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*Original article*

Bridging latino diaspora through consciousness: Examining The Cultural Canon in José  
Rivera's Marisol<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

For over a decade, the general contemporary American literary milieu has become a cultural one, the surge is diversity, and the agenda is to set a new canon with a recognized mosaic. Diversity and multi culturalism should cater as a recognized “canon” for both modern American dramatic politics and modern cultural politics alike. Exposition and portrayal of minorities, racial/cultural issues and diasporas, that were for decades the forbidden territory, have now become the norm-if not the parade- of modern American theater. With due regard to America's centuries – old assumption of being the cultural “crucible”; the melting pot where multiculturalism crescendos into a monoculture, today, with an overflow of diverse minorities, the melting pot falls too short to maintain it. Consequently, American literary canon started to suffer a state of moral discrepancy. It badly needed an apocalypse. (uhpok-uh-lips)

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This paper discusses and examines the existing cultural canon in modern America as well as its representation on stage. The shift of the canon from the stereotypical “white male” into other colors and genders alike becomes –thus- a matter of appropriateness. The dilemma of most writers was mainly how to uplift this new “canon” from the womb of a “minority” into the crux of a universal, multicultural humanism; to “dehistoricize culture, race, and gender”(Joseph Lee, p. 621). The paper also hypothesizes that Latinos’- and others’- strong feel of diaspora and cultural uprootedness stems mainly from their lack of consciousness and insight. The paper sets its basic discussion unto three main clusters or domains of bridging a condition as well as a sense of diaspora.

**key words:** multiculturalism- marginalized minorities-occult- apocalypse.

### **1- Ethnic & gender vintage:**

As all good works of art, Marisol addresses the "status quo"; the cultural tension caused by ethnic racial marginality that haunts contemporary North America. The play is basically set on two opposing forces: the first is cultural diversity, the second is ethnic consciousness, which Rivera conceives as the consensus for civilization in the play. Rivera’s amazingly drawn heroine, Marisol Perez, epitomizes the vulnerability and child-like confusion of a Latino female, who consciously endeavors to hide any distinguished elements of her ethnic roots in order to cope with the running tally of the American myth of cultural oneness. A college graduate and editor for a text book publisher in a Manhattan office; her life routine runs the gear which generates the dream of success and great possibilities that marks the second half of the American myth.

On another level, Marisol embodies the segregated Everywoman of a minor ethnicity when trying to “come to terms with her existence”(Wikipedia). She strives to gain cultural approval and to be a part of the social elite through a long transcendental journey:

I lived in the Bronx- I commuted light years to this other planet called- Manhattan! I learned new vocabularies...



wore weird native dress...mastered arcane rituals...  
amputated neat sections of my psyche, my cultural  
heritage”( Act)

The opening of the play emphasizes Marisol’s cultural naivete, embodied in her assumption that with such an acquired cultural privilege, she might beat diasporic legacy. When she is attacked by the homeless man with the golf club in the subway – who is possibly a Latino himself as we understand later in the play that most homeless are- she doesn’t relate his condition to neither cultural nor ethnic background. She simply, and unsympathetically questions him: “Man, why just you get a job?” ( Act 1)

But despite herself, a suppressed grin of double consciousness and bi-focality keeps hitting the surface of pretence in one moment of genuine revelation or another: being a part of a whole dominant culture, but deep inside, she is still aware of who she really is. And despite herself, Marisol Perez: the female Latina by name, physical proportion, and color of skin, still suffers to redeem the Latino legacy of Diaspora and dislocation. Westgate comments in his essay, “Toward the rhetoric of Sociopatial Theatre,”:

Marisol understands, however implicitly, that her nuyorican Ethnicity makes her out of place at her Manhattan job and among her Brooklyn friends. But she mistakenly thinks she can do what the play ultimately maintains is impossible: separate the social from the spatial. In her thinking, a new space will translate to a new sociality, and therefore she intends to leave the Bronx for Brooklyn.

(Westgate, p.30)

Allusions to ethnicity and skin color permeates all through the scenes of the play. In Act 2 , The Woman with Furs exclaims:

Woman with Furs: This brown piece of shit is mine!

( Act 2)



In his TV review, Life Of A Puerto Rican Family, O'Connor states that "Although Hispanic American may be well on their way to becoming the nation's largest ethnic minority, they remain oddly invisible ...."(O'Connor, p.18). The question of visibility that the play arises is the search for recognition. Marisol- and the other Latinos in her neighborhood- are characters in denial. They are midway between "becoming" and "being"; a sort of existentialism of the conscious; the most essential phase of the human nature, without which, a human life would be just a kind of a "Passover." "But consciousness is pain"(Edward Albee). Throughout the events of the play, Marisol undergoes a journey of regeneration of cultural consciousness. The eruption of Marisol's consciousness in the second half of the play leads to the restoration of harmony and order at the end.

In undertaking her journey toward the heart of the apocalypse, the "lone" female hero, Marisol has to leave the "womb" and entangles herself in a long struggle. Thus, she questions Aristotle's tyranny and sets the tone for a new, female – based American dramatic canonicity. Commenting on the blend of gender and ethnicity that the play presents, Rivera states: "I don't know if my gender politics would be as vivid as they are if I hadn't grown up as a Latin male. Latin women, in my experience, have really had the worst of all possible worlds. It is really difficult situation. The ones who are college – educated and career –oriented and things like that are fighting thousands of years of history. It hasn't been easy for them"( Rivera in Jacobson, p.55)

## **2- Culture, myth & the occult:**

In an interview in 1995, Rivera refers to "cultural diversity" in the United States as quite a common place; a defining feature" of life in such a multi- cultural society as that, not in need to be discussed or debated: "As far as I'm concerned, this is like worrying about the sunrise. The United States has always been a diverse society, even if that has not always been recognized by some groups. There has never been a monoculture here."(Rivera, An Interview: New Traditions Compendium, p.2). To Rivera's understanding, the main



dilemma – then- is not that America’s multi culturalism and multi ethnicity, but rather our denial of this fact under the assumed possibility that all culture might melt into one.

The play offends Latinos’ endeavors to accommodate to the existing cultural patterns, and calls – instead- for a cohesive integration with that general culture without forsaking identifying features of the native one. Rivera actually advocates a right of bi-culturalism. Cultural confusion suppresses Marisol to the level of a dream-like character in pretty long portions of the play until awareness is finally and ultimately rehabilitated through consciousness near the end. In the very first scene of the play, the outer cultural bravado invades the inner personal schemata of Marisol, and lays bare shades of uncertainty and fear. When Marisol is attacked by the man with the golf club in the initial scene, she is only saved by her guardian angel “not her good job nor street-wise attitude.”( Lee,p.631”This guardian angel – who managed to protect her from most modern evils of urban America as represented by central New York- probably represents her native cultural icons and the occult. In the heart of her cultural rituals and myths, there is a god, to whom she constantly prays and whose connotations were represented in the pictures she keeps near her bed. Other cultural images and associations – which are very central in the technique of the play- keep recurring in the outer and inner worlds of Marisol. She spreads on her bed necklaces and jewelry of traditional types in order to protect herself from demons and evil spirits. Such images help to bind both her heritage to which she both belongs and yearns but can no longer cope with, altogether with her present that stands in between that heritage and herself. The play carries further the belief in the cultural occult and the power of the myth. Some time later in the play, Marisol understands that the hostile, aggressive attitudes of people of late are simply because they are “bereft of their guardian angels,”(Lee,p.632) who are now engaged in the purgating revolt against god;

June: There is no protection. I just got out of hell. Last month, I was two hundred dollars over my credit card limit because I bought a hat on sale. And you know they are cracking down on that kind of thing...( Act 2)



This could be a direct clue that cultural pretence would deprive people of the spiritual support of genuine cultural heritage and the occult. Thus “Marisol strives to go beyond documentary realism into spiritual and transcendent realms” (Brustein, p. 30) that the play is heavy loaded with.

Marisol’s complacent cosmos is very soon disrupted when her guardian angel reported to her that, altogether with all other angels, he will carry out a rebellion against the existing, senile, old king-god to restore the vitality of the universe with his blood. She also learns from the angel that the chaos, poverty, and desolation that afflicted New York City is the aftermath of this war. Furthermore, the angel attempts to convince Marisol to join his rebellious intrigues. Yet Marisol refuses to believe that the god she used to pray to all her life has forsaken his responsibilities toward humanity. In an elusive style, Rivera relates the devastating episodes of the rebellion as ravishing people’s both physical and spiritual landscapes; how human civilization is coming apart and cities self- destruct. Unwilling to join the violent parade, Marisol carries on a- Wizards of Oz’s Dorothy- like journey, trying to “find her way home”(Home here could raise different convocations), and tries to make sense of a world gone absurd.

The old, dying god connotes dying dogmas and old creeds of cultural bias and fake politics. The Armageddon in heaven is the “messianic mission”(Robert Brustein, New Republic, p. 30). While the absence of the moon’s light symbolizes the decay of intellectual enlightenment. The revolution against modern god takes guise of a rage for order, and also of what we now call: “productive chaos”! In this sense, the play advocates cultural, and political, deconstruction and obliteration in order to build up better, trimmer ones. The combat between angels and god takes us to the arena of old Greek mythology where wars with gods were quite a commonplace. As Rivera has effected: "We need to find new heroes and new myths for our society -- the old ones just aren't working. The God we know now is a right-wing, white male, corporate God, in whose world racism, sexism and political



injustice are rampant. As the millennium nears, I am amazed these things are still valid.”(Rivera, Cause and Effect,p.6)

The events of the celestial battle starts to unfold: the sky over New York turned black and dark as the revolting angels spread their wings, armed with tommy guns, and inducing the inhabitants to take one side or the other. Unusual things started to happen: the sun fails to rise, acid rain falls, a man gets pregnant then begets a baby, a second lives on rat poison, while many others are stripped of their head skins, turning into new Nazis chasing people in the “immigration camps!”. Apples become salty, and..... Marisol conveys a sense of utter confusion at what keeps happening: “I just don’t know what to think about this.”( Act 2). One would recall the ominous revulsion of the supernatural elements prior to the night of the assassination of Caesar; here of the king- god. The rebellion and war against god starts to wear out as the angels die successively, but people catch up the rhythm, and start a new phase of revolt. Much like most protagonists in naturalist drama, Marisol and the other characters in the play have but tiny control on their fate. They are rather reduced into spicks in this malevolent universe into which they can neither fit nor commit.

Amongst the urban chaos, Marisol" tr(ies) to make sense of a world gone mad." (Theatre Department presents Jose Rivera's Marisol)It is ironic that the very moment when Marisol is assumed to be dead- it was not certain for most of the play whether she is truly, physically dead- is the one that marks a real life defining moment for her. It is just then that she rises from the state of anti-heroism to the level of heroism. “I think heroism is an internal struggle,” muses Rivera, “.....there are the internal monsters of apathy and racism and homophobia. Those are the monsters that have to be slain --it's the demon God within you that has to be conquered in order for consciousness to be raised” (Rivera, Maricela De la Luz Lights the World,p.25). Later, “in a post- apocalyptic landscape, Marisol is slowly stripped of the social masks that she has overlaid on her true cultural identity, and only



after she has suffered the death of everything she thinks of as self, is she offered the possibility of salvation and the crown of god”(Fink, 101).

### **3-Space, urbanity & dislocation:**

Rivera’s earliest lines, his epigraph to the play, express a sense of dislocation, disorientation, and displacement, if not uprootedness and non-belonging. It reads:

I felt a kind of vertigo  
As if I were merely plunging  
From one world to another  
And in each I arrived shortly  
After the end of the world  
Had taken place

All along the play, Marisol shows a desire to connect with others, or belong to both people and places; but the cord is always cut off. What she always gets is denial and disconnectedness. The main outframe of the setting is New York City; a domain that is both familiar and bizarre; a miniature of “an over-the- edge urban America”(Fricker, New York Times, p.1). Marisol lives in the dangerous Bronx by herself - a marginal borough that denotes a marginalized existence. Even though she elevated herself to the white – collar class, Marisol is still tied to the Bronx by bonds of ethnicity and memories of childhood. The ghetto is so ugly and unclean, full of garbage, with a “huge ugly windowless building with the smokestacks and armed guards across the street” that terrifies Marisol and arises many questions in her mind what it could be. June tells her that the huge building is a jail, “where they bring overthrown brutal right- wing dictators from Latin America,” while Lenny argues that the place is just a “federally funded torture center where they violate people who have gone over their credit card limit.” Both associations convey a sense of threat and antagonism that enhances Marisol’s sense of unsafety, disorientation, and dislocation. The denotation of the building is further established when the Woman with Furs recalls that she herself was once tortured inside the building. Rivera’s subsequent





allusions to the Bronx, with all its social, ethnic and spatial connotations, is a loaded imagery that reminds us with the fact that America has just become a “cartoon” of what it was supposed to be.

In the Bronx, Marisol occupies a tiny, “barricaded” space that “is more like a (confined) jail cell than an apartment”(Fink 101). In his analysis of the play, Westgate suggests: “The bars come to denote absence instead of a measure of security- the lack of, rather than the guarantee of, safety in this urban landscape.”(Westgate, p.26) To feel safe, she has to lock her apartment door with fourteen deadbolt locks and chains. Even the one only window in the brick wall of her building is broken: this enhances a sense of threat and unsafety. Central urban “crucible” America is Hell; Inferno!. A provided space is not always “home” for Latinos- as well as other ethnic minorities in the United States. Home – for them- becomes the “unattainable place of origin”(Sandoval-Sanchez in Paredez, p.140)

In a sense, all inhabitants of this ghetto are kind of “hollow men and women” – to quote Eliot- rather than fully alive people

To get to her work in Manhattan, Marisol used to take the subway, “probably one of New York’s most iconic symbols. She is reading the New York times, another marker of geography as well as of her middle- class status. The play invokes- in other words- a particular experience and expectation of urban space”( Westgate,p.24). Her journey starting with the subway and onto the other parts of the city denotes the mobility of life in urban America which enhances a sense of dislocation and non-belonging. Before the first act comes to an end, even this very diminished, rather finite space is lost: Marisol becomes homeless. In the street world, Marisol considers walking along the street with another homeless co- worker, who unfolds to Marisol that civilization is falling apart. Marisol learns the essentials of modern existence, develops, and comes to awareness and insight. Homelessness denies the inhabitants the possibility of leading a normal life. Lenny unfolds to Marisol his wish to have a home and family to share with her:

Lenny: ...give me compassion and let me live like a human being



for once. Marisol, we could have a baby...and love it so much. (Act 2)

Marisol feels crossed by Lenny's proposal, that seems to her out-of-context. She reacts unexpectedly when she attacks him, runs away toward the street, and she cannot even find her way. She starts to express a sense of lament, and wishes to restore back a sense of "home," "belonging," and special identity:

Marisol: ...I just wanna go home!...want my boring nine-to-five back-my two-weeks-out-of-the-year vacation- my intellectual detachment- my ability to read about the misery of the world and not lose a moment out of my busy day. ( Act 2)

Rivera reveals his insight behind this experience of homelessness by stating: "... the political essence of the play is about the homeless experience, the disorientation of the street....where the laws of logic don't necessarily apply."(Rivera in Jacobson, p.54).

The play also exposes the contradiction in the municipal authorities', and the city's itself, towards the homeless that is characterized by utter "antagonism"(Westgate, p. 30). There is an implicit segregation from their side between whom they see as really belong and who do not(Westgate, p.29). The fact that most of the homeless that the play swells with are basically ethnic minorities, mainly Latinos, transcends the issue from the urban social context into the realm of human civilization at large.

Woman with Furs: Homelessness is against the law in this city. I'm going to have the two of you arrested! They'll like that. I'll get big points for that ( ◯Act 2)

The only large space minor ethnicities would get, is the vast graveyard Marisol finds out near the end of the play, that was full of sepulchers for children with recognizably Latinos' names: "Fermin Rivera...born March 14, died March 16...Jose Amengaul.... born August 2, died August 2...Delfina Perez... born December 23, died January 6"(Act 2). After Lenny gives birth to a dead baby, he leads Marisol toward an apparently beautiful landscape, then shocks her when he exclaims: "People are buried here.



It looks like a sidewalk. But it isn't. It is a tomb." While he starts digging the ground to bury the child, he resumes, "The city provides these coffins. There are numbers on them. The city knows how we live."( Act 2). The Woman with Furs even reveals the municipal authorities' conspiracy to poison the whole Bronx ghetto as sort of modern American contribution to the movements of ethnic cleansing towards Latino whom they condemn as dirty and diseased, to which Marisol advocates herself in an exclamation of protest at the end of the first act: "I'm clean." New York City; the only world that Marisol is familiar with turns into a death saturated space. Even worse; now that she is deprived from the protection of her angel, she is more exposed than ever before to die herself. The angel – in an attempt to engage her in the ongoing war- insights her that she is at a crossroad now: she either fights such "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"( Hamlet, Act , Scene) or to succumb to her destiny: "You have to fight," he embeds her, "you can't endure anymore."(Act 2). The Armageddon in heaven mainly afflicts New York City, turning it into a contemporary Waste Land, or a modern Thebes doomed by the mischief of its own people .

In his interview with Fricker after the New York Premiere of Marisol in 1993, Rivera states: "I have been struck in the last few years by the enormous violence we live through on every level. There's a feeling that people have lost their way, that the basic rules of civilization have been suppressed. The millennium has a big role in that." "(Fricker, New York Times, p.1)

### **Conclusion:**

As all good drama, Marisol cuts through the grain of tissues of marginality and ethnic racism in the very cultural fiber of the United States. He endeavors to reach a cultural intersection and to put the United States in an ethnic crossroads, where minorities would be in the culture - mainstream. In so doing, Rivera does not only defend the rights of Latinos, but rather of humanity at large. This endorses the play well into the norm of protest drama, as well as the literature of exhaustion and recovery.



Near the end of the past millennium, there was a general feel that certain things got adrift, that they should come to an end . On the other hand, there was the will and the wish to start a new phase of life; to embrace a “brave new world.”

A triumphant moment in the play is at the end, when Rivera elevates the play’s clichés to a powerful and tense rhetoric. At this moment, the play transcends itself from naturalism back to reality.

The play’s optimism and apocalypticism show only at the very end in which he presents the remedy for cultural illusions and heterogeneity suggesting the rise of a new moon; a rebirth or regeneration of the history of humanity on earth. Although the revolting angels are dying and the rebellion is worn out, the people start a new revolt. Fire (hell) indicates the possibility of resurrection after a process of purgation. In the final scene, amidst the darkness and black color that dyed the stage, a sole ray of spotlight fell on Marisol. The rise of a new moon signifies the start of a new episode of history: a new millennium. Thus the play ends with an implied note of hope and redemption, altogether with a sense of cultural reconciliation, but no guarantee is granted. An Angel appears next to Marisol, holding a golden crown in his /her hand, denoting a new reign; a new phase of more “vibrant,” more pragmatic, “convictions and visions”( Brustein, p. 30); or consciousness. Marisol speaks of light, hope, and other possibilities before she disappears in the new “wild light of the new millennium.” In this sense, Marisol is the Messiah of the new millennium, who undergoes death to save her people. She is also the new “queen-goddess”- to destroy gender bias- who promises a new era of justice and welfare to the waste, New York, Land. It is allusive that the new Messiah, queen-goddess is a colored Latina!

Now that we are post the borders of the new millennium, and that Marisol’s apocalypticism has not yet become true, the play seems still to address two important quests. Firstly, as put by Stephanie Coen, it questions the meaning and validity of “be(ing) an American at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”( Coen, 254). Secondly, it “pins the destiny of our planet on the outcome of revolution on renewal”( doollee.com)



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#### Quotes:

"The good old immigrant values that once built the town are in rout"( Rich,p.17)

"The play is Jose Rivera's "Marisol," his 1993 treatment of earthly deterioration and celestial chaos"(Gaines)

#### Expressions

- The central image of the play is that of fall→ loss→ diminishing possibilities, and the effect of that on the personal spirit.
- Cut through the grain.....
- To catch the rhythm.
- Energetic irrelevancies.....
- Emotional speed limits...
- A kind of no exit
- He sets a moral archby.

