Las Mujeres de Teatro Izcalli*. 
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY & METHODS: A CEREMONIAL PROCESS UTILIZING PLATICAS AND TESTIMONIOS

Before I embarked on the journey of writing this thesis, I offered tobacco to the sacred directions, to my ancestors, and to my comadres whom I was going to ask to be a part of this project.\(^{29}\) In doing so, I enacted the age-old tradition of reciprocity. I asked for permiso to approach this work in a good way.\(^{30}\) My intention from that day forward has been to honor the work of my comadres and in doing so I also honor my own. As a result, the methods and methodology I utilized to carry out this research have facilitated a ceremonial process, which resonates with me as an Indigenous (Huichol) woman who follows Native-American/Mexican Indigenous spiritual practices (Avila; Gonzales). My spirituality is grounded in the acknowledgement of my interconnectedness to all living things in nature. I also espouse a holistic spiritual activist approach to my teatro work that encompasses both personal internal work and outward work that aims to transform unjust systemic social structures (Keating, “I’m a Citizen of the Universe” 57).

Thus, my methodology upholds the notion that I am not separate from the women who I interviewed. It recognizes the women in this project as being co-collaborators and equally as important in the development of this creation of knowledge. We have entered this ceremony together, to set forth in the storytelling tradition our own stories about being in Teatro Izcalli. In Research is Ceremony (2008), First Nations scholar Shawn Wilson writes:

Something that has become apparent to me is that for Indigenous people, research is ceremony. In our culture an integral part of any ceremony is setting the stage

\(^{29}\) Comadre in Spanish meaning “co-mother.” Lara cites an interview with Angelita Borbón, who elaborates on “comadre” as a chosen sister, a support person during birthing, nurturing, and survival process, be it of a person or a creative expression (Lara, “Latina Health Activist-Healers Bridging Body and Spirit” 27).

\(^{30}\) Permiso meaning “permission.”
properly. When ceremonies take place, everyone who is participating needs to be ready to step beyond the everyday and to accept a raised state of consciousness. (69)

Consequently, we have entered this work together with the understanding, recognition, and undeniable respect that there is something greater than I guiding this process. I trust and know that what needs to be said will be shared along with the ability to understand and transmit its meaning. It is not naiveté on my behalf, a lack of training, or misunderstanding of scholarship. It is a practice of asserting and centering the knowledges that the women and I bring to this academic institution. It is utilizing the decolonizing qualitative methodology of testimonios, which facilitate this ceremonial approach to knowledge creation from a spiritual, healing, and empowering perspective. As elaborated by The Latina Feminist Group, “Testimonios are a tool to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity. They allow for our histories and lived experiences to reveal our resistance to systems of power such as colonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism” (19). By engaging testimonios in this ceremonial process, I write, theorize, and research in this truth and to attempt to in any other way is for me, unethical and, furthermore impossible. This work is a reflection of this way of life. For in any other way, it would have not materialized. I respectfully then must thank the grandmothers, the ancestors, and those who came before me so that I could write these words. So that I could take a stand and say that our ways of creating, thinking, living, writing, and being are not only important but are essential to pushing academia into a new consciousness.

In conducting this scholarship that integrates a ceremonial process I have also relocated Chicana teatristas to a central position in the research that focuses on Chicana/Chicano theater and its relationship to activism and healing. This is an essential part of Chicana Feminist Epistemology, a methodology that aims to center the voices of Chicanas who have been historically silenced, oppressed, and omitted from history and academic research (Delgado Bernal, “Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology”). Scholar Dolores Delgado Bernal states that a Chicana Feminist Epistemology is “grounded in the rich historical legacy of Chicana’s resistance and translates into a pursuit of social justice in both research and scholarship” (“Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology” 561). As a result, Chicanas become agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that link
experience, research, community, and social change (Delgado Bernal, “Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology” 555-556). In using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology I also draw upon my “cultural intuition” that Delgado Bernal describes as:

A Chicana researcher’s cultural intuition is achieved and can be nurtured through our personal experiences (which are influenced by ancestral wisdom, community memory, and intuition), the literature on and about Chicanas, our professional experiences, and the analytical process we engage in when we are in a central position in our research and our analysis. Thus, cultural intuition is a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic (“Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology” 567-568).

Furthermore, I utilize this framework since it also maintains its connections to Indigenous roots and revolves around the understanding that Chicanas hold a deep knowledge about their own lives and experiences.

My Chicana “insider” status also informed my methodology. As an insider, I ask different questions and contribute a different perspective than an “outsider” would (Zavella). Furthermore, I have access to certain stories and cultural understandings that are relevant to the research. As a feminist researcher I also espouse a reflexivity that carefully considers my role in the research process and its findings (Ekinsmyth 178). Therefore, my methodology is a compilation of who I am and who I have been. It is an expression of decolonizing feminist perspectives that adhere to a non-linear, non-Eurocentric formality (Smith). For the words that I share in this thesis are not only a reflection of my graduate work or even my activist/artistic work with Teatro Izcalli, but a whole embodiment of the person I am at this moment in time, as a woman, as a graduate student, and far more. I encompass multiple roles in my life that shape my identity, but I am also aware that identity is fluid and is always shifting. I agree with Anzaldúa when she posits, “Identity is like a river, it is always changing, always in transition, always in Nepantla” (“Now Let Us Shift” 556).\(^{31}\) Who I am at this moment is well reflected in these pages yet I understand that this is simply a glimpse at a snapshot in time. Years from now, my thoughts, my reflections may shift, grow, and change for this is the nature of life. It is not static. We are always in motion. Nonetheless, my social

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\(^{31}\) Nepantla is a Nahuatl word meaning the “space in between.” According to Anzaldúa in nepantla you sense more keenly the overlap between the material and spiritual worlds: you are in both places simultaneously (“Now Let Us Shift” 549).
location has thoroughly informed my methodology. In “Identities and Social Locations: Who Am I? Who Are My People,” scholars Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey inform that social location is the place where all aspects of our identity meet and is a way of expressing the core of a person’s existence in the social and political world (59). My methodology is a reflection of this location for it is from this position that I negotiate how I interact with others and most importantly how I determine who I am in this world.

**METHODS**

I have blended several methods in undertaking this research, which have allowed for this fluid and ceremonial process. To begin with, as an oral history project I have utilized recorded in-depth interviews, which is a specific research method within the general designation of qualitative methodology (Yow 8). The use of these in-depth interviews enabled my co-collaborators to answer as they chose, to attribute meaning to the experiences under discussion, and to interject topics during our conversations (Yow 5). I also include the use of testimonios, which are autobiographical narratives. But more specifically a testimonio is a method for feminist research praxis as exemplified in the book *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (The Latina Feminist Group 3). Most importantly, testimonios provide the opportunity for women to create knowledge and theory through their own lives, experiences, stories, also known as our “theor[ies] in the flesh” (The Latina Feminist Group; Moraga, “La Guera”).

As a Chicana researcher who is also a current member of Teatro Izcalli, I have also included my own testimonio in the collection of data. By interweaving my own testimonio in the data analysis chapter, I acknowledge that I am a member of the group being researched and assert that we collectively, the women of Teatro Izcalli, are all indeed participating actors in the research process (Sánchez). I am also fully aware that as a member of this group, the women were hopefully more apt to share deeper personal experiences with me, thus providing richer data for my analysis. Although I understand that this was not a given, I came to this conclusion due to the fact that I interviewed my comadres, friends, and my daughter with whom I have shared the stage for many years. I have established very close relationships with these women and genuinely treasure the opportunity to document their thoughts and experiences. Additionally, I interviewed my daughter who is now 19 and has been
performing with the group since the age of two. I feel her testimonio provides a very interesting perspective as a person who has literally grown up performing on the Chicana/Chicano theatrical stage. I see all of these relationships as strengths for my research. However, I do recognize that it is possible that the women may have not wanted to share certain information out of fear of hurting my feelings, discomfort, or because of the intrinsic power dynamic of my position within the group as a founding member, a mother, and the wife of the current Artistic Director. My hopes are that this was mitigated by creating a space of mutual comfort and respect during the interviews in order for the women to share their truths openly.

An additional method that was essential during the interview process was the use of pláticas. Pláticas are a part of Latino culture and are conversations that allow for us to self discover who we are in relationship to ourselves and to others (De La Torre 44). Avila elaborates on the healing use of pláticas, “In curanderismo, pláticas are known as “heart to heart talks” that are used to determine what is ailing the client. In the Aztec tradition, pláticas are the place where a curandera not only learns the client’s story but also has the opportunity to educate” (Avila 143-145). Ultimately, pláticas set the stage for the intuitive sacred exchange of storyteller and listener to take place. Trust is fundamental to this process which leads to a mutual space for sharing, learning, and healing. As Chicanas, Mexicanas, and Latinas, the use of pláticas and storytelling are a part of our cultural assets and are deeply embedded in our way of life. Therefore, it is not surprising that the use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the use of the plática method to be organically interwoven in the research.

**Procedures**

In order to conduct my research I secured Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, which included the development of an approved research design, consent form, and research questions. I then conducted the interviews with all eight women in four different locations. Three took place in the participant’s home, one was conducted at a participant’s office at work, one was in a coffee shop, and the remaining three took place in my home. Prior to signing the consent form or beginning the interview process each participant was giving ample time to ask questions about the project. All of the women were informed about the
possible length of the interview, which could take up to two hours with breaks determined by them.

My goal was to interview as many of the women who are current or past members of Teatro Izcalli. There have been a total of nine of us who have performed with the group since the groups’ creation in 1995 and fortunately, I was able to interview all eight women. There were two identifying markers to participate in the research: (1) be a woman who is a current or past member of Teatro Izcalli and (2) self-identify as Chicana or Mexicana. Participant screening and selection criteria were based on my knowledge of the women who have publicly performed with the theater group. As a founding member of the group, I have the personal contact information for each of the women and contacted them to participate via email. The participation by the women was completely voluntary and all of the women were given the opportunity to keep their identities confidential and be assigned a pseudonym if they wished to do so. However, all eight participants decided to share their actual names and identities in the research. It was my hope that the women would want to do so, in order to be publicly recognized for their knowledge, experience, and contributions to Teatro Izcalli and Chicana/Chicano theater history.

The interview questions were grouped into the following areas: General Background/Life History Information; How the women became involved in Teatro Izcalli and reasons for joining the group; Experiences as a woman in the theater group; Views regarding decolonizing healing perspective of the bodymindspirit through being a teatrista; and Views on Teatro Izcalli as a means of activism for educating and social justice work in the community. The use of the plática method allowed for additional questions to organically be asked, which provided deeper insight into their teatrista experiences. Finally, the women were asked to be available via telephone or email in case follow-up questions were deemed necessary after the initial interview was completed and transcription analysis was underway. They all agreed to this request as well. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed all eight of the interviews and proceeded to code the most common themes, which I will cover in depth in chapter four.

I conclude this chapter by briefly listing the qualitative methods that I have used for my thesis. They include oral history, testimonios, and the use of pláticas. My methodology consists of an Indigenous ceremonial process that centers a Chicana Feminist Epistemology.
In the next chapter I delve into my analysis of the eight women’s testimonios and provide my own reflective testimonio as well.
CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS: TEATRO MEDICINE

In this chapter I provide an in depth analysis of the eight oral interviews that I conducted with the mujeres de Teatro Izcalli. My purpose in conducting the interviews is to build on scholarship about Chicana teatristas engaging in social justice work in their communities and the healing power of teatro. With the interviews, I aimed to find the link between embodying Chicana/Chicano theater stories on stage and moments of healing within the teatristas themselves. Therefore, I present this chapter in a format that allows for the women to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories about being in Teatro Izcalli. In order to accomplish this I use many direct quotes and excerpts from the interviews/pláticas with the goal of presenting the women as the storytellers of their own Teatro Izcalli experiences. Having to recount concrete memories did pose a problem for some of the women since it has been many years—up to 15—since they have been a part of the troupe. But what I found was that by engaging in the plática method, together we were able to piece together those fragments that had long been forgotten. In order to be a part of this unfolding story, I also braid my own testimonio throughout the analysis. This permits for self-reflection about my own healing and transformative story in teatro. It also allows me to present a collective voice of our “herstories” rather than have my testimonio be separate from the women’s. In dialoguing with the testimonios de las mujeres and in providing my own, I relate our stories of healing, activism, and empowerment in order to demonstrate our journey of individual and collective transformation while engaging in Chicana/Chicano teatro work.

In this chapter I begin by providing a brief biographical sketch of all the interviewees. Then I explore the most common themes coded from the interviews under the following sections: Identity, Consciousness, and Activism; Education; Being a Mujer and the Creative Process; Teatro Izcalli Pedagogy; and La Cultura Cura and Curandera Work on the Stage. I
conclude this chapter with exploring unexpected findings that also resulted from the research process.

**INTRODUCING LAS MUJERES DE TEATRO IZCALLI**

To begin, I provide a brief biographical sketch of each of the women. The order I have chosen to introduce the women into the writing coincides with the order in which I conducted the interviews. I present them in this way to not privilege one particular person and to not present them in any hierarchal manner.

Cristina “Tina” Nuñez-Medina is a 36 year-old first generation college graduate who holds an English degree with an emphasis in Creative Writing and a minor in Mexican-American Studies from San Diego State University.32 Tina self-identifies as Chicana and is a married mother of two. She currently works as a marketing manager at a mall. She joined Teatro Izcalli in 1997 while she was an undergraduate student and performed with the group for 10 years. She returned to the stage in April 2009 for a cameo performance when Teatro Izcalli produced “Anthology” at the Lyceum Theater in San Diego.

Maria Santos-Ochoa is a 42 year-old first generation college student who received her Bachelor’s degree in Latin American Studies from San Diego State University. She identifies as Mexicana and is a married mother of two. Maria is a founding member of the group and performed for over a year with the group. She left Teatro Izcalli in the summer of 1996.

Claudia Cuevas-Ramirez is a 38 year-old self-identified Chicana. She is a first generation college student that graduated from San Diego State University with double majors in Psychology and Spanish and a minor in Mexican-American Studies. In 2007 she received her Master’s degree in Marriage and Family Therapy with an emphasis in Latino Family Studies from Pacific Oaks College. She currently works full time as supervisor in a social service agency and is a Marriage Family Therapist (MFT) Intern. Claudia joined Teatro Izcalli in 1997 and continues to be a member of the troupe.

Olympia Andrade Beltran is a 36 year-old self-identified Chicana married mother of four children. Olympia is a second generation college student and has a Bachelor’s degree

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32 When Tina attended San Diego State University, the now named Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies was named the Department of Mexican-American Studies.
from the University of California, San Diego in Ethnic Studies. She also has a medical technician certificate from Kaplan College and is currently a Telemetry Technician on the Cardiac Care Unit at Scripps La Jolla Hospital. Olympia is a founding member of the group and has performed sporadically with Teatro Izcalli over the years. When the group initially started she performed for only a few shows, but much later returned in 2003 to work on our 0 to 5 Project. Aside from acting, Olympia has served as “prop master” and in 2009 painted a miniature Chicano Park pillar for our “Anthology” set design.

Veronica Burgess is 35 year-old self-identified Mexicana, actor, and teaching artist. Veronica is a first generation college student that graduated from San Diego State University with a degree in Theater Arts. She joined Teatro Izcalli in 2007 when the group staged “Juan More Beer” at the Lyceum Theater. Veronica is a current member of the troupe.

Iyari Arteaga is a 19 year-old self-identified Chicana and is a second generation college student at California State University, Long Beach. I consider her a founding member of the group since she has been performing continuously with the troupe since the age of two. Iyari was also instrumental in the formation of a Chicana/Chicano theater group known as Teatro Otra Vez at her high school that performed for all school assemblies for two years.

Michelle Tellez is a 38 year-old self-identified Chicana mother of one. She is a first generation college graduate from the University of California, Los Angeles with a Bachelor’s in Sociology and a specialization in Chicana/Chicano Studies. Additionally, she has a Masters in Sociology of Education from Teachers College, Columbia University and a Ph.D. in Community Studies in Education from Claremont Graduate University. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor in the Women’s Studies Program and the Social Justice and Human Rights Program in the Division of Humanities, Arts and Cultural Studies at Arizona State University; she also serves on the board for the Arizona Workers Rights Center and is involved with the Arizona Ethnic Studies Network.

Maria Figueroa-Chacon is a 36 year-old self-identified Chicana married mother of two. She is a first generation college graduate of the University of California, San Diego with a Bachelor’s in Theater and minors in Ethnic Studies and Spanish Literature. She has a Masters degree in Comparative Literature from Dartmouth University and is currently a professor of English, literature, and humanities at Mira Costa Community College. She performed with the group for almost a year in 1996 until the summer of 1997. Additionally,
after leaving Teatro Izcalli, Maria returned in 1998 to direct the group for a special engagement at San Diego State University.

**IDENTITY FORMATION, LIVING IN THE BORDERLANDS, CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS, AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

I initiated all eight interviews with asking the women to provide demographical information, including how they chose to identify ethnically. This gave them the opportunity to storytell about their lives and how their identity was formed. Two of the women identify as Mexicanas and six as Chicanas. When speaking about identity and how the women became involved in the group, what became clear was the significant role that being a college student involved in the student organization Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA) played in the majority of the women’s lives. Being in MEChA and other similar social justice student organizations instilled in them a sense of giving back to others by engaging in activism. As a result, the first portion of this analysis is not necessarily presented in a clear linear format since the lines between discussions about identity, participation in MEChA, being in the educational pipeline, and joining Teatro Izcalli have to a certain extent been blurred.

I begin with Michelle Tellez who sets the tone as to the complexities of living in the conservative San Diego borderlands region. Michelle articulates what it means to her to be a Chicana growing up in the San Diego and Tijuana region and how this was deeply influential to her identity formation:

> As much as I grew up going to the playas de San Diego I could go down to Tijuana and go grocery shopping at Comercial Mexicana and so negotiating like the crossing of the border in my family’s life shaped how I live in the world in the sense that I knew that I never fully belonged here and I knew that I never fully belonged there. (Tellez)

Michelle speaks to the very familiar experience of Chicanas/Chicanos living in the United States and the sense of not fully fitting in on either side of the border. Furthermore, she articulates how her sociopolitical Chicana identity also includes, “My identity as a scholar, as a mother, as an activist. It embodies or encompasses multiple realities and multiple experiences” (Tellez). Michelle speaks to the multiplicity of ways that Chicanas operate and negotiate in this world. It is an intersectional identity that goes beyond a social economic category. Here she also demonstrates how she enacts a “mestiza consciousness” and
positions herself in not having to choose between the dichotomies of the geopolitical border and reaches a “tolerance for ambiguity” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 104). Through embracing her “mestiza consciousness,” Michelle engages in the ongoing process of reflecting, identifying, and critiquing the multiple internal and external borders that contribute to the identity of oneself and others (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 99-120).

Veronica also spoke of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, living this borderland existence, being born in Tijuana, and then moving to Chula Vista at the age of seven. She elaborates on her having to learn English and describes her school years as being a “positive experience.” She was mainstreamed into an English speaking classroom and details the process as being “sink or swim” in the 80s when she was teamed up with the only bilingual speaking student in the class. Veronica identifies as Mexicana and sees this identity as more closely correlated to her world view that is not necessarily a politicized one. She states:

I guess I never grew up with that belief that … we have to strive to push our people further thing. Like my mom, you know we weren’t raised that way. My mom is just like, “Somos Mexicanos y es todo…and that’s it.” There was never any kind of political underlining message of any sort. (Burgess)

Similarly, Maria Santos spoke about identifying as Mexicana and sees Chicana as being “a more political term.” Although she was a Mechista at San Diego State University and believed in what MEChA stood for, she does not necessarily see herself as an activist with a politicized identity. The remaining women, Tina, Claudia, Olympia, Iyari, and Maria Figueroa also spoke briefly about their Chicana identity and how for many of them it was taking Chicano Studies classes and their involvement in MEChA during their college years that indeed informed their Chicana identity formation. I can relate to this since it was in the early 90s during my undergraduate years that I too was also involved in MEChA and in the Association of Chicana Activists (AChA) at San Diego State University. Most definitely being in these two student organizations played a pivotal role in fostering my own Chicana activist and feminist consciousness.

Claudia spoke of the transnational experience of moving to Mexico at the age of 12 and then returning to Orange County at the age of 18. After graduating from high school, she attended community college where she learned about “Chicanismo” and claimed her Chicana identity. As she recounts: “I became very involved in knowing the history of Latinos and Mexicanos here in the United States” (Cuevas-Ramirez). Claudia then transferred to San
Diego State University and continued her activism in MEChA where her Chicana feminist consciousness further expanded. Claudia recalls that she was the co-chair of MEChA at San Diego State University when she first saw Teatro Izcalli perform for the MEChA High School Conference in 1996: “They reminded me of Culture Clash which later I found out why.\(^{33}\) They were very much influenced by them” (Cuevas-Ramirez). Furthermore, she speaks about why she continues to perform with Teatro Izcalli after so many years:

> It’s because this is my way as a Mechista, former Mechista continuing the work that I started off as a student. Being an activist and exposing our issues and just daring to be on stage is a form of activism because it is not expected of us. We are always contradicting what is expected of us. I consider myself an exception to every rule. (Cuevas-Ramirez)

Claudia speaks to how she resists patriarchal and colonial ideologies that relegate limiting expectations of Chicanas. In seeing herself as an activist to effect change she positions herself as a woman operating with agency within the sociopolitical discourse of this country.

While some of the women elaborated more as to what their Chicana or Mexicana identity meant to them, what became evident was how being in college, being student activists, living a transnational existence of living in Mexico, and crossing the border all influenced their identity formation.

### FROM IDENTITY TO JOINING THE CAST

Next I turn to analyzing how joining the cast of Teatro Izcalli was an extension of identity formation for the majority of the women interviewed. Although they all had distinct paths to joining the cast, they did share some commonalities in the role that MEChA played and their love for theater. For most of the women their decision to join Teatro Izcalli was facilitated by their individual paths of conocimiento that prompted them to engage in teatro as activism. Anzaldúa defines the path of conocimiento as “consciousness work that connects the inner life of the mind and spirit to the outer worlds of action” (Keating, Entrevistas/Interviews 178). By becoming aware of the interconnected systems of domination based on race, class, and gender in their own lives, the women then became

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\(^{33}\) The San Diego State University MEChA High School Conference is organized annually to bring high school students to the university and expose them to higher education in order to encourage them to attend.
agents in the struggle for social change. Anzaldúa calls this particular aspect of conocimiento as spiritual activism (Keating, Entrevistas/Interviews 178). For the women who consciously chose to be involved in social justice organizations and then later engage in teatro to expose the issues relevant to our community to create change, indeed were operating within a spiritual activist framework. The following excerpts of the women’s testimonios provide evidence of this spiritual activist subjectivity.

When we held the first Teatro Izcalli meetings in early spring of 1995 both Maria Santos, Olympia, and I were all involved with Izcalli’s Escuelita program. So when the idea of starting a Chicana/Chicano theater group was mentioned, both attended the first meeting as an extension of their work with Izcalli. Maria Santos came to the first initial Teatro Izcalli meeting to accompany her boyfriend (now husband) Alejandro Ochoa who is also a founding member of the group:

So he and I got into teatro at the same time when we went to a meeting. So that’s how I got into teatro because I was involved with him. You know, if it sounded good I would go check it out. (Santos-Ochoa)

Maria’s reason for joining Teatro Izcalli was largely out of curiosity, but she ended up performing with the troupe for well over a year. When asked why she decided to perform teatro she responded:

I liked the fact that we were doing something that other people liked either doing or wanted to be a part of or wanted to come and see. But going out there was terrifying all the time. I was out of my element. I had never acted before. (Santos-Ochoa)

Taking into account how “terrifying” it was for her to act and how “it never got easier,” I asked why she continued to perform for a year with the group:

I definitely thought that all of the messages that we were doing were, they were powerful...you know, when I went to San Diego State I had no idea what Chicanismo was all about. I had no idea that we were being discriminated against. So the fact that we were bringing this theater group with these issues to high-schoolers that maybe they were seeing that for the very first time. I thought that was very powerful. Because somebody opened my eyes when I went to San Diego State and the fact that we were passing that on, I was very proud of that. (Santos-Ochoa)

During Olympia’s plática she mentioned how it was her involvement in MEChA as a high school student that prompted her to attend Izcalli’s newly formed Escuelita. Then two years later as a college student, she became a founding member of Teatro Izcalli. She
describes her decision to join as, “Izcalli was it. That was the movement at the time so I wanted to be in on it” (Beltran). She adds her thoughts about teatro addressing issues that are especially significant for youth:

I think Izcalli’s work is so important. We’re bringing topics that are kind of hovering around but not many kids stop to focus on them. Like immigration issues. Immigration touches all of us, Chicanos, Mexicanos, Latinos in all different forms, it’s around. We all know somebody or we are a product of, but when it comes to facing our own politics about it or deciding what can be done, I don’t think those issues are brought to a young enough age. Like when of voting age, kids don’t really know how they stand on politics and Izcalli is at the forefront of discussing the topic and making it comfortable through humor. (Beltran)

Olympia performed in only a few shows during 1995 and then left the group before the birth of her first child in April 1996. She returned many years later in 2003 to work on our 0 to 5 Project funded by the Chicano Federation. Her returning to Teatro Izcalli and performing in a project that directly addressed parenting and gender roles allowed her to engage critically again with her own life. She recounts:

All of us were educated. All of us had a different perspective, trained to look at things critically. And being with a group of other critical thinkers, you can’t be lazy, you can’t just kind of sit back and be this is how it is. (Beltran)

Iyari has been performing in Teatro Izcalli since age two. When I asked her about those early years she states, “I didn’t really have a choice (laughs) because I was a little kid and so ‘cause you guys started it, I was there” (Arteaga). She further adds that it is now a “normal” experience for her to be on stage and how it is “second nature” after so many years. I also asked her to share her earliest memories about that time; she mostly remembers “doing shows at the Centro Cultural de la Raza and sometimes going to San Diego State University” (Arteaga). Understandably, she has no concrete memories about those early years, but she did share the following about what being in the group has meant to her:

It’s given me a lot of opportunities. Well I mean, first of all, it made me, well not just the teatro group but my life, the way you guys raised me with Teatro Izcalli, Izcalli, and then always going to events, the sweat, and all of that stuff made me into a Chicana, but then I think in terms of being in a teatro group and traveling and performing and all of that stuff and doing it for the reasons that we do it, like the activism, I think it’s made me more into a person who understands the importance of giving back and the importance of community and culture. And I think it’s made me a better person. (Arteaga)
It was May 1996 when Maria Figueroa a Mechista at the University of California, San Diego invited us to perform at Raza Awareness Week. She had this to say about being in MEChA and bringing Teatro Izcalli to her campus:

You know MEChA politicized you and it helps you to be conciente or it facilitates that concientización and so I thought, okay if I’m in this leadership position in MEChA then I can bring in community so that’s how that happened. (Figueroa-Chacon)

A few months later Maria Figueroa joined the troupe when Maria Santos left. Maria Figueroa was a student of Jorge Huerta’s and already had much theater experience prior to joining the cast. She recounts the following about her Teatro Izcalli experience:

It was like praxis. It was theory and the practice coming together and for me it was very empowering and very formative as well because I thought yeah, I’m actually doing what I am studying. I’m participating. It’s not just a study, or historical-like perspective but I’m participating in what I am learning in the coursework of my study. And the fact that I was so young helped to ground me in a sense in that work too. But I was also doing other work, I was Teatro Izcalli but I was also doing other work like at the Centro and shows there. (Figueroa-Chacon)

She performed with the group for a year then left for graduate school. After graduate school she returned to perform in a few shows and directed a major production for Teatro Izcalli at San Diego State University for the Associated Students Cultural Arts and Special Events in October of 1998.

In 1997 we held auditions at the Centro Cultural de la Raza to replace Maria Figueroa and prioritized the need to have a more equitable gender balance in the group. At that time there were four men in the group and two women – Maria Figueroa and I. Honestly, I do not recall verbatim our conversations as a group, but do remember it being a collective decision. We all wanted more women in the teatro group, especially me. Interestingly, this has been the only time that the group has held formal auditions in all of these years of operation. All of the women (Tina, Claudia, and Michelle) who auditioned became members of the troupe and were quickly integrated. They each related their audition story with laughter and here I share a bit as to why they decided to join Teatro Izcalli. Tina auditioned to be a part of the group

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34 Our director at the time of these auditions was Miguel-Angel Soria who is a founding member of the Taco Shop Poets and of Izcalli.
after she “heard about it through the MEChA grapevine” and because of her “love of being on stage” (Nuñez-Medina):

Because I was so involved in MEChA and in the community at that time it was a really good fit because they were talking about the messages that were things that we were all dealing with. Whether it was political messages or sexual identity, things like that. That’s why I was drawn. (Nuñez-Medina)

Tina was an undergraduate student at San Diego State University when she first saw Teatro Izcalli perform *Got Tortillas* in 1996. She had seen Culture Clash in high school so she was familiar with the genre of Chicano theater and she had also performed in a play that as she says, “put me in the circle of cultural theater” (Nuñez-Medina). So when she saw Teatro Izcalli she was drawn to the stories being embodied on the stage:

You feel like, I know this story but yet I’m excited to learn what they are talking about. It was things that you had either been through in your life or had heard other people had been through. And here it is and it was like, finally, somebody is telling a story that you know that doesn’t have to do with the classics and it doesn’t have to do with, you know mainstream culture. (Nuñez-Medina)

Claudia recalls falling in “love at first sight” with Chicana/Chicano theater after seeing Culture Clash on PBS, the play *Solo Café* in which Maria Figueroa acted, and Teatro Izcalli’s show at San Diego State University. Below she narrates how she came to audition for the group:

I was very close friends with a former member of the group Abel Macias and I forever wanted to be an actress. I didn’t find out I was funny until I was probably in college but people kept telling me you’re kind of funny so I really liked that. Before I was just mean and a “b” (laughs). And so Abel told me there was an opening and there was auditions and my friend Ricardo Lara pretty much forced me to go and audition. They handed me a monologue and I auditioned at the Centro Cultural de la Raza. It was something from *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*. The monologue was John Luguizamo’s. I was super nervous, I had never done that. (Cuevas-Ramirez).

Claudia articulates how she stepped out of her comfort zone in order to pursue a dream that day. It also presented her with the opportunity to further explore a budding aspect of her personality, the notion of being perceived as a “funny” person and not a “b.”

Like Tina, Claudia, Olympia, Maria Figueroa and I, Michelle had also been an activist as an undergraduate student. While at UCLA, she was active in the struggle for the Department of Chicano Studies in 1993. She was also involved in the student organization Conscious Students of Color and in Expression Latina, a theater group on campus. Along
with taking Chicano Studies classes, she attributes these experiences as really shaping her identity. After graduating from UCLA, she returned to San Diego and worked as a kindergarten teacher for three years. It was 1996 when she first saw Teatro Izcallí’s show *Got Tortillas* at the Centro Cultural de la Raza. She recounts, “I went to your show and I was just like so proud and so happy to see these parallels to our lives” (Tellez). Michelle performed with the group for three years until the summer of 2000 when she also went off to graduate school. She states the following about her time in the group:

I do remember feeling really excited to be a part of the group and feeling very privileged to share that space. And also I really liked that our work was never about just performing to perform. It was always about- you know- it wasn’t about personal accolades or you know who is the best actress or actor or whatever but it was about building bridges with our community and then funding the summer program. Like that to me was just amazing. (Tellez)

She further elaborates on learning about MEChA while in the group and how her teatro experience connected to her Chicana feminist awareness:

In fact teatro was my MEChA experience because I never fully participated in MECHA at UCLA. Izcalli was like a graduate course in Chicano Studies as it relates to San Diego and MEChA and that’s when I found out that MEChA had regional meetings and nationals, the organization. I didn’t know any of that stuff. I think it was an important vehicle for me to become a Chicana feminist or to name it, to be able to name it. It wasn’t the end and it wasn’t necessarily the beginning but it was an important vehicle. And because it gave me- like I said- it provided all kinds of historical context and lessons and relationships. (Tellez)

While the majority of the women had a distinct socio-political Chicana/Chicano consciousness that influenced their decision to join Teatro Izcallí, Veronica’s trajectory was more focused on the fact that it was simply a theater group. Veronica joined Teatro Izcali in 2007 to be a part of the *Juan More Beer* production, which is a comedy about the true meaning of Cinco de Mayo. It critiques the alcohol industry’s sexualization of women’s bodies for advertisement and how it has appropriated the Mexican holiday for its own corporate greed. When asked why she was interested in being a part of Teatro Izcallí she responded, “Honestly, the first appeal came from the theater standpoint” (Burgess). She reiterates that it was not necessarily the activist position that the group upholds that attracted her to join. It was more the stories being told on stage that drew her to the work:

That was the first time I was really like finally, cool, something that is educational and it’s funny and it’s fun for kids and it’s targeted to youth. I’m glad that we can
tell stories like this and still educate at the same time. I guess it’s something that I always believed in but there isn’t that much work out there that does that. (Burgess)

When asked about why she continues to perform with the group she offers the following:

It’s more the camaraderie and the connectedness and what I’ve always said. It’s definitely a different theater experience from other productions that I do. But that’s what makes it special. It is different and it’s that kind of sense of familia and connection and groundedness that the group itself shares, mostly from having been together so long that I kind of just enjoy being around. (Burgess)

All of the women shared their unique different paths to joining Teatro Izcalli and what became evident is that while engaging in the work of educating others, the women in Teatro Izcalli also learned about themselves and their communities.

**Educating Ourselves and Educating Others**

Educational research has shown the influence that community based organizations can have on enhancing the prospects of Chicana/Chicano youth in ways that benefit the entire community (Rumberger and Rodriguez 130). Since Teatro Izcalli was mainly founded with the intention to promote education, we use our position in the community to influence youth to think about their own educational paths. After our performances, especially at schools and community spaces, we always introduce ourselves, say our degrees, and recount a little about our college experiences. Michelle remembers what it was like for her to see us do this when she saw us perform for the first time:

That is a very impactful way to end a performance and I think for a number of reasons. Because first of all, you’re surprised to see that these talented individuals are also doing x, y, z and have gotten their education and then on another level they are still coming back to their communities. And so you feel a sense of pride in that you could relate to that. (Tellez)

Tina theorizes about how Teatro Izcalli’s work might influence high school students in their decision to pursue higher education:

Education is a big theme for Izcalli. I think that it was kind of the reason why the group started. I bet if you could go back and talk to every person who has sat in your audience and asked them how important was seeing us as an event and you deciding that you wanted to pursue higher education and I think that you would find that there’s a lot of kids who maybe thought that they couldn’t or wouldn’t ever go to college but saw us. And we did and we were just like them. We came from the same families. We came from the same neighborhoods. We have the same everyday struggles and we made it. (Nuñez-Medina)
Maria Santos adds to Tina’s thoughts by saying how teatro’s intention is to impart some knowledge to those who attend our shows:

You are teaching them something and for somebody it’s going to click or for somebody they’re going to be able to relate to something and there’s going to be a light bulb that is going to go off. So I think that is the message. We are teaching even though it’s through acting, through comedy. I would say that is our hope, is to teach. For them to leave with something, with a message. (Santos-Ochoa)

Some of Las Mujeres de Teatro Izcalli were actually in college themselves when they joined the group. I felt it was important to ask whether or not their participation in the group had an influence on their own educational trajectory especially when considering the group’s promotion of education and our embodying stories that resist deficit models of education. Olympia quickly responds, “Yes, definitely because education was a big topic when I came into teatro” (Beltran). She further elaborates about the challenges she faced to finish her own undergraduate work:

It was very hard, it took me eight years and three kids (laughs) it was hard for me... But it was a goal reinforced by teatro...So the support of the theater group, to be able to go and laugh at something, and have people that support you was really important. (Beltran)

Maria Figueroa states the following about her time in the group and her being in college:

I don’t know if I can say, yes it kept me in college or helped, but it definitely always served to-when you can be a role model for others that is an accountability. Especially as someone who is Chicana/Chicano identified. (Figueroa-Chacon)

Claudia recounts that for her, she knew she was going to finish school no matter what, but adds:

What it did influence was being in the group and a lot of the members or some of the members already had their BA. So the expectation was, you’re gonna finish school. For me it was almost expected. It almost felt like it was a requirement in order to be in the group that you were going to have higher education. Cuevas-Ramirez)

Tina states the following about her being a college student while also being an active member in Teatro Izcalli:

I would have not survived. I would have not graduated without the things that I had, that was able to connect to, like Izcalli, like MEChA because really what it did was sort of held me up in a culture. I think that it really helped me stay focused on something and have a goal. And want to graduate and want to be that role model for the person who was maybe like me. (Nuñez-Medina)
The importance of getting an education is so infused into the structure of the group and in how it operates, for younger teatro members who are still in school find themselves to be in an environment that supports and promotes their educational goals. Claudia adds to this sense of being a role model by speaking about Teatro Izcalli’s promotion of education both on and off stage:

The purpose is to educate the community, expose the problems, expose issues, talk about whatever the issue is going on. A lot of our skits are about higher education, the history and not knowing the history. I think when the younger kids start coming in, we don’t ask of them like what job are you gonna do, the first question is where are you gonna go to college? And how can we support them. (Cuevas-Ramirez)

Iyari responds to this by saying how performing in the group influenced her own thoughts about getting an education:

Like I’m not going to go out there and talk about the importance of education and then like not get an education, you know (laughs). I think it definitely did. Well, it wasn’t just that. Like for me personally teatro and then the people in my life who all pushed me, not saying that I was not going to do it anyways but it definitely motivated me and it reminded me that it’s important as a woman of color, I need to get an education if I want to make a difference. (Arteaga)

Michelle joined the cast before moving on to graduate school and shares the following thoughts about Teatro Izcalli’s implicit relationship to education and activism:

I think that being surrounded by folks who practiced ceremonia and community work but were also engaged in higher learning institutions helped me negotiate my multiple realities as well. So at least, I felt like we could still do everything and not walk away completely for where we were from. So I think that was an important tool for me as I proceeded and I think I already had an interest in going back to school.(Tellez)

Clearly, being in Teatro Izcalli created a space of support for the women as they navigated their schooling but it also became a space of accountability where the expectation of getting through the educational pipeline existed. This accountability continues to this day, for those of us who have already graduated from college and now mentor the next generation of teatristas to ensure that they will reach their own educational goals as well.

**BEING A MUJER AND THE CREATIVE PROCESS**

In this section the women speak as to how it has been to be a part of a co-ed teatro group and how the creative process works in the group. Most of the women do identify as
being Chicana feminists and those who do not, perceive “feminist” to be correlated to whiteness and thus a term that they do not necessarily embrace. As an example, Veronica chooses to call herself an “empowered woman.” However, I do believe that participation in Teatro Izcalli has supported feminist thinking in the women. Feminism is about choices, about fostering dialogue, and engaging in critical thinking regarding relevant and important issues for women. This clearly has been evident in the group as recounted by several of the women. Furthermore, in this section, I introduce the women in chronological order since it became quite evident that a shift did occur in the group once more women became members in 1997. In the first two years of the group, the women were more critical with certain aspects of their teatro experience. I begin with Maria Santos who shares how it felt for her to represent women on stage and the sense of responsibility that it fostered:

I liked that we were at least representing women out there. It wasn’t just all men. But that also made me feel like I had a big responsibility. You and I were the only ones. I felt like—oh my gosh—these women are looking at me and what I say can either impact them or change something in their lives. (Santos-Ochoa)

Maria Santos also spoke about the creative process and our use of improvisation and how this was also a source of apprehension for her:

I think that’s what made it fun too. While at the same time it’s what made it nerve wracking that my god is this going to work? … Like when we were doing Mariabertos, I remember perfecting it as we got it down. So that’s what made it terrifying too. Do I need to remember what I said last time or am I changing it this time? (Santos-Ochoa)

Olympia recalls how her involvement in teatro contributed to her “self-confidence as a woman” she adds, “Having danza, having teatro, and having Izcalli and the Círculo de Mujeres was part of my development and growth” (Beltran). In regards to Teatro Izcalli’s first shows, Olympia recalls how the men had more stage time than the women since there were more of them. But later adds that when she returned to the group in 2003 for the 0 to 5 Project, “There was just as much female time as male time. There were just as many strong female characters” (Beltran). Olympia also recounts teatro’s intial meetings and the writing process:

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35 Círculo de Mujeres, meaning “Circle of Women,” is another component of Izcalli.
I remember the beginning stages, some of our meetings flowed really well and it would be a very open collective and if it worked, it got written in. If it was funny and it worked well it got written and other days it was like banging our heads against the wall. (Beltran)

My recollection is similar to Olympia’s and Maria Santos in how the actos were created and improvised. I do remember if someone brought in an idea or a draft script, we would all work on it together, fleshed it out, then we would take it to the stage. I am not saying there were no disagreements or that some ideas were not considered, certainly heated dialogue was also a part of the process. I must also emphasize the fact that there were more men in the group at that time, being a mujer and having our perspective heard was definitely a challenge at times.

Maria Figueroa offers the following thoughts about being a woman in the group, the characters she played, and how she experienced the writing process:

In retrospect, I don’t know if the fact that we are women made us different or immediately connotes that we are going to have a different experience in teatro because it was just you and me for that period of time. In terms of the roles we played, they were stock characters but all of them were stock characters. These are just the roles we are going to satirize about our community. And vamonos lets just completely make them exaggerated. So whether we were men or women ibamos iguales when it came to rasquachismo, but as a woman in the group outside of the performance, in the creation we didn’t have a say in creating these characters either. I didn’t get the sense that we were truly like a collective process.36

In terms of the personal relationships, I found commaraderie, comadrismo with you…As a mujer, I was also really young. I was like 21? I was 20. Estaba chamaca.37 That’s really young but not to dismiss the fact that there’s like a feminist concientizacion or an awareness about gender kind of subjectivity. But I just felt like, it always was a fun experience. It was fun coming to rehearsals and performing and even being together outside of the performance. (Figueroa-Chacon)

The introduction of three women actors Tina, Claudia and Michelle in 1997 unquestionably changed the gender dynamic in the group for the better. Tina was one of the lead writers during her time in the group and spoke about how important it was “for the

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36 Ibamos iguales meaning “we were the same.” Rasquachismo refers to the Chicana/Chicano teatro aesthetic and vernacular practice that is unsophisticated and unpretentious that was used in actos and other theatrical statements popular in the 60s and 70s (Huerta, Chicano Drama 183).

37 Estaba chamaca meaning “I was young.”
women to share our point of view since it’s not always the same” (Nuñez-Medina). She further recounts the significance and contribution of the women in the group:

It’s important to know that you have a voice. That you should use that voice. That you should be a part of the creative process. Teatro Izcalli would not be Teatro Izcalli without the female energy, the female voice. (Nuñez-Medina)

Clearly, the writing process has been perceived differently by the women over the years. Claudia articulates how even though she is not a writer in the group, she does feel a sense of creative license to make her characters her own even if the work is written by a man:

I feel much more comfortable for someone else to write it and me to re-write it or me mold it. The roles that have been written for women we made them what we wanted to make them. (Cuevas-Ramirez)

Claudia and I spoke of this being a different type of “theater” experience in how the script is not rigidly adhered to and how this allows for you to shape your own characters. I believe this goes back to how the group was founded in that much of the original work was collectively improvised. This set the tone in the group of being able to change and mold your own characters even if you are not the original writer of the work.

As for Iyari, she articulates the following about also feeling a sense of accountability to other young women in the audience. In particular she spoke about her performance of “Tina” in the acto Educación Más Alta:

Like if there are girls who have gone through that where their dad won’t let them go to college but then they see this character who is strong and she won’t back down. And she’s like-no, I’m gonna go and I don’t care what you say. Like I think it’s important for me to remember that that these characters might be really empowering for other young girls. And really important for them to see because it might inspire them or remind them that they’re strong too and that they can overcome, whether it’s something like that or something bigger. (Arteaga)

As a working actor, Veronica echoes what many of the women expressed during their interviews, the importance of having positive female roles in Teatro Izcalli and how this awareness has influenced her thoughts about her other work:

It’s made me more aware of how important it is to really push for positive and empowering female roles. It’s easy to forget sometimes doing different kind of work but not just being a woman but being a Latina woman. It has kind of helped to explore that more. (Burgess)

Tina relays the following about her experience, “For the most part I think it was great. I think at one point we had more women than we did men actually performing at one time”
(Nuñez-Medina). She adds that she feels there is still a lot of material that is “untapped” by the group such as “sexuality, certainly pregnancy, and motherhood if we are talking about the female side of it” (Nuñez-Medina). About the group dynamic of being in a co-ed group she adds:

There are always challenges in a group dynamic with men and women. And who is going to be in charge and who is gonna make the decisions and I think that was certainly a challenge that we faced a time or two. It’s great to be in a male-female group, it’s also really great to be in an all female ensemble. (Nuñez-Medina)

I take from Tina’s cue to expand on work that only the women created outside of the parameters of Teatro Izcalli, although some of us were still in the group. I include this work here to honor these independent collaborations and to demonstrate the close relationships that the women have developed over the years through being in Teatro Izcalli. Although this work is notably very different from the comedy-based aesthetic of Teatro Izcalli, being involved in these projects is certainly a part of my own teatrista testimonio.

In 1999, I was asked to create a teatro piece for a Dia de los Muertos event at the Centro Cultural de la Raza. I wrote La Ofrenda and asked Tina, Claudia, and Maria Figueroa to perform in it. The piece blends Danza Azteca alabanzas, movement, and teatro to tell the story of building an altar to honor our relatives who have passed. This work is very memorable for me since we performed La Ofrenda two weeks after I returned from Puerto Rico for my maternal grandfather’s funeral. I recall performing La Ofrenda with much emotion as I acknowledged on stage my abuelo’s very recent passing. I was taken back to my grandfather’s funeral. His casket covered with an American flag, a veteran who fought two American wars and lived most of his life in the United States yet chose to be buried in the embrace of his Borinquen querida. I believe this is how my grandfather asserted his humanity and exercised his choice in what may have been a life full of powerlessness. For me, this project was a self-affirming moment as to the healing power of embodying our stories and our pain in teatro. We performed La Ofrenda again the following year in Chicano Park for a Dia de los Muertos event.

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38 Abuelo meaning “grandfather.”

39 Borinquen is the Taino Indigenous word for Puerto Rico. Querida meaning “beloved.”
In the spring of 2008, once again Tina, Claudia, Maria Figueroa, and I joined to create a piece we titled *Pintame en Vida: Murales de la Vida* set in San Diego’s Chicano Park. The idea for this collaboration came out of a desire to once again work together and to present our “work in progress” at the Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS) Summer Institute in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Each of the women wrote their own piece, be it a monologue, acto, or vignette. Tina wrote a monologue titled *Ameyalli* that is about a biracial woman who comes to Chicano Park to see her father’s mural before meeting him for the first time in her life. Claudia and Maria Figueroa together wrote a dialogue about two comadres meeting at the park to discuss the complexities of living and crossing the borders of the San Diego/Tijuana region. I wrote an acto titled *Chula Chuca Chola* which is about Chola an undocumented aspiring college student who is on the verge of quitting school due to the real life fear of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and deportations in her community. At Chicano Park, she solicits advice from the mural of the Virgen de Guadalupe who comes to life as a 1940s pachuca- Chuca. The first time this acto was performed, I was the Chuca and Maria Figueroa played the Chola. This acto is now being performed as a part of Teatro Izcalli’s line-up with Veronica or Claudia playing the role of the Chuca and I play the role of Chola.

When the women collaborated on this project we decided to call ourselves Hijas de Coatlicue. Interestingly though, when we performed at MALCS we were recognized as being Teatro Izcalli since Claudia, Tina, and I had self-identified as being from the group and it was listed in the program. At the time, Claudia and I were still in the group and Tina had recently left because of the added pressures of full-time work and motherhood. In term of this project’s connection to Teatro Izcalli, I feel there is the link since we all have been a part of the group at one time or another. Maria Figueroa articulates that she saw this collaboration as being “associated yeah but I don’t see it as a branch there of, maybe because I’m the one more far removed like from the group in terms of years” (Figueroa-Chacon). She adds how this experience was “a collective creation that was truly collectively created piece where we were able to individually write our piece and bring them together” (Figueroa-Chacon). Claudia remembers the experience as “feeling very organic. It felt very natural” (Cuevas-Ramirez). Tina adds to this by saying:
I feel like that was one of the most powerful creative processes that I’ve ever been a part of in my life. Collaborative creative process. Where there were many people coming together to put out a product. And I don’t know if it was because we’re all women or I don’t know if it’s because our personalities mesh well, but probably a little bit of both. (Nuñez-Medina)

As for myself, I remember the experience as being truly magical. We all work very well together and it is a very different experience working with only women from the writing process, to rehearsals, to the performance. There was another level of understanding—that granted- may have been because of knowing each other so long and having done teatro together before. It is also important for me to point out that Michelle moderated the discussion for our workshop at MALCS. Michelle recounts her participation in the workshop as feeling like she was still a part of the group, “We still have a relationship and a connection that goes beyond time and space and distance” (Tellez). It was indeed a reunion of Teatro Izcalli mujer teatristas. I also must mention that on this particular trip we had the opportunity to sit and talk with Chicana writer and master storyteller Denise Chavez in her bookstore in Mesilla, New Mexico. This was one of the highlights of the trip for me as well. We shared our stories through laughter about growing up Mexican, performing teatro, and being women. Being in this círculo with Michelle, Maria Figueroa, Tina, Claudia, and Denise Chavez is a memory that I will forever cherish.40

TEATRO IZCALLI PEDAGOGY: EL CIRCULO

As is evident form analyzing the interviews and my testimonio, there are several ways in which we practice a spiritually holistic Teatro Izcalli pedagogy. Here I also explore the ways we engage bodymindspirit when we gather together as a teatro group in a círculo before our performances and during our rehearsals.

Before each performance we always gather in a círculo and this sets the tone for our shows. As we speak our truths, always in the direction of the heart-to the left-our intention for the work always reveals itself. Our words then intermix with our heightened awareness of the audience members anticipating the stories to be embodied on stage. We engage our bodies in the círculo by holding hands and share our thoughts and feelings, which sometimes

40 “Círculo” meaning circle but it also makes reference to the traditional Indigenous talking circle format where people gather to engage in plática that may impart a healing or a teaching.
invokes tears or laughter. Similar to the practice of curanderismo documented by Elena Avila, we acknowledge the Creator or our higher power in the círculo before we present nuestra ofrenda para la comunidad.41 Avila writes, “It is unthinkable for a curandero not to call upon Divine Energy for help before he or she begins to work. Divine Energy was the very cornerstone and foundation of my healing work (128). This speaks of us as well, although most of us do follow the path of the “Red Road” there are individuals within the group who identity as Christian or Catholic or follow other spiritual beliefs. This is bridged when we meet in our círculo and have the opportunity to be mindful of our connection to each other, to our audience, and to the universe. This is also the foundation of spiritual activist work that recognizes our interconnectedness to all creation in the universe and aims to heal the traumas of racism and other “isms” by dedicating ourselves to social justice work.

It is in the círculo that we become one as we prepare to step onto the stage. We ask for protection, for blessings, and most importantly for the opportunity to be a conduit for healing for others. Whether or not we verbalize it, this has been our intention and it is looming all around us. Iyari speaks about having the círculo before our performances, “I think it motivates us to go out there and give like 110% and to also remember what we’re doing the show for” (Arteaga). Veronica recounts about our use of the círculo and adds that as a Catholic, she gives thanks to her higher power before she walks onto the stage but recognizes that “to do it as a group, it’s so much more powerful” (Burgess):

You know that’s one of my favorite parts when I first started with the group because again that was very different. I had never done anything like that in any of my productions in college or outside of college. (Burgess)

The practice of having a círculo before our shows has always been a part of our Teatro Izcalli practice. Maria Figueroa recounts about our use of the círculo and how it is a different approach to theater:

That’s a very different methodology technique in the execution of performance because theater is ritual-yeah- and there’s ritual associated with it but they’re not necessarily seen as spiritual. They don’t have a spiritual component to them and so the sage going around in the círculo is the spiritual aspect, grounding of that practice. (Figueroa-Chacon)

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41 Nuestra ofrenda para la comunidad is “our offering for the community.”
Michelle also articulates how it was when she was in Teatro Izcalli that she learned about the pedagogy of the círculo and how it’s now a practice that she continues to use in her life:

I learned how to do the círculos, the palabra, I learned it in Izcalli. And even to this day, like I’ve done a ton since then and it’s like I remember okay vamos por aca a la izquierda and you know the little things. Giving voice to little people, having to ensure that when Iyari was three or four that if we were passing the sage, she had a place in that. (Tellez)

Michelle’s testimonio also addresses one of the fundamental elements of the use of the círculo, it dissolves hierarchies. By being in a círculo, all persons are equally as important and have the opportunity to speak. Consequently, the círculo also heals ageism and how western culture devalues what a child may bring to the table. Iyari was always recognized as a contributing member of the group and always had a role in the group on and off stage.

Due to the largely voluntary nature of the group and the enormous amount of time, energy, and commitment we have given to the group in order for it to persist for 17 years, there has been another motivating factor that has driven us to partake in Teatro Izcalli. Yes, the few moments of fame and perks are enjoyable, but ultimately there has been something greater that has driven us to write, rehearse, and perform for the community. We are relaying hope and in the process we are reminding ourselves of this hope as well. We are embodying the great tradition of storytelling as a medicinal practice that heals (Gonzales 39). How could we not be touched by this sacredness? Michelle adds to this by saying:

We are like a walking history book in a lot of ways…telling our stories in ways that’s accessible...valuing our stories and realizing that our knowledge, that we have knowledges to share, that our lives are knowledge. (Tellez).

Our stories of hope uphold the fact that our knowledges are indeed valid, significant, and important. As teatristas we embody these stories of hope and reveal painful experiences, but this also transforms us. Anzaldúa writes that the story transforms the storyteller, for only through the body may the human soul transform (Borderlands 97). Moraga echoes this by stating that through the enactment of historical oppression in performance, pieces of ourselves shattered by racist and colonial incursions are then re-collected and reconfigured (A

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42 Vamos para aca a la izquierda meaning “we go to the left.”
39). It is therefore through our embodiment of stories in teatro that also engage our minds and our spirits that allow for shifts and healings to then take place within us. In the following section I present how performing teatro has imparted a healing or facilitated a new found conocimiento for us as teatritas.

**La Cultura Cura and Curandera Work on the Stage**

I have intentionally left my analysis of the responses about healing for the end of this chapter because I feel that all of the women’s prior answers lead up to and inform their responses to these particular questions: How has performance in Teatro Izcalli contributed to a healing of the women’s bodymindspirit? How has Teatro Izcalli contributed to community healing? What I found is that healing did result from the embodiment of stories that resist colonization and patriarchy, but it was also due to engaging in the decolonizing practice of “curandera (healer) work” as defined by scholar Laura E. Pérez (1998). Pérez’ curandera (healer) work describes the work of Chicana writers and artists who are “reclaiming and reformulating spiritual worldviews that are empowering to them as women (Chicana Art 41). Although Pérez focuses on art making as curandera (healer) work, I am expanding on her concept to also include performing teatro and the moments off the stage in how Teatro Izcalli espouses an Indigenous pedagogical practice that includes moments of prayer, intention, meditation, burning sage, and meeting in a círculo. Furthermore, Pérez asserts that curandera (healer) work is a conscious act of healing the cultural susto that causes cultural fragmentation of our bodymindspirits because of colonial and neocolonial ordeals (Chicana Art 21). This act of healing extends to teatrista and audience members alike.

As suggested by many of the women I interviewed, Teatro Izcalli became a space to foster being an activist, an artist, and a thinker. It has empowered our voices and has become a space where we are able to unite and heal the fragmentation of our bodyminds. As Moraga writes, teatro can be perceived as a “contemporary curanderismo that emerges from an ancestral knowledge that a story told with the body can cure and create great warriors of heart on the cultural battlefield” (A Xicana Codex of Consciousness 41-42). The women’s stories of healing and resistance speak of these moments in which they experienced a shift of consciousness, a healing, or a new found conocimiento on a bodymindspirit level.
I begin with Maria Figueroa who could not recount a specific healing moment associated to her participation in Teatro Izcalli but offered the following narration about the power of teatro to impart healing through laughter and how it humanizes our community’s experiences:

As teatristas in this rehumanization process we are part-I see that-as you know-we are part of that rehumanizing legacy. And that’s healing in of itself. And so does it happen through laughier, of course. You know laughter is medicinal…We create works that trigger that emotion or that emotional response you know and so for our community that has never seen teatro or is very limited in exposure to live performance to see themselves projected even in a humorous way where they know it’s not really them but there’s something about that characters that reminds them of themselves or their experiences and to laugh with it and to laugh at it is gonna do something physiologically to the body just on that level, but it’s also gonna do something to their psyche and to their spirit. And that’s all bodymindspirit connected. That’s part of the healing. That’s all integrated into the healing journey and the healing process. (Figueroa-Chacon)

Maria Figueroa articulates how teatro and our use of laughter affect the audience on a bodymindspirit level. Naturally, this engagement in teatro also affects us as teatristas on a bodymindspirit level as recounted next by Maria Santos.

Maria Santos shares what being in Teatro Izcalli has meant to her and what she considers to be a healing that was facilitated from being a part of the group:

I just feel very proud and honored to be a part of something that started as an idea. And who can say that? How many people can say that? I was there and it has taught me a lot. How to be yourself, how to accept yourself, who you are. Yeah, you may not be perfect, but just be who you are…So I think that if anybody can continue to do the work of teatro and conveying messages of what it means to be a Chicana/Chicano that it’s not just a term, it’s an identity, something to be proud of. More power to them.

I think maybe I was able to confront some discrimination against me that I didn’t know like when I was younger. I know I was discriminated against but being, having these issues that we were talking about was like–yeah, that’s me. So I think that healed me a little bit that it wasn’t my fault that I was a Mexicana. It was somebody else’s issue. It wasn’t me. It wasn’t because of my skin. It was somebody that couldn’t accept that part of me. So just doing some of those different skits, I think that was a healing. I was able to not blame myself for being Mexican. (Santos-Ochoa)

Maria’s powerful story is about the decolonizing healing that she experienced from engaging in teatro. By addressing critical issues for our community on stage, she was able to heal some
of the susto that she had sustained from experiencing racism and reconfigure a new perspective about her own life.

As for Olympia, she speaks about how she sees Teatro Izcalli’s “healing work” as taking place on two levels and how engaging in this healing work has affected her:

I see it as healing work on two levels. I think it’s healing for the audience on one level. On a level that we’ve chosen for them. We understand what kind of conflicts are going on in their community and we pick that through humor. You know it’s like, we recognize your struggle we know what is going on. We’re gonna give it back to you in a humorous way. I’m gonna offer you a way to have a relationship with it in a positive way. That’s a healing that we’ve chosen to give our audience. On a whole another level developing that way, that package, that gift is healing for us! It’s empowering. It was empowering for me as woman, empowering to me as a mom, as a Latina being able to show issues that were important to me, to voice it in a public way, in a strong public way, to educate. Especially the 0 to 5... I think in the 0 to 5 Project I healed a lot personally in relationship to my own children. (Beltran)

By being involved in the 0 to 5 Project as prop master and as an actor allowed Olympia to critically engage again with certain aspects of her life that we were addressing on stage such as pregnancy, parenting skills, challenging gender roles, and questioning cultural stereotypes.

Olympia further speaks about the challenge of being at home with her three children and how returning to teatro provided a space for her to re-connect with all aspects of herself:

Cause it’s hard to not be yourself for the sake of raising kids for a while. I mean it is something every mom goes through, but for me personally it felt good to be able to be funny, and loud, and seen and be creative. (Beltran)

Olympia also spoke at length about painting a mural on a mini Chicano Park pillar for our Anthology set in 2010. She painted the mural with her mother and daughter and detailed how this was a healing experience for her as well, “It was such a blessing to be able to do that and have that experience of all three women and discussing the things that made us strong” (Beltran). During our plática, Olympia shared about the significance of each of the images painted on the pillar. This particular pillar is the one used for the Chula Chuca Chola acto. She relays the following about seeing our performance and how her pillar was used in the show:

It was full circle for us. The three of us and all of this was being painted and then to see how it was used and to see those two mujeres and their dialogue express things that are important and relevant to each of us as women...it was a perfect ring around the circle. (Beltran)
Although Olympia had been out of the group for over five years when she painted this pillar, Teatro Izcalli’s has always maintained an “open-door” policy that allows for past teatristas to return to perform or to work on projects with the group.

Michelle’s story of resistance and healing occurred while she was on stage performing in *El Nopal Boy*. Her story depicts the multiple shifts occurring within while performing the transgressive act of embodying a stereotyped upper class white woman on stage. Her worry about a white friend’s reaction to her portrayal is what triggered the following healing:

> And then it dawned on me and I don’t know how quickly though. That all of those years right, all of those years people never once asked me how it felt to be called a beamer. Never once asked me how it felt to be racialized and gendered. And never once said, when they said to me, “Oh, but you’re not like the other Mexicans.” I mean you know all of this stuff. They never once asked me how it felt. So why was I concerned about what she would think about, you know what I mean? So not that I’m trying to say that I didn’t care about her I mean that was my friend. But maybe it would be good for her to be challenged. And so that was huge, I still talk about that to this day. (Tellez)

Iyari’s healing story is about performing a monologue that she wrote as part of the high school teatro group that she was instrumental in organizing. Veronica Burgess, Macedonio Arteaga, and I taught the after school classes with approximately 20 students. The students named their group Teatro Otra Vez. For two years, the group rehearsed and performed Teatro Izcalli actos for school assemblies at the end of the school year. During the second year in February 2010, four of the students developed their own monologues about identity and performed them at the Lyceum Theater before a Culture Clash show. Iyari was one of the students and she now performs her monologue with Teatro Izcalli as well. She recounts the experience of performing this monologue for her school as being a challenge:

> When I do it like at our shows, I’m not that nervous about it because I know most of the people there are mostly Chicanos and they understand, but like doing it for totally different audience in high school especially in high school, cause high school is just, you just say high school and everybody gets it. (Arteaga)

I asked her if she felt it was a healing moment because of her writing the monologue. She responds how it was the actual act of performing the monologue that facilitated the healing:

> I don’t think it was the writing process ‘cause like I said, I just wrote it. I really didn’t think about it. It was the performance more because I had to get over it and do it even if I didn’t want to. But in the end it was good that I did do it. (Arteaga)
After her performance, Iyari shares how it felt when students spoke to her about her monologue. She also theorizes at to what she thinks being a part of the group did for the other teatro students:

Everybody was like, “Wow, that was really powerful.” And they were like I had no idea any of you guys like have gone through that stuff… Like for those kids that became a part of the teatro group, it was a healing process for them too because it gave them a voice…That’s the whole point, well, I think it is. To inspire other like little branches, we’re just one tree and those are the seeds and they’re going to grow out and then they’re going to plant more seeds and it’s going to keep going. I don’t think we do it to be the only Chicano theater group. Like Culture Clash inspired you guys to start the group, I mean it’s going to happen, we’re going to inspire somebody else and they’re going to inspire somebody else. (Arteaga)

Iyari also shares her thoughts on Teatro Izcalli’s work as being healing work that validates young women who see our performances:

I think it’s healing because like I said for girls, like seeing themselves on stage is healing for them especially because watching t.v. or movies or other plays there’s not many Chicanas or people of color. (Arteaga)

Iyari’s story is also about resisting the educational system since she addresses the importance of learning about one’s culture and engaging in activism in her monologue. Furthermore, her story exemplifies a spiritual activist position in that by speaking her own truth, others were able to connect to the work and hopefully were inspired to also create change. This is a basis of spiritual activist’s work that uses commonalities and interconnectedness as a catalyst for transformation.

Veronica did not articulate a healing moment during our interview but she did speak about her most memorable moment being in the group. It took place when we traveled to Denver, Colorado in March of 2010. We performed at Northern Colorado University in Greeley, at La Escuela Tlatelolco, and a community space known as Café Cultura. She articulates how sometimes she “feels out of the loop” and not sure what or who we are talking about since she does not have a Chicana/Chicano Studies background but adds that she simply asks for clarification in those instances. It is during our trip to Denver that Veronica learned about the Chicana/Chicano history of the city. Veronica recounts how this immersion in this Chicana/Chicano experience facilitated a shift in her thinking:

I guess through that trip it was almost endowed upon me. Almost like I didn’t have a choice, this is where I am and this is who I roll with and this is what and
who we represent. And so that label or that identity was endowed to me through that experience of the audience and the experience of the people we were there to talk to. Whether it was a performance or just talking to people and it was definitely strong in that moment of-I guess you know-I’m brown too and here I am speaking these words and talking to these kids and sharing my experiences so whether I like it or not this is what I am. So you know even though I don’t call myself Chicana, culturally all of the things-you know-the stories that we tell, like I said that’s the part that I feel most connected to. So in that sense to me I felt like-oh you know-I am. I am Chicana. And I felt it strongly ‘cause the people we came across and them sharing with us. I guess mostly for me was that the students whether it was at the college level or the Escuelita. The kids relayed to me and to us, how important the work was to them. So I kind of was like -oh wow- this is very, very important to you and I’m glad that I can be here to share it with you. (Burgess).

Clearly, this is a pivotal moment in Veronica’s trajectory with the group where she experienced a new found conocimiento about the importance of bringing our stories to the community and how this also has affected her own thoughts about identity.

Tina’s story is about the process of writing her monologue *Ameyalli* that she performed with the women at the MALCS conference in 2008. She recounts how writing and performing this very personal piece provided a healing on a bodymindspirit level for her:

I think when you are writing and performing things that have to do with your real life which in my case did, it helps you really understand. Like it helped me understand, why those things happened a lot more. It helped me put it into perspective a lot more. Where from the outside looking in it’s easy to judge and say, why did they do that? Why did they do that? When you write from that person’s perspective then you kind of understand why. You know, well, they had this going on and this going on. So it’s very therapeutic. It’s traumatic on some levels. I think there’s time when I would be writing my piece and I would just cry because I was angry. I was really angry with the whole situation. And so writing about it just really-cause writing is a slow process. It’s not like a thought that you have and it goes away. It’s a slow process. So I was angry. I was happy. I was sad. I was all those things rolled into one. And then actually putting it out there like naked for other people to see and make their own judgment on. Then you feel like (laughs) then it’s really, you know a whole new experience. It’s very freeing. It helps you to kind of (exhales) it’s like an exhale. It’s like you hold your breath and you hold your breath and this whole thing is very tight and (exhales) and then like you exhale. And people embrace it and you know maybe they have a similar experience and hopefully, maybe I or the group helped that person open up about their own experience. (Nuñez-Medina).

Claudia relays her healing story as being “very layered.” Claudia has been in the group for over 15 years now and had many thoughts to share about her journey. This is partly
due her being an MFT Intern who has given much thought to the therapeutic value of teatro, which she wrote about for her Master’s thesis. She begins by saying why she continues to perform in the group after so many years:

Because the group met a need for me. Doing theater, having a familia, making people laugh, really fulfilled many goals but an actual hueco in me. I was able to transform who I was through theater, through acting. (Cuevas-Ramirez)\(^{43}\)

Part of the transformation that Claudia speaks about is her battle with her weight over the years. She spoke extensively about how teatro became the place where she confronted her weight issue:

And the way to protect myself was to put on a lot of weight but little did I know that weight made me stronger. And so my process going through the theater and exposing myself and putting myself in such a vulnerable position helped me strip away the layers that I had to protect me. It gave me confidence. It gave me control.

Perdi la verguenza.\(^{44}\) Just being able to be transparent so no matter how much armor I put on myself, the people, the audience was seeing right through that. And things that were so unconscious. Like it wasn’t like I was consciously trying to see my-who I really am. It was just this re-solidifying that I can be accepted regardless, because it’s really about who I am and what I bring to the table. And the relationship that I have with the people in the audience. I mean, every time I was on stage, I gave everything and they gave me everything and so it was a relationship. And you know, it’s like touching of the soul. (Cuevas-Ramirez)

She further adds how she feels about her body now, “I have become really comfortable with it” (Cuevas-Ramirez). Claudia’s healing story exemplifies the bodymindspirit connection in how all aspects of her being body, mind, and spirit have been involved in her teatro work.

Scholar Shelley Scott writes about embodiment as a healing process in theater:

Women, especially, often associate their experience of their own bodies with lack of control, a sense of alienation and even loathing, which is further compounded by histories of abuse. To reclaim one’s body, to physically re-inhabit it in a public ceremony of sorts, can be both personally healing and artistically profound. (125)

Claudia’s healing was facilitated by the embodiment of teatro work that forced her to process her relationship with her body but there is also a very spiritual component to Claudia’s healing. During her plática, Claudia made several references to the spiritual nature of teatro.

\(^{43}\) Hueco meaning “void.”

\(^{44}\) Perdi la verguenza meaning “I no longer felt embarrassed.”
by stating how our use of comedy affects the audience, she states, “Laughter is healing and it opens your soul to receive the medicine. And it’s the hardest way of doing it. It’s hard to do it because not everybody has that talent” (Cuevas-Ramirez). She further adds that as teatristas we also receive energy or “medicine from the audience” (Cuevas-Ramirez). The interconnected spiritual nature of our teatro work is most evident by Claudia’s articulation of how our work affects others and ultimately how it affects us as well.

**THE HEALING POWER OF LAUGHTER**

In all eight interviews, the women talked about the healing power of laughter in our teatro work. Here, Huerta theorizes on the use of laughter by Chicana/Chicano teatro groups:

> Like any other ethnic group, Chicanos have responded to their marginalization with laughter to build community, uniting in a common cause. I believe that they have employed humor in their theatre as a means of protection, as a weapon, and as an educational tool. Chicanos laugh at the weaknesses of their oppressors and in so doing, feel superior to them (“Introduction” 7).

Indeed using comedy to address difficult issues is a tactic that Teatro Izcalli has utilized for many years now. As recounted by the women, the use of comedy also allows for certain information and healing to be imparted to the audience. In addition to this, the women spoke about our own laughter and use of play during rehearsals. In fact, all of the women spoke of Teatro Izcalli’s use of comedy and the laughter that occurred off stage as being one of their favorite parts of being in the group. Maria Figueroa adds:

> Teatro is play and you have to have fun. You have to take risks. And I think one of the things that this particular theater group in its strong commitment to rasquachismo is that it takes risks, more so then…I feel like those moments on the stage where I played a lot in risk taking made it fun, made it memorable. (Figueroa-Chacon)

Michelle echoes Maria’s response by adding her thoughts on how as activists we also need the healing power of laughter in our lives:

> Everyone can relate at some level to what we are talking about. You know what I mean? So to be able to sort of like say I’m gonna heal this trauma cause in a lot of ways what we go through in our everyday lives being in these bodies, in this place, in this particular border town is sort of traumatic, right? Constantly negotiating and so then to be able to share these stories and then to bring laughter to it is—that was super important to me. Because I think we become really like militant in our activism and in our desire to change the world in the way it is. We stop laughing. We stop taking care of our spirits in that way. (Tellez)
Olympia spoke about being an only child and how her biggest lesson from teatro is that she learned not to take herself “too seriously.” This was facilitated by our engagement as a group in laughing and joking off stage as well. She shares her conocimiento:

I think the relationship I gained with the people in teatro and the process of being in theater, I learned not to take myself so serious. It’s okay. Caria is okay. And it’s growing and learning. It’s a good way. I think those skills even help me now. (Beltran)

Similarly, Tina recounts how being in Teatro Izcalli taught her something very important about herself as well, her love of laughter. She states:

It opened up something in me that I love to make people laugh. That I have a love for that… I make a joke out of everything, And I don’t remember being that way before Izcalli. But now like every-I find humor in just about anything, any conversation that I am having with anyone. You know, there’s always like a punch line. (Nuñez-Medina)

For the audience who engages in the laughter, Maria Santos sees it as “laughter is healing, they’re able to forget whatever they came with, whatever burden. They’re here to enjoy the moment” (Santos-Ochoa). Olympia expands on our healing use of comedy and laughter to reach youth and educate about important issues.

I think it’s almost the only way kids are listening right now… I don’t think it really sinks in until it is made personal the way Teatro Izcalli makes it personal to our particular cultural group is through humor. We recognize chistes and dichos and stuff like that to where it opens the mind to receive that kind of information. It’s hard to get a message across to kids right now, especially the digital age with Iphones and instant gratification and instant information. It doesn’t sink in. It’s just a glance that and process and then you move on but with Teatro Izcalli it’s an experience. Like when you live something, you have an experience and you make an emotional connection with the humor or tears, whatever that experience is you take it home and then you use it again. My kids are always quoting… They’re gonna use that line somewhere else and when a topic, a political topic comes up, they can bring that out and use that in their arsenal because they understand it and have had experience with it. (Beltran)

Evidently, the use of laughter is very healing but it also provides a means to address complex issues that people have difficulty discussing.

45 Caria meaning “make fun of” or “jokingly, giving someone a hard time about something.”

46 Chistes are “jokes” and dichos are “colloquial sayings.”
THE HEALING USE OF THE PLÁTICA METHOD

Since sharing stories triggers memories, I was well aware that the conversations during the interviews/pláticas could bring forth a range of human emotions. Indigenous scholar Margaret Kovach writes about this link:

Indigenous research frameworks have a decolonizing agenda that involves healing and transformation. When asking Indigenous people for their stories in research, a researcher must be aware that the choice of method opens a door for healing associated with decolonization (125).

Utilizing the plática method for my interviewing also facilitated moments of healing during the research gathering process. I feel this is what occurred during my plática with Maria Santos. She left the group in the summer of 1996 and here is a brief account as to her reason for leaving:

It was tough leaving because I didn’t see eye to eye with somebody else. And because I wasn’t writing because I wasn’t as involved as other people were, it wasn’t fun anymore and I was questioned. So I liked the meetings and all of that and getting together. That was fun! And I think in the end I missed that but you know what, I realized it’s not something that I want to do. So why am I fighting this? (Santos-Ochoa)

During my plática with Maria Santos it became evident that her remembering why she left the group was indeed a painful memory. I could see the tears welling up in her eyes and as she continued her storytelling, I could tell that she choose her words very thoughtfully. I know that there were things that she kept to herself but my hope is that by finally speaking of it after so many years maybe the heaviness of her story had been lifted. I can only hope that the plática provided her a moment of desahogo and a sense of agency. As she continued sharing her memories, her energy lightened and there appeared to be a shift in her demeanor perhaps signaling a new found conocimiento regarding the importance and significance of her contribution to the formation and the history of the group. Something very interesting happened as well during our plática that did not with any of the others, Maria Santos organically became the interviewer. She asked poignant questions of me about the changes in the group from those beginning days, how the group has grown, how people get along, how

47 Desahogo meaning “to undrown.” In curanderismo, to desahogar oneself is when a person “speaks until everything has been released from the body, soul, and heart” (Avila 78).
the writing process has changed, and how I feel about passing the torch on to the next generation. Her questions provided moments for my own reflection. This is an example of the mutual learning that can happen by using the plática method.

When we started the group, the world of teatro was a new endeavor for most of us but we did it with the best intentions and perhaps that was our saving grace. In looking back, I can definitely point out the actos or performances that just did not work but I can also laugh at them. It was all a part of the process and the journey of conocimiento. Maria Santos and I definitely laughed about those moments as well during our plática. Her interview gifted me with a deeper sense of my own development and growth since those first years.

**ADDITIONAL INTERESTING FINDINGS**

In this chapter, I have focused on the themes of identity formation, activism, education, our pedagogy, and the healing power of teatro. In coding the interviews however, there were additional themes that became evident. In this section, I provide a brief overview of such findings.

Although I did not specifically inquire about motherhood and/or its’ relationship to activism, several of the women of Teatro Izcalli raised the issue of having to negotiate their time and energy as mothers while choosing to continue to be active in their community. Broyles-Gonzalez writes briefly about motherhood in teatro and how the women of El Teatro Campesino felt this pressure as well. She writes:

> Any theater history that places women’s experiences at its center will have to include categories such as childbearing and child-care. The rigid views of gender roles both on and off the stage created a special set of problems peculiar to women in the theater. These problems illustrate the close relationship between the private the public spheres in theatrical life. (146)

I can relate to this since my teatro experiences are directly intertwined with my being a mother. My daughter was only two years-old when we founded the group. I never thought about not having her at rehearsals or not taking her to shows. Frankly, it was never questioned by anyone either. Also relevant was the fact that my husband and I were young, with limited economic resources, so having to pay for childcare was out of the question. Broyles-Gonzalez documents Socorro Valdez’ thoughts about motherhood in El Teatro Campesino, “The company had to make it possible for children to go with us. That’s what it
had to do. Staying home had to be a matter of choice and not a matter of having children. That point was very important: the establishment of the acting mother” (148). This is my reality as a teatrista, I have been the “acting mother” in the group all of these years. It was the choice that I made to be involved and consequently my daughter was implicated in that decision. In all of the interviews with the women, the significance of Iyari and her involvement in Teatro Izcalli also became a topic during our pláticas.

The impactful role of having a child in the group, Iyari was also an unexpected finding during the research process. All of the women mentioned Iyari during their interviews. Claudia jokingly spoke about how at first she thought people were not going to take us seriously because they saw a child on stage with us. She adds that for her, having Iyari around actually enforced a type of “morality code” in the group. She relays the following about this:

I think that set the tone for the group to where you are not going to say cochinadas cause there’s a child and I think that was great for the group. I mean in retrospect that was great because it kept us focused. There was an embodiment all the time with us of who our future was and why we were doing this. And so Iyari is really significant when it comes to the group. (Cuevas-Ramirez)

Tina also spoke about seeing Iyari grow up in the group and how she thinks its “beautiful.” She adds:

I don’t think there’s any part of her life that isn’t influenced by it. From who she decides to be friends with, how she decides to pursue her education. I think, god, who wouldn’t be so lucky. I mean I think that is the gift that she’ll have forever, that stage. (Nuñez-Medina)

Furthermore, Tina spoke of how she wishes she could “do that” meaning continue her teatro work while juggling motherhood and full-time employment. She recounts that when she left teatro it was because “something had to give” in her life:

It wasn’t that I wanted to give it up because I miss it every day. I miss the camaraderie…I don’t feel like I’m 100% out of it…I always feel like it’s an open door policy. (Nuñez-Medina)

Maria Santos also remembers how even as a small child Iyari would not interrupt the actors on stage, “She performed when she wanted to and we respected that and when she

48 Cochinadas meaning “inappropriate language.”
performed she performed! It was so neat to see” (Santos-Ochoa). She further spoke about the future of teatro and how she sees Iyari’s role in that:

I’m interested to see where you guys take it and keep going with it. Cause obviously you guys are still doing it. It would be interesting to see what maybe Iyari does with this part- the next generation-cause she is the next generation of Izcalli. (Santos-Ochoa)

This was another theme that was mentioned by several of the women, the passing of the teatro tradition to the next generation and the need for teatro to forge forward. Veronica offers the following advice for the group:

There are more truths to be exposed. And as time goes on and as the group progresses, society is progressing as well. So you need to reflect that, you know. I think the whole point of the group is to reflect the community, so as the community is growing and evolving the group needs to and so does the work…To keep talking to the community and see what it is that’s important to them. Because anytime when a story is told and it is- you know- its intent is to heal. (Burgess)

I agree with her assessment. There are still many more stories to tell on the stage. Now that we have a younger generation performing with us, I also feel that I can personally move on to other work that is exclusively women-centered and relevant to my age group. I am excited to see what the future holds for Teatro Izcalli and happily accept the change that will also come with it.

In the following final chapter, I summarize my key findings, the limitations of my study, and articulate possible questions for future study by other scholars. I conclude my thesis with a poem about my Teatro Izcalli journey.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: ENDING FULL CIRCLE

I initiated this qualitative study to demonstrate the multiplicity of ways that the women of Teatro Izcalli healed their bodymindspirits and empowered themselves and their communities by engaging in decolonizing and feminist work in the group. I posed the following questions of the women teatristas: How has being in Teatro Izcalli affected teatrista women’s personal growth and their academic lives? How has performance in Teatro Izcalli contributed to a healing of the women’s “bodymindspirit?” How has Teatro Izcalli contributed to community healing? What do teatrista women think about Teatro Izcalli as a means for the promotion of social justice? To answer the four questions I relied on oral histories collected from the eight women who are current or past members of Teatro Izcalli. I also integrated an analysis of my own testimonio as a founding and ongoing member in the group.

This research is significant in that it contributes to scholarship on Chicanas engaging in teatro and specifically expands the historical record on Teatro Izcalli. This thesis also contributes to literature on the role of healing and spirituality while engaging in teatro performance and “curandera (healer) work” as coined by Laura E. Pérez. These testimonios of Chicana teatristas experiences demonstrate that by participating in the act of storytelling via theatrical performance, we Chicana teatristas empower, heal, transform, and decolonize our minds, bodies, and spirits by embodying the stories of our community.

The limitations of this study lies in the fact that I utilized a convenience sampling of the women who are or have been members of Teatro Izcalli. This may be seen as problematic in that it does not provide a spectrum of experiences of women outside of this particular theater group. In addition to this, my “insider” status as a founding member in the group and my relationship to the Artistic Director may have influenced some of the women to not completely share their truths about being in the group. I also did not interview the men in the group about their own experiences or contributions to the development of Teatro Izcalli, which has resulted in only a partial truth about the troupe. However, as a feminist and a
woman teatrista, this thesis is a reflection of my commitment to Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez’ call to not allow the erasure of women’s stories and contributions in teatro to occur.

For further areas of study, my findings could be built upon by future scholars by comparing the men’s thoughts about the power dynamic within the group and the creative process itself. Additionally, an investigation on the commonalities and differences in the ways the men and women relate to and speak to the healing and resistance aspects that I raise in my study could be expanded on. I also did not explore our cross-gender and cross-ethnicity embodiments on stage. Although this was mentioned by a couple of the women, due to the focus of my study I did not elaborate on this in the analysis. As Olympia recounts, “The men have played women and the women have played male roles. We haven’t been rigid about that” (Beltran). It would be interesting to further explore their thoughts on this and how representing the oppressor or colonizer—which is a part of the teatro tradition—has had an effect on them.

In conclusion, in conducting this oral history project I aimed to document the testimonios of the women who have performed in Teatro Izcalli. I hoped to find moments of healing and empowerment during their time in the group by documenting their teatro experiences. I also felt this was imperative since much of our early teatro work is not well documented. However, Tina reminded me about a very important point during our plática. I mentioned to her our poor documentation and she reminded me of the following, “There’s a positive in that, it is in the oral tradition. It doesn’t need to be, it would be nice to have pictures and to make scrap books or whatever, but the work sort of speaks for itself. It’s a living breathing piece of art” (Nuñez-Medina). I needed to be reminded of that. In documenting the women’s stories I am also making certain that this thesis is a breathing piece of art with their wisdom and transformative stories. Personally, the writing of this research has been a ceremonial, academic, and creative endeavor, but more importantly it has inspired the storyteller in me to ensure that these medicinal stories will be shared with a broader audience. My hope is that they will not only sit within the pages of this thesis but rather that these stories of healing and resistance by the Mujeres de Teatro Izcalli will one day be embodied on stage to be shared with the community. Then they will truly take on a living breathing energy that links back to spiritual activism, which aims to combine self-
reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about social change (Keating, “I’m a Citizen of the Universe” 58).

I end this thesis with a poem I wrote for one of my graduate courses that describes my personal journey in Teatro Izcalli. This piece is about my own healing and interweaves concepts that I addressed in my study, such as curanderismo and ceremony. This poem is also a part of my testimonio in that it encapsulates my final thoughts about my teatro work but most importantly it brings it all back full circle in that I am able to conclude with my Chicana teatrista voice.

“TEATRO MEDICINE”
¿Si es que la cultura cura, como me ha curado a mi?49

Copal and dry leaves of romero smoke elicit 17 years of memories
Heightened emotions
Fluttering butterflies of anticipation
Círculo prayers
Two minutes to places
As curtains lift inhibitions once more.
Costume changes
Blunders to improvisation
Muffled laughter
Broken beds, tumbled chairs, spits to the eye, swallowed coughs and unspoken tears
All part of our ensemble days.
Telling our stories of pain and joy.

Mural mural on the wall Chuca Chola dialogue
Deportations y faraway sueños of college.
Satirized propositions
Politicians.

49 Si es que la cultura cura, como me ha curado a mi meaning “if culture heals, how has it healed me?”
Celebrating pedagogies of the home
Community voices
Y parodies a la Chicana/Chicano since we have been left out.
This is our ofrenda
An incarnation of love.
Sacred space where bodymindsprits transcend, speak, move, laugh, and cry freely without veil.
Healing sustos of relegated silence.
Transformed.
For I know that what I do for you… is ultimately what I need for me.

¿Si es que la cultura cura, como me ha curado a mi?
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**WORKS CONSULTED**


