

Nuyorican Fairy Tales: Allegories of Existence and Bare Survival in Migdalia Cruz and Eddie Sánchez's Theater

Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez

"[A]ll fairy tales *have* a history."

Elizabeth Wanning Harries

Since the animated musical film's release in 1991, few have escaped the magical charm of Walt Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Its financial success led to a Broadway production that enchanted audiences from 1994 to 2007. The film made dreams come true for children and families, dreams based on the commodification of the fairy tale and the easy circulation of merchandise and home media technology—music CDs, VHS cassettes, DVDs, Blu-ray disks, and video games. In 2017 Disney launched a live-action remake of the animated film, once again casting a tantalizing spell on audiences all over the world. The persistent narrative replication, genre adaptation, ideological revision, media conversion, and bodily reincarnation of this tale attests to the powerful versatility and potentiality of the story as well as Disney's capitalist sovereignty within the American cultural imaginary.

The Disneyfication of America

First, let's look at the politics of entertainment. Following the opening of its Disneyland family theme park in California in 1955, the Disney World en-

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tainment complex, founded in 1971 in Orlando, Florida, has become an inexhaustible machine of fantasy and desire—and a profitable industry. With *Sleeping Beauty*'s magnificent castle at the parks' centers and with the incarnated fictional characters in costume greeting children as they parade down Main Street, USA, Walt Disney does the impossible: he has turned America itself into a fairy tale, making children happy and fantasy a reality. At the inauguration of Disneyland, Walt Disney offered a declaration of principles that builds on a cultural capital project that comprises, at its core, the materialization of the American dream, the consolidation of middle-class family values, and the advocacy of American cultural imperialism: "To all who come to this happy place: welcome. Disneyland is your land. Here age relives fond memories of the past, and here youth may savor the challenge and promise of the future. Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and the hard facts that have created America, with the hope that it will be a source of joy and inspiration to all the world."¹ Susan Hines and Breda Ayres further underscore this approach in their study of Disney: "Disney ideology is a form of empire building [through which] its emperor constantly reaches a new audience with an old groove of noxious ethos" (11). Walt Disney's vision of a "happy place" can also result in a "noxious ethos" if we consider that the happy ending of *Beauty and the Beast* undoes all marks of difference/monstrosity/bestiality. This vision perpetuates white racial predominance through Belle's and Beau's marriage and through the enforcement of a regulatory gendered frame of heteronormative power.

In fact, this ideological platform makes the Magic Kingdom not only the manufacturer of dreams but also a place where dreams truly do become realizable. This vision was poetically inscribed in *Pinocchio*'s theme song in 1941: "When you wish upon a star, / Makes no difference who you are. / Anything your heart desires will come to you."² Nor should we forget *Pinocchio*'s rhetorical intertextuality with Dorothy's song, "Somewhere over the Rainbow," in 1939: "Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue, / And the dreams that you dare to dream / Really do come true. . . . Why, oh why can't I?"³ All these tropes—rather, ideologemes—engage and emotionally seduce spectators to make happiness achievable—as long as they believe. With a single leap of faith, the process of self-fashioning that defines the so-called American way of life is well anchored in the resilience, individualism, and optimism that support the scaffolding of the American dream. "When You Wish upon a Star" is a national anthem that operates as the ideological and affective foundation of Disney's capitalist enterprise. The touristic attractions, the films, the theatrical productions, the ice skating shows, and the brand consumption are not merely entertainment and leisure time: once initiated, children assimilate, perform, and unknowingly rehearse their roles as future serial consumers of All Things Disney through bedtime rituals and playtime. Furthermore, Disney success-

fully speaks to parents as well by awakening nostalgic affective investments: at work here is a dynamic of infantilization grounded in the parents' revisiting the park, recycling emotions, and reconsuming childhood memories as experienced through their children's enchantment.

Back home, children can comfortably relive the Disney experience thanks to their parents' acquisition of goods and All Things Disney, ensuring, in this way, their children's familiarity with and immersion in the fairy tale. What passes for simple children's fantasy or playtime has more to do with the performativity of Anglo-American identity formation in everyday practices, be they ordinary encounters, interpersonal relations, quotidian routines, actualized rituals, symbolic exchanges, discursive transactions, ideological negotiations, emotional responses, or "regulated improvisation."⁴ The reading of and listening to the fairy tale, the viewing of the film, the attendance at the musical, the playing of the CD, and the visit to the theme park open up to a liminal space where imagination, once tapped, reigns supreme, even more so when children can bring home costumes to perform the roles of Belle and the Beast or join in singing the Oscar-winning theme song.

Beauty and the Beast is not just a fleeting paradigm of a make-believe world in a Neverland far, far away. By acting out the fairy tale, children and parents negotiate with the story daily and make it a part of the American social construction of reality and, to some extent, an indispensable narrative that gives shape to American identity in a familiar world according to their now-lived experience. Visiting Disneyland and Disney World, shopping from the limitless catalog of Disney products, and viewing Disney films are indeed a civic duty, not to say a parental responsibility (of course, as long as families can afford it). Just as children pledged allegiance to the Mickey Mouse Club, televised from 1955 to 1996, parents continue their loyalty to the Disney corporation for the sake of their children's pursuit of happiness. In this land of plenty and its dream world, parents guarantee their children will also become rightful American/Disney citizens.

The semiotician Umberto Eco cleverly observes in *Travels in Hyper Reality* that "Disneyland makes it clear that within its magic enclosure it is fantasy that is absolutely reproduced" (43). As such, he argues, "[the] 'completely real' becomes identified with [the] 'completely fake.' Absolute unreality is offered as real presence" (7). If the rhetorical expression "once upon a time"—the quintessential opening line for fairy tales—welcomes and transports readers of the story and spectators of the film or the theatrical production to an "indefinite nonhistorical epoch . . . where events are not 'real'" (*The Role of the Reader* 19), the park itself stands for an idealized America made real within the sphere of fantasy. The domain of experience is dehistoricized and fantasy acquires a patriotic dimension coterminous with the myth of the American dream as the "land of the free" and the "land of opportunity." This

vision is also at work in Dorothy's search for a utopian land: "Why, oh why can't I?" All Dorothy has to do is click her heels. In the real world, all it takes to get to utopia is booking a flight, renting a car, making a hotel reservation, and purchasing a 4-Park Magic all-guests multiday ticket for only \$279.00 per adult and \$259.00 per child.⁵ If you cannot afford the trip, you can always purchase the film to enchant you.

That there is always the magic of reading the fairy tale to take you away to a fantasy land, however, may not be what Disney had in mind . . . "Once upon a time . . ."

My preamble sets the stage for considering *Beauty and the Beast* as a fundamental master narrative entangled in the articulation of Anglo-American subjectivity and thoroughly encrypted in the American national political unconscious. In these terms, the fairy tale's immediate accessibility and achievability make for its easy entry into multiple cultural scripts and ideological agendas in the hegemonic cultural arena. Given the currency of Disney's film and Broadway production, no adaptation of the fairy tale can dismiss or obliterate Disney's haunting power over cultural production. I propose that not all renditions, revisions, and rewritings of the fairy tale purport to be submissive to Disney's putative copyright and profitable consumerism. Indeed, since the 1970s feminists have intervened on two levels: women writers overturned patriarchal rule by appropriating the fairy tale, as did feminist scholars by questioning the canon and its phallogocentrism. Even at the peak of postmodern havoc in the 1980s, Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods* (1987) on Broadway masterfully troubled the enchantment and happy ending of fairy tales. Disney went further with the animated film *Shrek* (2001), converted into a Broadway musical in 2008, recycling the ingredients of the traditional fairy tale and reconceptualizing the valorization of the beautiful and the ugly. Whereas at the end Princess Fiona's spell cannot be undone, the ogre still chooses her as his wife. The message: True beauty is on the inside and not something physical based on good looks, echoing the ending of *Beauty and the Beast*.

In October 2015 the Dartmouth College Spanish and Portuguese Department invited me to participate in a two-day event dedicated to the work of Nuyorican playwrights Migdalia Cruz and Eddie Sánchez. In a panel interview and a conversation with the audience following a stage reading, we engaged in a lively discussion about the playwrights' aesthetic principles, artistic practice, and limited opportunities to stage productions; audience responses; and the poetics of Latina/o theater at large. What stayed with me was an unexpected desire to conduct further research into a topic that caught everyone's attention and imagination: to what extent do Cruz's and Sánchez's plays *Fur* and *Icarus* relate to *Beauty and the Beast*? How is the fairy tale allegorically registered in the plays? My curiosity led me to interview them via email (see my conclusion) inquiring about specific issues that would

elucidate how conscious they were about revisiting and rewriting the fairy tale. Since at the heart of both plays the conceit of “beauty” is the major affective generator of the action, the specter of *Beauty and the Beast* cannot be ignored. Indeed, in the prologue to the publication of *Fur*, Cruz literally refers to the fairy tale genre and cites it. Sánchez, in an interview, also recognized the correlation between *Icarus* and *Beauty and the Beast*. My point of departure is having the playwrights themselves summarize in their own words the plots of the plays:

Fur is the story of Citrona, a hirsute young woman who is purchased by Michael at a sideshow to be his bride. Michael has a fetish for animals and runs a pet shop in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles which has become a giant sand pit. He hires Nena, an animal trapper to catch and bring food to the caged Citrona. But Citrona falls in love with Nena who’s in love with Michael. In this visceral story, I explore the many facets of love—the beast and the beauty, the savage and the sublime, the hunger and the romance—within each character that will do anything for love. . . . Citrona is both the beauty and the beast. . . . Michael and Nena, also take turns being the ideal of physical beauty—but acting in “bestly” ways to get the object of their affections to love them. Until each character achieves her or his own spiritual enlightenment, true beauty is inaccessible to her or him. In *Fur*, true beauty is the goal of each of my characters—who each feels like a beast—either because of unrequited love or physical attributes outside the norm.⁶

Icarus is a play that questions the true nature of beauty. When is one truly beautiful and what makes you beautiful? Altagracia, a deformed girl, sacrifices everything to care for her sick brother. They have created their own reality where the outside world is not welcomed. Into their lives arrives Beau, an outsider like them, who brings to Altagracia the possibility of falling in love.⁷

Clearly, what is central to Cruz and Sánchez is the notion of love and beauty. I am interested in explaining not what beauty means for them but how the playwrights’ entanglement with the fairy tale is discursively produced within

the hegemonic cultural imaginary. My critical inquiry centers on unburying the present absence of the fairy tale in their plays. Moreover, I focus on making visible how the processes of abjection, monstrosity, and enfreakment are semiotically set in motion in the embodied figure of the Beast. I propose to bring to the surface how *Beauty and the Beast*, in the form of allegory, functions as a rhetorical strategy of intertextuality that aims to put a halt to the dehumanization of the other.

To trace the specter of *Beauty and the Beast* in *Fur* and *Icarus*, it is imperative to keep in mind my previous semiotic approach to Disney's dissemination of the fairy tale "in the age of mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin 217).⁸ When envisaged as a fleeting paradigm for both playwrights, first, *Beauty and the Beast* must be understood with regard to oral traditions and the rhetoric of the folktale; and second, attention must be paid to the intrinsic "duality of opposing forces" between physical beauty and ugliness and its correlative moralistic foreboding binary of good and evil.⁹ In doing so, I will emphasize how the dualisms of sameness and difference, self and other, abjection and sublimity, and the normal and the pathological are deeply rooted in the discursive and corporeal construction of racial identity on Broadway in terms of abjection, monstrosity, and enfreakment.¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the way in which this binary mechanism operates gives embodiment to the moralist regime of a dualist ontology that has determined "who is considered human" since the foundation of Western civilization. The question is, how do Cruz and Sánchez's counterdiscourses reverse the hegemonic ontological structure that posits the narratorial logic and value system of the fairy tale?

Tinkering with the Fairy Tale

Back to the story of the young girl who had no choice but to fall in love with the Beast. In addition, though, the Beast could not be set free from his enchantment and monstrous behavior without her willingness to love him. She is the one who has the agency to reinstitute his social status and, by doing so, ameliorating her father's bankruptcy. *Beauty and the Beast*'s popularity did not start with Disney's musical film. The story has appealed to a vast readership since Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's first publication in *Le Magazin des Enfants ou Dialogues d'une sage gouvernante avec ses élèves* in 1756 (translated into English in 1761). Living as a governess in England, Leprince collected folktales and legends, adapted cautionary tales, and wrote moral stories with a didactic purpose in mind: under a proper bourgeois upbringing, young girls should acquire the education, manners, taste, and discipline to learn the virtues of being a good wife. The lesson's ulterior motive revolves around a securable degree of happiness in a marriage of convenience. Leprince found particular

inspiration in the fairy tale genre with its horizon of expectations through which coherence, conformity, harmony, and kinship are restored in the name of the father at the end. The celebration of the couple's marriage is coupled with the setting of an exemplary happy ending. The function of the classic fairy tale and its denouement can be further accessed from a feminist perspective that assesses the role of Beauty, as feminist critic Wanning Harries observes: its "incantatory power" (36) foretells "the allegory of the position of women in the marriage economy. . . . [F]airy tales gradually became naturalized as guarantors of good behavior, bourgeois family stability, and submissive female purity" (39). For Teresa De Lauretis, the female is the object of desire in a hegemonic misogynist patriarchal culture: "Femininity and masculinity, in [man's] story, are positions occupied by the subject in relation to desire corresponding respectively to the passive and the active aims of the libido" (143). For De Lauretis, the narrative structure upholds a dualistic and hierarchical gender ideology in which men own a unified subject and women lack agency: "[Male] is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life and death; she (it) is an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter" (119). Such a critical feminist position acutely calls into question the phallogocentrism of Western culture and undoes the entertainment and magic attributed to the fairy tale. From a feminist vantage point, the "happily ever after" formula serves to promulgate the imprisonment of the female protagonist, advocate female subservience and submission to patriarchal rule, and secure the enforcement of heteronormativity peculiar to romance narrative. In Disney's version, the independent young Belle, who likes books and adventure, ends up being a good wife who finds only goodness in the Beast.

Before I proceed I find it necessary to review the narrative sequence of the story. I borrow Betsy Hearne's plot summary by virtue of its precise condensation of events:

[T]he father loses his wealth and moves his family to the country. He subsequently journeys to recover one ship and retrieves the sisters' requested gifts, is lost in a storm, and finds the magic palace. When he takes a rose for Beauty, the Beast demands his life, but Beauty offers hers instead and goes to the palace for three months, where she refuses nightly dinnertime proposals of marriage and requests leave to visit her sick father for one week. When Beauty returns home, her sisters deceive her into overstaying, but she dreams on the tenth night of the Beast's death and returns to declare her love. The Beast is transformed into a Prince and the two are married, while the sisters are punished. (27)

The beauty of Leprince's version of the fairy tale, which continues to enjoy canonical status, consists in the simplicity of the storyline and the easy accessibility for children to assimilate the moral lesson. However, Hearne detects a major shift in the structural semantics of the story:

The Beast's representation over two hundred years demonstrates a distinct shift from formal symbol to personal identity. This shift comes with the same noticeable movement from an eighteenth/nineteenth-century stress on internal theme. After 1900, both the story and the main character are turned inside out. In most twentieth-century versions, the stress really has shifted from a statement of virtue rewarded to a question of psychological complexity. (135)

Hearne notices the epistemic break that takes place between oral tradition and bourgeois literacy—that is to say, Hearne visualizes the epistemic shift from the ritual of storytelling and exposition of communal values in the fairy tale to the literary psychological individualism at the heart of bourgeois identity. Walter Benjamin agrees.

In "The Storyteller" Benjamin laments the loss of the oral tradition of storytelling and the art of listening with the advancement of modernity. In his disenchanting world, the secular forces of history give way to the evanescence of the craftsmanship of the storyteller, which evinces the removal of storytelling from everyday life. As I read Benjamin, in the age of mechanical reproduction we lose the "incomparable aura" (109) apprehended between the act of telling, the unfolding of the story, the "living immediacy" (83) of perception, and the process of reception. The solitary act of reading that flourishes with the rise of the novel and journalism casts aside the communal experience once rooted in ritualistic performances of cultural memory. That is to say, the feeling of "astonishment and thoughtfulness" (90) once rooted in ritualistic performances of cultural memory faces imminent danger. Benjamin contraposes the incompatibility of an oral economy to the marketability of literature that abrogates "the gift for listening" (91). He mourns the inevitable disappearance of collective practices of "living speech" (87) that sustain mythical views of existence and benefit the transmission of knowledge and sociality. Storytelling registers the basic human need to recount life experience thanks to the "living immediacy" and continual retellings of the storyteller whose voice is "prior of all literature." It is no surprise that Benjamin seizes upon the fairy tale to showcase the storyteller's cultural praxis since the beginning of Western civilization:

“And they lived happily ever after,” says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was created by myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which myth had placed upon its chest. . . . [I]n the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is it shows us that the things we are afraid can be seen through. (102)

Benjamin foremost accentuates the usefulness of fairy tales for transmitting wisdom. What I find problematic is the universality and atemporality he attributes to the fairy tale. This conventional appraisal seems to be popular with other European literary male writers. For example, for W. H. Auden, books such as Grimm’s *Fairy Tales* are “indispensable, common property upon which Western culture can be founded. . . . [T]hese tales rank next to the Bible in importance” (1). For Italo Calvino, “these folk stories are the catalog of the potential destinies of men and women, especially for that stage in life when destiny is formed” (xviii). For J. R. R. Tolkien, “The history of fairy-stories is probably more complex than the physical history of the human race, and as complex as the history of human language” (121). For Michel Butor, “Fairyland therefore is common ground, a perfect center of references, the very realm of the exemplary. . . . The special language of the fairy tale frees the adult’s consciousness. By this ruse, a moral experience is transmitted which transcends the acknowledged precepts” (352–53). In contrast to this male-centered outlook, Angela Carter in her 1991 compilation of fairy tales attempts to recover the female legacy and gender bias embedded in the genre:

[In this world] only the intervention of the supernatural can change the relations of women to men and, above all, of women to their own fertility. I don’t offer these stories in a spirit of nostalgia; that past was hard, cruel and especially inimical to women, whatever desperate stratagems we employed to get a little bit of our own way. But I do offer them in a valedictory spirit, as a reminder of how wise, clever, perceptive, occasionally lyrical, eccentric, sometimes downright crazy our great-grandmothers were, and their great-grandmothers; and of the contributions to literature of Mother Goose and her goslings. (xxii)

Carter not only recovers such a legacy but puts into practice a radical and erotic revision in her own novels and short stories by centering on female desire and sexuality.

Taking into consideration the feminist reminder that the fairy tale is “a man’s world,” the genre must be historicized to reveal the patriarchal world order and gendered polarization in the text, and to bring to light the fact that, as my epigraph reads, “All fairy tales *have* a history.” What I want to spotlight is the dark side of the genre Benjamin points out: “the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare” and “the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is.” Framed between the “once upon a time” and the “happily ever after,” a rite of passage takes place: an unknown territory must be trespassed, obstacles are to be confronted, and boundary lines must be reestablished. The rhetorical figure of the nightmare epitomizes the social drama occurring in a given imagined space of liminality where a violation comes to light and where the hero plunges into crisis, put to the test. The storyteller sheds light on the existential forces of the “fabric of real life” (Benjamin 86–87) when danger resulting from a transgression threatens the safety of the community. “To learn what fear is” translates into subduing the fear of death in the realm of the story and in the real world. That is why the most powerful statement in Benjamin’s brilliant essay turns out to be a philosophical reflection: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back” (94). The storyteller in each retelling and reimagining has the power to administer the fear of the unknown, manage the anxieties of the risk of dying (as if death were near), and appease the ambivalence toward death within a shared space time (in the here and now) for a community of listeners. As long as there is a “once upon a time,” there shall be future stories of enchantment . . . until death. This book unleashed abjection as a valid framework to theorize the material body and liminal subjectivity.

The Road Not Taken

Wandering off into the landscape of the fairy tale requires first standing in front of the two fortified towers of dualistic thinking and the entry gate of reason that give access to the domain of Western ontological identity formation. Once crossed, there are only two roads to take either right or left: once again, either/or. What lies between fleshes out the space of abjection where self-fashioning takes place according to the implementation of self/other identitarian binary structures and patriarchal models of domination. The walls at each side of the landscape function to survey, imprison, and subju-

gate the other: any wandering or derailing outside the limits is obstructed by the binary logic of sameness and difference that reinforces, empowers, and perpetuates the law and order of the father.

All references to abjection begin with Julia Kristeva's theorization in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. This is the book that unleashed abjection as a valid framework to theorize on the body and subjectivity in process. At times, she finds herself struggling with the whole picture of the concept, or relying only on poetic glimpses, or making it clearer in an interview:

[I]t is an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside. So it is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so—whence the element of crisis which the notion of abjection carries within it. (Hoffman 372)

Kristeva's writing is a balancing act between the language of psychoanalysis and the poetic:

what is abject . . . the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. . . . And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. . . . Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. . . . On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture. (*Powers of Horror 2*)

It is within that interstitial zone between the "not me," the "not that," and the "but not nothing either," as Kristeva ascribes to a being "on the edge," that the abject subject is brought about to produce a clean and proper body. The subject experiences abjection as a corporeal-psychic-sensorial engine that propels existence to the edge of the precipice: "Abjection, or the journey to the end of the night" (58). The abject is what is excluded from the body and expelled from the symbolic order. It is what is outside the body, "challenging

its master.” Because of its ambiguity and in-betweenness, it is uncanny. It is fascinating and repulsive. It sustains the notion of selfhood in place always in relation to difference, always manifesting a desire for the other that must be repressed and be kept at a distance, beyond boundaries. Kristeva’s definition of abjection works in terms of “not [a] lack of cleanliness or health . . . but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (4). Elizabeth Grosz’s theorization on the abject is applicable here too; once again, the workings of abjection can only be poetically grasped: “It is the underside of a stable subject identity, an abyss at the borders of the subject’s existence, a hole into which the subject may fall when its identity is put into question” (*Sexual Subversions* 72). Or, as John Lechte has wonderfully observed, “[abjection] is precisely what Narcissus would not want to have seen as he gazed into the pool” (160).

Adding to Kristeva’s proposition, Judith Butler moves on to conceive the positionality of the abject subject in the territory of abjection:

[T]he abject designates . . . those “unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject domain. . . . In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (*Bodies* 3)

This is why the body acted upon, always under the threat of abjection, matters, and why it also matters when it is out of place. I propose, following both theoreticians, that such repudiation and marginalization reproduces the experience of abjection along a continuum of affective and corporeal reactions and effects. Abjection allows for the examination of the processual dynamics embedded in the social practices between sameness and otherness, self and other, in given relations of power. Abject performance triggers the implementation of the law of the father, the surveillance and control of undesirable bodies, and the repression of otherness and difference.

Abjection breeds monsters. Abjection hatches freaks. Abjection generates queers. Abjection procreates the other. There is no better example to demonstrate the making of monsters in classical philosophy than Aristotle’s inferior

appraisal of women: “[A]nyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a monstrosity, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type. The first beginning of deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male” (401) and “[T]he female is as it were a deformed male” (175). Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti’s counter-response to Aristotle says it all: “History, as we have come to know it, is the master discourse of the white, masculine, hegemonic, property-owning subject who posits his consciousness as synonymous with a universal knowing subject and markets a series of ‘others’ as his ontological props” (254).

In a contestatory gesture to male supremacy, feminists, queers, peoples of color, and postcolonial/decolonized subjects since the 1960s have embarked on an epic journey to dismantle the Cartesian humanist project, to interrogate the classical model of rationality, to decenter unitary subjectivity, to implode phallogocentrism, to defame the name of the father, to dislodge the logic of sameness, and to tumble hierarchies of power relations. The call to arms has been to intrude into and raise hell in the abject topography of heteronormativity, misogyny, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and all taboo territory where the rational and normative Eurocentric male subject reigns supreme. The boiling craters of otherness and difference await trespassers whose embodied subjectivity materializes in the form of devalued identity after resurging from the murky waters of abjection, if not by any chance already drowned in sinkholes of oppression, exploitation, intolerance, prejudice, violence, terror, genocide, and death.

Beauty and the Beast, like other master narratives on Broadway that stage abjection, otherness, and difference, showcases the dialectics of beauty and ugliness, along the axiomatic axes of good and evil, always privileging the selfsame logic of identity that overrules the presence of alterity repeatedly framed and performed in abjection. Even Shakespeare calls into question the dyadic interaction between good and evil: “For there is nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (946). All the same, the logic of the one/not-one perpetuates itself through the generation of dichotomies and installation of hierarchies ad infinitum in pursuance of the exclusion of abject subjects and outcast of improper bodies: male/female, mind/body, culture/nature, master/slave, human/beast, reason/irrationality, civilization/barbarity, dominant/subordinate, purity/dirt, sublime/grotesque, normal/pathological, order/chaos, clarity/obscurity, black/white . . .

For me, theater has always been a privileged site within the cultural imaginary for unique and extreme ways of articulating the unthinkable and unimaginable (like monstrosity and enfreakment), witnessing the unknown, and embodying the uncanny. Now I must ask, how are otherness and difference represented on the Great White Way? In dominant spectacular theatrical pro-

ductions such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the abject body is done away with and sameness is safely reinstated at the end of the show: the monstrous, freakish, and queer creature must be cast away by the mob to secure the borders of the body politic and install normalcy and civic order. The strategy is to reposition the ideal Caucasian couple that guarantees the promise of a future generation. When abjection takes over the subject, pushing to the limits the possible collapse of the social order, the eroticized perversion present in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, cannibalism in *Sweeney Todd*, or evil in *Jekyll and Hyde* must be eradicated at the end. In the *Wizard of Oz*, *The Wiz*, and *Into the Woods*, the witch must be killed. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel mutates into a human with a pair of legs and female-assigned genitalia. In *Wicked*, the Wicked Witch of the West, Elphaba, is not killed but exiled.

As for the representation of “freaks of nature,” in *Sideshow* the Siamese Hilton sisters overcome congenital malformation with their talent and virtue. Similarly, in *The Elephant Man*, Joseph Merrick’s assimilation into bourgeois culture earns him the admiration of upper-class philanthropists whose humanity substantiates the ruling logic of sameness despite his corporeal deformation. An extreme case is *Shrek*. This musical under the spell of multiculturalism celebrates the difference of the ogre, his princess, and freaky fairy tale characters. The show advances a liberal politics of identity in a theme song titled “The Freak Flag:” “Let your freak flag wave, / Let your freak flag fly. . . / What makes us special / Makes us strong.”¹¹ Utopian difference reigns at the end when the princess cannot break the enchantment and remains “ugly.” Difference mutates into the banality of political correctness. Everyone metamorphoses into the same.

Green becomes the common denominator replacing skin color on the Great White Way: Princess Fiona wears a green dress, at night she turns green, and at the end she stays green, thus matching her husband’s skin color. In *Wicked*, the Wicked Witch of the West is green, born that way because of her mother’s adulterous act. It cannot be forgotten that on both *Sesame Street* and *The Muppets*, Kermit the frog begins the song “It’s Not Easy Bein’ Green” by lamenting his green skin coloration yet nevertheless ends up reconciled with and accepting of his difference. Nor can we dismiss that in *The Wizard of Oz*, America’s favorite fairy tale, the witch, the Emerald City, the outfits, the lighting of the chamber, and the image of the Wizard on the screen are all green. The color green becomes problematic in *The Wiz*. However, while Emerald City stays green, the green effect is more complicated: it is limited to coloring hair green, wearing green costumes, and displaying sets with green lighting and projecting green light on bodies. Here, the skin cannot be dyed green. The mechanized image of the face of the Wiz even changes colors. But evidently African American skin is not susceptible to changing color. On the one

hand, the fantasy of essentializing epidermal coloration into green is the white man's privilege also exhibited in blackface. Is green the cultural symptom to euphemize the circulation of racist ideologies? Therefore, the invisibility of whiteness disavows practices of racial discrimination.

As the examples show, when abjection strikes, unless it is camouflaged with the color "green," in a blink of an eye alterity can hijack the regime of Western ontology and jeopardize the order of things, making subjects think and act differently.¹¹ Now, then, I must ask, how does the other represent and negotiate with its own alterity from the positionality of the margins? How do Cruz and Sánchez deviate from the proper and clean body to engage the figure of the other embodied in the tropes of monstrosity and enfreakment? At what point does such enactment of radical performances destabilize and put at risk the power of the sovereign subject? How do they open up a theatrical space where bodies matter and thus cast doubt on who is considered less than human?

Twice upon a Time

The theatrical works of Migdalia Cruz and Eddie Sánchez have seduced, fascinated, and impacted me in such an intense and insane manner that I have had to embark into unknown territories within the cultural imaginary where abjection, monstrosity, and enfreakment unconditionally rule. First of all, it must be established that their theatrical works articulate a new politics of representation and difference in US Latina/o theater: Cruz and Sánchez distance themselves both from realist theater and from Nuyorican theater of the seventies and eighties (which concentrated on *la vida del barrio*, the crisis of patriarchy, the dysfunctionality of the family after migration, and the transcultural condition of the second generation) by configuring characters who are out of the norm, uncanny, and extremely abject.¹² Their corporeal anomalies, unruly bodies, odd behavior, and divergent ways of being engage spectators in ex-centric situations in which bodies, images, and actions surprise, tease, trouble, shock, disturb, scandalize, and haunt audiences forever after. Cruz and Sánchez succeed in their theatrical projects because spectators find themselves unexpectedly entering marginal spheres of dubious uninhabitability, following liminal circuits of/for abject subjectivities-in-the-making, and suddenly maneuvering multiple decentered and provisional positionalities without relying on a self/other dichotomy for the articulation of identity. Without questioning or judging the ex-centricity of their protagonists and by undoing the gridlock of the binary of self/other, both playwrights trespass into unexplored domains where the axis of sameness and difference falls out of the orbit of identity formation. The playwrights make spectators (on their own

and stepping outside their comfort zone) face difficulty apprehending issues such as victimization, exploitation, and marginalization and do so within a poetic frame of representation in a world out of joint and spinning in fractured memories and broken dreams. *Fur* and *Icarus* leave behind the pedagogical message embedded in realist community-based theater and minority kitchen sink drama. Instead of presenting a politically inflamed identitarian lesson against racism, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, stereotypes, and liberal multiculturalism celebrating alterity, both plays stage a poetic performance that short-circuits the politics of representation and identity formation that traditionally characterizes Latina/o theater.¹³

The master narrative of *Beauty and the Beast* may be seized only as a fleeting paradigm surpassing the plays' storylines. Yet it does not escape being subdued and named. Cruz explicitly quotes the fairy tale in the prologue of the play: "'I shall not let you die!' cried Beauty. 'You shall live and I shall be your wife! I cannot bear to lose you.' Scarcely had she spoken than there was a sudden flash of brilliant light; and there before her stood a handsome young prince" (76). Similarly, Sánchez discloses his acquaintance with the fairy tale: "I've always been interested in the story of *Beauty and the Beast*—especially in what would happen if you flipped the role."¹⁴ Besides, given that Sánchez names one of his characters Beau, surely registering a direct queer reciprocity to Belle, and marks Altagracia's face with disfigurement, *Icarus* exhibits a forthright entanglement with *Beauty and the Beast*.

In their reviews the critics took hold of an obvious connection with the fairy tale, thereby prioritizing and legitimizing the storyline of the classic as if Cruz and Sánchez had undeviatingly replicated the storyline: "*Fur* Does a Darkly Comic Take on *Beauty and the Beast* . . . a dark but fanciful retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*"¹⁵; "*Icarus* plays out like an inverted *Beauty and the Beast* fairy tale, though there's no magic to whip up a happy ending."¹⁶ No doubt Disney deserves full acknowledgement for the popularity, circulation, and consumption of the fairy tale kept alive in the public sphere since 1991. Yet Cruz and Sánchez do not have in mind the archetypes of the beauty and the monster, nor the monstrous physical appearance and behavior of the Beast, nor the cautionary tale with the happy ending in which the Beast is regenerated and redeemed. Failing to understand this rejection yields a misreading of how abjection, monstrosity, and enfreakment operate for both playwrights.

How useful, therefore, is Benjamin's interpretation of the fairy tale in terms of its scheme to "shake off the nightmare" and "to learn what fear is" when applied to *Fur* and *Icarus*? And, furthermore, how applicable is Kristeva's theory of abjection? First of all, the Beast is not a monster. It is an enchantment that has turned him into a monstrous being. The conversion into a handsome prince at the end just brings back the order of things and the prince's true nature. The nightmare is surmounted. What was once feared is now van-

quished. Abjection is repelled. That's it. For Michel Foucault, "the monster insures the emergence of difference . . . [and] provides an account, as though in caricature, of the genesis of differences" (*The Order of Things* 156–57); "The monster is the limit, both the point at which the law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases. The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden" (*Abnormal* 56). The Beast succeeds in shaking off the nightmare of innate monstrous corporeal difference. Not an extreme case of monstrosity to worry about. What was once seen as a monstrous body is left unmarked by difference. But it is that difference that Cruz and Sánchez cannot dispose of. They do not set out to stage a fairy tale; otherwise, they would be committed to maintaining the status quo of difference as the binary opposite to sameness. They take up the paradigm of the fairy tale to transform it into a contemporary ethical code through which true beauty can be experienced and, more importantly, redefined. That means that they lay bare the ontological status of the abject subject in pursuance and recognition of, as Judith Butler states, "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as human? And, finally, *what makes for a grievable life?*" (*Precarious* 20). I would insist that the fear of the other is what remains intact in these plays when considering the precariousness and vulnerability of malformed and damaged bodies: Citrona is a hirsute. Altagracia is disfigured. Primitivo is handicapped; Gloria is too old. Beau is psychologically injured. Mr. Ellis is crazy. Michael is fetishistic. Nena is obsessive. They are all marked by permanent signs of difference and subjected to the gaze of normality physically or psychologically. They are all, in one way or another, figures of abjection. In this sense, Cruz and Sánchez's characters do function under the workings of enfreakment, but it is up to the audience to categorize them. The category of the freak must be understood as a historically situated social construct. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has observed, "Because such [extraordinary bodies] are rare, unique, material, and confounding of cultural categories, they function as magnets to which culture secures its anxieties, questions, and needs at any given moment. . . . Thus, singular bodies become politicized when culture maps its concerns upon them as meditations on individual as well as national values, identity, and direction" (*Freakery* 2). If Cruz's and Sánchez's scenes of abjection center-stage difference without making a spectacle of monstrosity and enfreakment, why does the freak show still creep inexorably onto the stage?¹⁷

"See and Be Astounded. Come Inside and See Nature's Macabre Human Wonders"

The Beast would have been a wonderful specimen for a freak show, yet there are no sideshows in fairy tales. In their adventures and fantastic journeys,

heroes mostly encounter monsters, evil beings, and supernatural creatures, all of whom, once rewarded at the end of the storyline, reestablish the regime of law and order by conquering evil. By contrast, the public in freak shows turns human beings into a commodity in exchange for staring. Diane Arbus, well-known photographer of “extraordinary bodies,” remarked about her passion for and attraction to meeting and photographing freaks that it was an experience analogous to an encounter with a character in a fairy tale: “There’s a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats” (3). Arbus turns fairy tales and freak shows into human riddles, reverses the assigned rules, all the while modifying the ethics of the gaze. Arbus references the hero undergoes in fairy tales to reach his ultimate compliance and happiness, but freaks, unlike people who complain about the vicissitudes of life and fear of future trauma, are sentenced to exhibit their innate scar of bodily difference. They have the answer to the riddle; they must embody the riddle. For Arbus, freaks cope with “extraordinary bodies” and the trauma of daily existence no matter what. Arbus, who suffered from episodes of depression, did not find an answer to the riddle of life that she searched for in her photography. Is that what she meant in one of her most cited statements? “I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them” (15). Arbus committed suicide in 1971.

Given that the etymology of “aristocrats” (*aristo* + *kratos*) translates into “the best,” the “most fitting” to rule, Arbus’s use of the word evinces her respect and admiration for those who work in freak shows, those institutionalized for life, even those trapped in daily life.¹⁸ Ironically, this extraordinary word, when applied to freaks, makes of them the “privileged,” the “best-born or best-favored by fortune,” grants them knowledge and wisdom. As aristocrats, freaks have the power to create a brotherhood. These reversals are especially true in Tod Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks* when, in the wedding scene, they welcome and chant in unison the acceptance of the bride, a normal outsider: “We accept her, we accept her. One of us, one of us. Gooba-gobble, gooba-gobble.” Unfortunately, the story turns into a horror film once they discover her intention to kill her midget husband with poison in order to inherit his fortune. They mutilate and disfigure her body beyond recognition (making her one of them) as punishment. Because of this act of revenge, the freaks infringe on their own moral and human status. Regardless of how horrifying the crime is, what is meant to take place is the reversal of the normative gaze. The beautiful woman will now be subjected to the stares of the public *en carne propria*. She will have to face the intrusive, discriminating, condescending, and repulsive gaze from spectators that will invalidate her humanity. Gar-

land-Thomson observes that the voyeur's compulsion to stare at extraordinary-looking bodies does not take into account the violence perpetrated on disordering bodies. The woman/freak/animal will be subjected for life to the "perversity and the anxiety of being a staree" (*Staring* 43). She will endure the dominant "ocular intrusion" (46) that is put into practice in freak shows, where "staring validates our individuality, calls out our differences from others. Sameness does not merit stares" (75). Indeed, Cruz and Sánchez bounce the hegemonic gaze back to the audience in order to effect an alternative way of seeing the other. They showcase "inappropriate/d" bodies whose difference challenges audience complicity with the logic of sameness and otherness and the normalization of the medical gaze upon damaged or contra natura corporeality.¹⁹

There is no more abject space in juxtaposition to the fairy tale than the freak show. It could be considered one of those abject spaces Butler refers to as being "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life . . . populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (3). I would go further: in spite of it all, abject subjects make those spaces habitable and livable for their own survival. From this alternative point of view, the freak show constitutes a refuge, a place called home, where lived experience is circumscribed to the basic needs of subsistence. What is undesirable, intolerable, and improbable becomes a mode of existence. Since its foundation, the freak show has provided a way for stigmatized and destitute bodies to make a living at the risk of dehumanization. The sideshow advertisement campaign exploits, for amusement and profit, the incongruity and deviance of "extraordinary bodies." The practices of ontological disqualification with labels such as "What is it?," "Nondescript," "Human Oddities," "Missing Link," "Wild Savage," "Man Monkey," and "Animal or Human?" frame the abject spectacle of the freak show and perpetuate the stereotype. These categories flesh out and authenticate the perception of the freak within a frame of reference that denies the other a common humanity, always positioned as less than human. Along with other forms of othering (e.g., exoticism, eroticism, colonialism), at the moment the "living curiosity" takes the stage, an assemblage of tropes and discursive formations are mobilized; as Fiedler correctly asserts, what begins with "a fear of difference, eventuates in a tyranny of the Normal" (*Tyranny* 154). Cruz in her play pushes the limits of bodily representation and the transgression of taboos with a hirsute whose indomitable desire and unruly passion for love take the audience to places never before explored in Latina/o theater: the freak show.

Fur's opening scene takes place at a freak show, where Michael is looking forward to seeing the just-arrived new oddity, a hirsute named Citrona. The playwright emphasizes in the prologue the horror, abuse, and exploitation

Citrona has lived through, noting that she “has been sexually mutilated by her mother and sold to him like a dog. The beauty Michael sees in Citrona is about her otherness, her exoticness, her Latina-ness” (Cruz 73). The same process of othering happens at the freak show but in a public context. Michael buying Citrona with the sole purpose of making her his wife focalizes in the private domain the exposure to the dynamics of power in love-sex relationships, extreme fetishistic behavior, polymorphous perverse sexuality, and the violence perpetrated against women’s bodies.²⁰ Citrona incarnates the freak with a huge capacity for love. She expresses her feelings through the lyrics of Beatles songs by undermining their heteronormative message.²¹ She sings them to the beautiful woman he hires to feed and clean her. Nena is attracted to Michael from the first time she sees him at the carnival grounds. She finds her way to his pet shop to be close to him. As in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit*, an impossible love triangle takes over the plot: Nena falls in love with Michael, he wants Citrona to love him, and she wants to possess Nena. The removal of Citrona from the freak show to her imprisonment in a cage in Michael’s basement shows how both spaces enslave her, not allowing her human status. Citrona is the beast driven by a life force that dates back to primal human ways of survival. As a hirsute, she is condemned to be exhibited like other symbolic feral figures of abjection in history with the congenital conditions of hypertrichosis lanuginosa and gingival hyperplasia. The most salient example was Julia Pastrana (1834–60), originally from Mexico, whose body was completely covered with hair. On tour she was advertised as “the Ugliest Woman in the World.” She had a child who inherited her mother’s deformities. After their embalment they were circulated in Europe and America as a commodity. Upsetting the line between the human and the beast, pushing the limits of the culturally permissible, and awakening the horror and aversion of corporeal disfigurement, such abject liminal subjects foremost fed fantasies of monstrous sexualities, mixed ancestry, racial impurity, and even religious violations. Citrona’s sexual voracity emblemizes a contemporary trope of abjection, monstrosity, and enfreakment whose libidinous energy is overbearing and liberating.²² In a culture where regimens of cleanliness and health dominate daily life, Citrona’s undisciplined body provokes anxiety and discomfort. To better visualize Citrona’s hirsute condition, Marina Warner offers a precise explanation of the cultural symbolism of hair, noting that it “is both the sign of the animal in the human, and all that means in terms of our tradition of associating the beast with the bestial, nature and the natural with the inferior and reprehensible aspects of humanity” (*From the Beast* 373).

At first sight, *Icarus* has nothing to do with the freak show. Yet, when placed side by side with *Fur*, it distances itself from the hegemonic viewing practices and exploitative modus operandi of the freak show. Mr. Ellis, who

seems to be the most normative individual among all, reiterates in a series of soliloquies:

I am not staring. I am not staring. I am not staring. Am I staring? I am not staring. I am not staring. I am not staring. Am I staring? I am not staring. I am not staring. I am not staring. Am I staring? I am not staring. I am not staring. I am not staring. I am not staring. Oh my God, I am staring. (Sánchez 9)

Critics dismissed Mr. Ellis's verbal compulsion as a strange and tedious mantra.²³ Not so, I insist. Instead, it is a self-reminder about the habit of staring at the other. He is undoing the act of looking at difference as institutionalized in the freak show and practiced in society at large when confronting alterity and disabled bodies. Rather than being nonsensical, Mr. Ellis's soliloquy performs the role of the choir in ancient Greek tragedy. He writhes at the very idea that he must regulate his impulse to look away and stare again. He writhes at the very idea that he must regulate his impulse to look away and then stare again. Thereby, he disrupts his compulsive inclination to submit to the internalized logic of sameness and difference. The subject at those moments of encountering the materiality of the flesh oscillates between attraction and horror, fascination and repulsion touching on corporeal difference. Mr. Ellis finds himself under the distress of the sovereign self upon viewing the abject body. Grosz explains how this process of dis-identification produces a subjectivity in process embedded in the perception of and reaction to bodily difference:

Freaks traverse the very boundaries that secure the "normal" subject in its given identity and sexuality. . . . The freak confirms the viewer as bounded, belonging to a "proper" social category. The viewer's horror lies in the recognition that this monstrous being is at the heart of his or her identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible. In other words, what is at stake in the subject's dual reaction to the freakish or bizarre individual is its own narcissism, the pleasures and boundaries of its own identity, and the integrity of its received images of self. ("Intolerable" 64–65)

In this process of subject formation, the subject struggles to recalibrate the workings of the gaze of normality. The same happens with the viewing of Arbus's photography. She exposes "extraordinary bodies" who inhabit liminal spaces of abjection that no one gets to see unless she shoots them. Arbus's subjects stare back, conscious of their livelihood in one of the most prevalent spaces of abjection, the freak show. They challenge the master gaze prescribed in one of the most commodified rituals of leisure activities and open a new space of possibility to destabilize the category of self/other. Cruz's and Sánchez's audiences also confront in a Brechtian fashion the dynamics of staring, staring away, and staring back. It is precisely in those visual exchanges and bodily perceptions that spectators confirm their normality and contend their humanity. *Fur* and *Icarus* pose an allegorical answer to the riddle of what it is to be human in precarious modes of existence and what counts as human under abject conditions of survival.

Allegories of Existence and Bare Survival

In 1992 Dan Rather, then a CBS news anchor, wrote an article as a guest film commentator for *The Los Angeles Times* titled "The AIDS Metaphor in *Beauty and the Beast*." Rather's article is a courageous act of journalism aimed at dissipating the panic over AIDS. The dying scene of the Beast reminded him of a person with AIDS:

Think of the spell as AIDS with the same arbitrary and harshly abbreviated limitations on time and you feel the Beast's loneliness and desperation a little more deeply. He's just a guy trying as hard as he can to find a little meaning—a little love, a little beauty—while he's still got a little life left. . . . Say that the AIDS metaphor is just one way, a valid way, of looking at *Beauty and the Beast*. . . . That means that millions of Americans, most of them children, are looking at a Person With AIDS with a new kind of compassion. We're crying when he's sad, cheering for him when he wins. You can hope that huge audiences would feel the same way about a real Person With AIDS, Kaposi's Sarcoma lesions and all the most visible symptoms of the full-blown illness. You can expect that we'd feel pity. But can you possibly imagine that we'd identify with him? Actually, now that we know how to identify with the Beast, maybe we can identify with people with AIDS.²⁴

In *Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation*, Joshua David Billen astutely pays attention to how Disney's animated films advance a new way of seeing the marginalized freak. According to Billen, as a result of disfigurement, dysfunction, or presumed deformity, the protagonists experience "alienation-through-embodiment" (176). What is fascinating about his critical reading is his approach to the Beast in association with the Americans Disability Act, which became law in 1990. (The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life. The purpose of the law is to make sure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else.) Billen, like Rather, does an allegorical interpretation of the film:

If nothing else, this conjunction encourages one to view the Disney freak films not as typically seen—as timeless fairy-tale narratives of an outsider gaining acceptance as the reward for a self-sacrificing act—but as participants in an opening cultural debate concerning physical difference, representation, and alienation. . . . It is *Beauty and the Beast* that most fully embraces its affinity with the freak show, using the premise (or pretense) of bodily difference to engage a range of critical, interwoven issues: issues of appearance, representation, intolerance, and alienation. . . . Disney films [i.e. *Tarzan*, *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Little Mermaid*] repeatedly enact the exclusionary us-versus-them politics that *Beauty and the Beast* so powerfully challenges. (178, 183)

Rather's and Billen's allegorical readings of *Beauty and the Beast* gesture toward a radical ethical position, an undeniable act of intervention and compassion in the mainstream consciousness of what counts as human and who has full citizenship rights. As they propose, the status of the human ought to be bestowed with compassion on the sufferer of AIDS and the stigma against people with disabilities be removed. What it means to live with AIDS or physical disability finds its rhetorical embodiment and affective investment in the figure of the Beast. Rather's and Billen's allegorical interpretations not only enclose the surface narrative of the fairy tale but also register the affective identification and political activism triggered by the AIDS epidemic and the disability rights movement. Such rhetorical practices of narrative framing, semiotic excess, discursive displacement, and affective disposition illuminate both sets of historical experience. That is why, once the spectators such as Rather and Billen become aware of the possibility of reinscribing an alternative perception of the figure of the Beast, the fairy tale opens up the narrative

structure to accommodate cultural, political, and social commentary, or ideological commitment, such as AIDS and disability, in the here and now. Rather identifies the person with AIDS as a human being, not as a monstrous freak. The virus embodies the monster. For Bellin, the freak ceases to be a sideshow attraction or a medical problem and is instead construed as a civil rights issue.

Attending performances of *Fur* and *Icarus* entails traversing abject spaces and witnessing the precariousness of human existence.²⁵ No surprise that Altagracia, Primitivo, and Citrona are homeless. As figures of abjection, they are dispossessed, and thus cannot make a living in the “real world.” As abject subjects, their articulation of a bilingual and transcultural identity is entangled with brutal colonization, successive traumas of displacement, and extreme cultural violence in Puerto Rico and the diaspora.²⁶ The indeterminacy of Puerto Rico’s colonial status goes hand in hand with practices of discrimination on the mainland, framed by marginalization and poverty. Cruz’s and Sánchez’s dramaturgical practices open a cultural space to imagine the modes of existence of Nuyorican colonial abject subjectivities unaccounted for within the hegemonic national social imaginary. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s work examines spaces that the Anglo-American regime of political power does not want to regard and continually dismisses. Her approach offers an adequate point of entry into the “uninhabitable” and “unlivable” conditions of barrios and ghettos (such as the Bronx) where Cruz’s and Sánchez’s characters survive on the margins: “[a] ‘space on the side of the road’ in the ‘American’ cultural landscape. . . . It is a space often crowded into the margins, and yet it haunts the center and reminds it of something it cannot quite grasp” (12). From this vantage point, Nuyorican theater materializes the kind of space Stewart theorizes: “a dwelling in and on a cultural poetics contingent on a place and a time and in-filled with palpable desire” (4). There is some irony here. The barrio is both what they have left behind and what they cannot get away from. Yet these plays do not take place in the barrio. *Fur* comes about in a beach house Altagracia and Primitivo have just occupied. *Icarus* moves from a sideshow to a pet shop. After all, they still are outsiders, bodies out of place, diasporic abject subjects.

I call Cruz’s and Sánchez’s cultural poetics of Nuyorican theater “allegories of existence and bare survival.”²⁷ They de-mythify the ahistorical narrative of the fairy tale and implode the “once upon a time” trope to invoke the immediacy of lived experience in the here and now. The linear progression of the narrative in the fairy tale gives way to spatial fragmentation and temporal disarrangement. Nor does the storyline in the plays follow a chronological sequence: each scene becomes a vignette that gives the sensation of a plot out of joint. The interruption of the action not only frustrates the fulfillment of the fairy tale’s horizon of expectations but also discards the possibility of a happing ending. Closure hangs in the air, becoming an interrogative ending in

both plays. In *Fur*, when Michael releases Citrona from the cage and the lights go out, the audience hears Michael screaming. Is it a cry of pain or orgasmic jouissance? Does she begin to cannibalize him? Is Michael's ultimate desire to be possessed in a mouthful by a woman he cannot subjugate? Or is it his desire to die at the hands of Citrona, becoming the materialization of his own fetish once he is consumed and digested?

In *Icarus*, Primitivo, who is training as a swimmer so he can become famous by reaching the sun on the horizon, decides to keep swimming on his own while his sister and Beau are away. In doing so, he opens the door to a possible love relationship between Altagracia and Beau. By taking his future into his own hands, Primitivo's decision to take his life suggests the ethical dilemma of dying via euthanasia. Altagracia stops Beau from rescuing her brother and saving his life. The final exchange between the two is not a declaration of love per se but an agreement that when the time comes, they will themselves go on and touch the sun. Without a doubt, the audience's familiarity with Icarus's story anticipates Primitivo's drowning. In the Greek myth, Icarus, whose wings are made of wax, falls down into the ocean because he flies too close to the sun. For Sánchez, the myth is not only a point of departure but also becomes a retelling of alternate ways of life on the edge.

As in *Fur*, *Icarus*'s denouement comes with the opening of time to an unpredictable futurity anchored in the immediate present of subsistence. It is not a promising future but a becoming on a daily basis, a satisfying of the basic needs just to go on living, a desiring of whatever possibility shows up. Like *Fur*'s, *Icarus*'s interrogative ending leaves spectators with unforgettable images and characters who inhabit the most unthinkable scenarios of abjection, where survival is the rule of the day. As I said above, these plays go further than audiences have been before: they have the power to surprise, tease, trouble, shock, disturb, scandalize, and haunt forever. And this is so because spectators witness the most unforeseeable and memorable "allegories of existence and bare survival."

The above comments rely on the spectator's attention and interpretation. Now let's hear from the playwrights. It is time for the playwrights to speak, instead of privileging my own conclusions and my insistence on critically reading *Beauty and the Beast* as a fleeting paradigm entangled with the plays. I asked the playwrights: "What does the fairy tale have to do with *Fur* and *Icarus*?"²⁸ This is what they had to say when I asked them:

1. *What motivated you to write the play (Fur/Icarus)?*

Migdalia:

I was in a writing workshop with Maria Irene Fornés leading at the Pad-

ua Hills Playwriting festival in Northridge, California. It was like 110 degrees, in the middle of a desert-like-concrete college. I was thinking about the heat, the dryness of that place. It was overwhelmingly depressing. I felt completely alone and outside everyone else at this place. I was doing the exercise which was to draw two people you see around you and then turn them into characters. I saw a very beautiful/very femme woman staring at this very butch woman with a mustache—and I thought—“I wonder what would happen if one of these women fell in love with the other.” It seemed so impossible to me, that I turned it into a play. This exercise brought me to Citrona’s first monologue, where she talks about how being alone in the dark is not so bad. Then another monologue about Citrona meeting Nena for the first time and falling in love. All along, I kept seeing this angelic looking man perched on top of Citrona in her cage.

Eddie:

Just the idea of what real beauty is. I remember seeing an all-star tribute to Elizabeth Taylor. This was during one of her ill periods. In any case, she was a little bit heavier than she’d like and her back was obviously causing her pain, but here were all these celebrities singing her praises and she just sat there with a tired smile on her face. They showed clips of her and, at her peak she was the most exquisite woman on the face of the earth. Astounding. And they cut back to her, older and clearly in pain, but smiling and it was really unsettling. She was not feeling well, it was noticeable, and you knew the only reason she was there was to raise more funds for her charities. Well, at the end of the event, Bob Hope called her up on stage and she had to actually use a ramp as I recall to get to the stage, because she couldn’t handle the stairs. As she stood in the center of the stage Bob Hope read a list of all of her charitable acts. And it went on. And on. Bob Hope’s voice even cracked with emotion at one point because of the vast amount of charities she had been a part of. And I swear to you, the more he read the more beautiful she became, at least to me. By the end of it, she was the most beautiful I had ever seen her. That just blew me away. So, that really redefined beauty for me.

2. *At Dartmouth you talked about fairy tales and your handling of the plot of Beauty and the Beast; can you say something about your approach? Is Fur/Icarus an act of intervention on matters of the representation of otherness?*

Migdalia:

I saw the fairy tale connection after I found the characters. Ah, this is like *Beauty & the Beast*, except who is the beauty and who is the Beast keeps changing. There are other ways of being beastly of course other than just

looks. I can't say I speak to myself in terms of representation of otherness. That seems quite an academic way of looking at the act of invention, but in hindsight I see how all three characters are outsiders, all in love with the absolutely wrong person and all hopeless and hopelessly in love.

Eddie:

I knew that with this play I also wanted to address the burden of beauty. In a strange way, Altagracia has absolutely nothing to lose. Nothing is expected of her because of how she looks. Beau, on the other hand, is expected to achieve something. Do something. Amount to something. His looks have given him an entry to everything, but it is hollow. Think of all those rich kids who are born into money. So many of them lose their way because they don't know how to fight for something. In a certain way that is Beau. By wearing the mask he takes away the golden ticket life has given him. He finds his humanity when people don't see him as beautiful but just as Beau.

3. Did you employ any strategies to undermine and subvert the hegemonic Eurocentric plot? How do you engage with the folktale?

Migdalia:

I didn't consciously do any of that. I did want it to be a non-traditional love story, a three way love affair that did not have a man at its center—only as part of the three way cog of a love wheel of fortune. Is that subversion? I hope so. In the end, I let Nena and Michael both be consumed by Citrona. She is the center and the most outwardly freakish, being hirsute. She is somehow both male and female. So when she eats the things she loves it seemed right. I didn't actively engage with the folktale, but I was inspired by it, once I'd found my characters.

Eddie:

Well, certainly the names. I wanted Altagracia and Primitivo as names because they really fill the mouth. I very much wanted them to be big Spanish names. I also wanted to incorporate that beauty in the US means one thing, go to Hollywood! But, as we see with the Gloria, you are beautiful until the next, younger starlet comes along. And just as in the original, the Beauty in the end has to earn the love of the Beast, which I love because that's what makes it a love story.

4. How do you aim to humanize your characters in spite of their supposed "abnormality" or "queerness"?

Migdalia:

For me queer is normal. So to humanize the humans is not difficult. I just let them speak for themselves, with honesty, poetry, fragility, and savagery.

Eddie:

I just give them human situations and emotions that anyone could identify with. One of the things that has moved me the most regarding how the play is received is how many straight males have taken to the play. I've had them walk up to me after the play just sobbing their guts out.

5. *At large, in what way do you deal with difference, enfreakment, and the monstrous in terms of marginality and ex-centricity in your play?*

Migdalia:

I just write for the people who are most like me. I presume my eccentricity is normal and my marginality is a given, being a Puerto Rican woman born in the South Bronx in perpetual search for Home. Society would like me to stay a freak, to marginalize me, but being an artist and being able to write myself into history unfreaks me, I think. Ha! Coge!

Eddie:

Again, it's just humanizing them. I always like to show them at the very beginning full out. The ultimate outsider. I don't really mind if the audience sees them as other or "not like me" at the outset. The challenge for me comes from taking them from their initial reaction of watching and judging them to a point where they see themselves in them.

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Notes

1. Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W8iugY3C0>.
2. Visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pguMUFyJ3_U.
3. Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U016JWYUDdQ>.
4. I am borrowing the term “regulated improvisation” from Pierre Bourdieu.
5. Visit <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/special-offers/park-tickets/>
6. Personal communication via email, 27 Jan. 2017.
7. Personal communication via email, 26 Jan. 2017.
8. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” has become an indispensable theoretical reference in media and cultural studies.
9. Anne Bogart’s quote appears in “The PAJ Casebook #2 Into the Woods,” 50.
10. I am borrowing David Hevey’s concept of “enfreakment” (53) to refer to the figure of the freak as a social construct and as a practice of othering. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson lucidly states: “What we assume to be a freak of nature was instead a freak of culture” (“Introduction” 10). Robert Bogdan also defines the process of enfreakment as a cultural framing: “Freak is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices—a social construction” (xi).
11. For example, when Toni Braxton was hired to play Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, a song was added to “accommodate her presence as a sultry black soul singer” (King 74). For King, Braxton’s racial difference and voice register an excessive and transgressive subtext. No matter how much, according to him, the corporation may have exploited her stardom, her presence and her black performance could not be entirely controlled (76). As a guest on *The Rosie O’Donnell Show* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EbTwhmrlvY4>), Braxton sings “Change in Me” in costume. What follows is a striptease accompanied with music while she removes her gloves, Princess dress, and wig revealing her black skin. She insists that she is still Toni Braxton, and that means still black. Rosie in shock says: “kind of a break away Belle there.” Braxton not only sexualizes Belle but affirms her racial identity. In exchange for her act Rosie gives her a miniature white Belle. Is that a reminder that the musical is still framed by whiteness?
12. For example, see Jaime Carrero’s *Pipo Subway Doesn’t Know How to Laugh* (1972), Miguel Piñero’s *Short Eyes* (1974), Jaime Carrero’s *The FM Safe* (1978), Edward Galardo’s *Simpson Street* (1979), Pedro Pietri’s *The Masses Are Asses* (1984), Richard V. Izarry’s *Ariano* (1984), Federico Fraguada’s *Bodega* (1986), Reinaldo Povod’s *Cuba & His Teddy Bear* (1986) and *La Puta Vida* (1988), and Reuben Gonzalez’s *The Boiler Room* (1987).
13. In “I Don’t Consciously Set Out to Write about Blood,” my introduction to Cruz’s anthology *El Grito del Bronx*, I judge *Fur* to be one of the most “provocative and controversial” (15) Latina plays in this country. This also applies to Sánchez’s playwriting.

14. Personal communication, 3 Feb. 2017.
15. Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune* (17 Jan. 1997): Visit http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1997-01-17/entertainment/9701170270_1_fur-playwright-migdalia-cruz-comic
16. See *Icarus*'s back cover. Blurb by Chad Jones, *Oakland Tribune*.
17. Even a theater critic in his first viewing of the play linked it with the classic horror film *Freaks*: "The disquieting scene that opens Edwin Sánchez's *Icarus* is enough to make anyone uneasy. But what initially seems like some postmodern cross between *Beach Blanket Bingo* and *Freaks*, Tod Browning's 1932 cult film, methodically unfolds into a thing of profound beauty." See *Icarus*'s back cover. Blurb by Mark de la Peña, *San Jose Mercury News*. Critics also compared Citrona to the Elephant Man (<http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Fur-a-Lust-Triangle-That-Doesn-t-Square-2826250.php>) and saw her as a bearded lady (<http://www.monarchtheaternyc.org/fur-by-migdalia-cruz/>).
18. Visit *The Online Etymology Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=aristocracy>
19. I am borrowing the term from Trinh T. Minh-ha. For her, the "Inappropriate/d Other" is the woman "who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while pointing insistently to the difference; and that of reminding 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at" (9).
20. See Jacqueline Lazú's "*Fur* or Hair: L'Effroi et l'Attrance of the Wild-Woman" for a feminist approach to the play. She also traces the genealogy of the commodification and enfreakment of women's abject bodies.
21. Some songs are played in the background. The songs included are "Birthday," "Yes It Is," "Wait," "Girl," and "Here, There, Everywhere."
22. See Armando García's "Freedom as Praxis" for an allegorical reading of the play that highlights a genealogy of the figure of the slave and the embodiment of race and freedom. He places Citrona's diasporic subjecthood within a legacy of enslavement, resistance, and liberation.
23. Bruce Weber misses the point when he complains about Mr. Ellis "recit[ing] a mantra . . . that might be the soundtrack of Primitivo's and Altagracia's nightmares." So does *Variety*'s film critic Dennis Harvey when he states, "Ellis' 'I'm not staring, I'm not staring . . . Am I staring?' mantra grow[s] tedious fast." Visit variety.com/1998/film/reviews/Icarus-1200453555 for the review.
24. Rather is right after all. In *Tinker Bellies and Evil Queens*, Sean Griffin documents how Disney responded with compassion and respect to the AIDS epidemic. When Howard Ashman, who resurrected Disney's animated films and won the Oscar for Best Song at the Academy Awards, died of AIDS, the studio used the release of the film to honor him (99). The company also extended sick leave and insurance benefits to gay employees with AIDS and contributed with charity events (110, 191). Indeed, many AIDS quilts included very well-known Disney figures and All Things Disney. After my own AIDS diagnosis, I happened to join a support group. When the counselor asked the group what each one of us would like to do, a guy said his dream was to go to Disney World. I said I would love to go to Cuba.

25. A short, unedited first draft of this section was published without my permission in *Ollantay Theater Magazine* 18.35–36 (2011). The editors failed me.
26. See Analola Santana's essay "Una máquina teatral: Forma e identidad en el teatro de Migdalia Cruz," where she applies Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "minor literature" to Cruz's theater in order to explore Latina/o subject formation and the politics of writing in English in the United States.
27. In "Caught in the Web," Román and I discuss why *Kiss of the Spider Woman, the Musical* can be read as an AIDS allegory writ large. In this collaboration we unpack the entanglement between AIDS, Latinidad, Broadway, and gay spectatorship.
28. Personal communication, 1 Feb. 2016.

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