

## “TIME TO SPEAK OUT:”<sup>1</sup>

### Toward Conocimiento in Tanya Saracho’s *Kita y Fernanda*

Melissa Huerta

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the powerful effects of social class that shape the female characters at the center of Tanya Saracho’s play Kita y Fernanda. Saracho writes about the complexities of Mexicana identities in the U.S., especially the dynamics between different social classes within the U.S.-Mexican community. Kita y Fernanda is structured as a series of vignettes based on the characters’ memories, revealing the effects of social class and cultural identity on their friendship and their lives. These protagonists navigate translocalized social paradigms, relationships, cultural memory, history and (im)migration on a journey of self-discovery. Drawing on Chicana Feminist theories and theories of performance and behavior, this article considers the ways difficult journeys of translocalization can lead to conocimiento, evidenced especially in the character of Kita Gómez. Tanya Saracho’s treatment of translocalization and intra-Mexican relationships demonstrates that by subverting restored behaviors, we can gain self-realization, activism, and social transformation—alternate modes of believing, seeing and being in the world.*

**Key Words:** *conocimiento, restored behavior, social class, Tanya Saracho*

Early twenty-first century playwrights who are women of color craft theatrical worlds that chart and chronicle the experiences of simultaneously inhabiting multiple social realms. Tanya Saracho, a playwright of Mexican descent, is one such artist. She emigrated from Mexico to Texas in the early 1980s and moved to Chicago in the late 1990s after studying theatre at Boston University. In 2000, Coya Paz and Tanya Saracho formed Teatro Luna, an all-Latina theatre collective, in Chicago. Both artists had become frustrated over the lack of opportunities for Latinas to write, produce, and direct theatre in Chicago. They also wanted to create roles

for themselves that went beyond typecasts like the domestic worker and the undocumented immigrant. During Saracho’s ten years with Teatro Luna, her plays were popular throughout Chicago, and several of them have been performed on national stages. Present and past collide in Saracho’s plays as her Mexican and Mexican-American characters negotiate their identities at the intersection of gender, nation, and class. The characters Saracho creates consistently (re)negotiate their Mexican identities through cultural memory, history, relationships, social class, and (im)migration. In this essay, I propose that the female protagonists in Saracho’s *Kita y Fernanda* (2008) negotiate their roles as Mexican nationals on the US-Mexico border and in Chicago, Illinois through an exploration of their class status and place in the twenty-first century world. In the play, the two main Mexican-born characters reunite while engaging in civic action in the US, and through a series of flashbacks, reflect on the touchstones during their childhood that defined both their relationship and their identities: Kita as the working-class Mexican daughter of the housekeeper and Fernanda as the middle-class daughter of the employers.

Specifically, in *Kita y Fernanda*, Tanya Saracho charts the journey of these two long-acquainted Mexican women who unexpectedly meet in Chicago during an immigration rights march, both of whom land at the march for completely different reasons.<sup>1</sup> Kita Gómez grew up undocumented in the 1980s as the child of a Mexican housekeeper in South Texas, while Fernanda Valderrama is the privileged daughter of the Mexican family Kita’s mother served. Although both women grew up in the same household, they experienced coming of age differently. In their Chicago encounter, the women recognize each other immediately despite having spent ten years apart, but Fernanda does not want to acknowledge her childhood friend. In the flashback vignettes that follow this chance meeting, the audience witnesses the class differences that shape Kita and Fernanda’s childhood friendship, a set of memories and recollections that

traverse them from the past to the present as they navigate temporal, social, and cultural borders throughout the play.

### **A Class Focus**

Saracho's play *Kita y Fernanda* focuses on the intersections of socioeconomic class and ethnic identity, particularly Mexican and Mexican-American identities, to complicate essentialized notions of these positionalities.<sup>2</sup> In a profile feature article in *American Theatre*, Saracho explained, "class is something that I've always been obsessed with" (Reid 2011, 38). By centering social class as a marker of identity, Saracho explored the ways it intersects with an ethnic Mexican identity through the two multifaceted protagonists she creates in the play. In an interview with Tanya Palmer, Saracho affirmed her intention: "What I really want to do is add dimension to the image of Mexicans in general, and of Mexican women in particular" (2011, 9). These characters—especially Kita Gómez—seek to move beyond a homogenous Mexican identity and experience in the US, complicating essentialized understandings of identity.

In this essay, I draw from Anzaldúa's concepts of *mestiza consciousness* to examine the shifts in identity of Saracho's protagonists. I pay particular attention to Kita, who is on a journey of translocalization and identity negotiation, a transformative journey that can lead to an empowered state of *mestiza consciousness* (Anzaldúa 2007, 101). Understanding the term *translocalization* to mean that one's beliefs, actions, or social class, for example, extend beyond the local, I suggest that Kita moves through the process of *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa 2002) as she negotiates her identity as a Mexican immigrant in the US. Anzaldúa defines *conocimiento* "as that aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained" (2002, 577). Anzaldúa further notes that "*conocimiento* comes from opening all of your

senses, consciously inhabiting your body and decoding its symptoms” (2002, 542). Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento* is useful in analyzing *Kita y Fernanda* because it helps us understand how one of the lead characters—Kita—ruptures the class dynamics between herself and Fernanda that have shaped her experiences and sense of self. Marked by moments of discomfort, frustration, pain, and anger, Kita’s understanding of the hierarchical infrastructure of social and cultural categories allows her to disavow inherent contradictions in fixed stereotypes of a Mexicana identity that fail to account for interlocking systems of oppression rooted in class and migratory status.

### **A Path to Conocimiento**

Kita’s connection to her cultural heritage, her relationship to Fernanda, and her new home country informs her journey to *conocimiento*, the physical and emotional space where transformative change can or will take place, enabling self-realization, activism, and social transformation. According to Anzaldúa, *conocimiento* consists of seven nonlinear stages that help individuals ponder and readjust their ideas, beliefs, and motivations, connecting the self to political action (Anzaldúa 2002, 542).<sup>3</sup> As Ana Louise Keating notes, *conocimiento* requires thinking that is reciprocal and connects the inner life of the spirit with the outer worlds of action (2008, 57). Though the various components of the character’s intersectional identity contribute to the transformation, class is particularly salient to the characters in this play because it impacts the type of migration experiences and the types of social inequality immigrants endure when they enter a new country. As bell hooks firmly asserts in *where we stand: class matters*, “Nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It’s the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand” (2000, vii). It is a difficult journey for those outside of class privilege, and the powerful effects of class differences are seen in these two characters. I contend that Fernanda

Valderrama, a member of the privileged class, has a harder time challenging her privilege and unlearning her socialization, leaving her in what Anzaldúa (2002) calls *desconocimiento* (lack of awareness), while Kita Gómez can transgress her ascribed social role as the maid's daughter and undocumented immigrant. Like the battles that Kita faced during her upbringing and young adulthood, currently thousands of DREAMers are actively working toward achieving their dreams and aspirations. Theories of Chicana/Latina feminism, performance, and behavior combined with performance theories are valuable tools in analyzing differences between these characters' negotiation of identity. Together, they provide a way to theorize the level of critical consciousness the characters express through their respective behaviors. In particular, the notion by Richard Schechner (2006) that learned behaviors both shape and impose class norms, values, and expectations provides insight into Saracho's characters. His ideas are explained below.

### **Performing Socio-Cultural Roles**

From an early age, society begins to teach us how to behave; that is, it shows us how to perform a role. Social roles, such as being a parent, daughter, or friend, demand that we perform specific and appropriate behaviors based on those positions. As such, our identity is made up in part by a series of roles we are ready to play by accepting or rejecting social norms. Sociologist Erving Goffman describes and explains daily life as a series of roles we enact with and for others, fostering a consensual reality that serves to influence others, which in turn creates dramatically realized social roles (1959, 72). Performance theorist Richard Schechner builds on Goffman's observations, arguing that

Performances—of art, ritual or ordinary life—are 'restored behaviours,' twice—behaved behaviours, performed actions that people train and rehearse. That making art involves training and rehearsing

is clear. But everyday life also involves years of training and practice, of learning appropriate culturally specific behaviour, of adjusting and performing one’s life’s roles in relation to social and personal circumstances (Schechner 2006, 28–29).

In other words, just as actors rehearse roles they attempt to play perfectly, every individual enacts roles that are the product of practiced or repetitive actions throughout his or her life. In life, like in theater, restored or “twice-behaved behaviors” are repetitive actions that individuals have already rehearsed to adapt to cultural and social expectations.<sup>4</sup> Through these acts, subjects learn socially and culturally appropriate norms, including those practiced by members of their social class and culture, and are as influenced by legacies of conquest and colonization. History and culture establish certain behavioral patterns that tend to dictate individual behaviors. Reflecting on the legacy of the colonial, performance theorist Diana Taylor suggests that “mestizaje allows us to understand the racial and cultural continuities on the bodily scale—the microcosm in which these conflicts were lived as embodied experience. As such, behavioral patterns, ‘memories and survival strategies are transmitted from one generation to another through performative practices that include (among other things) ritual, bodily, and linguistic practices’” (2003, 108). In other words, the impact of colonialism on performative practices helps us understand the ways in which stratified systems of social class cross transnational borders; as such, the same social and racial hierarchies that exist in Mexico for the protagonists in the play are typically enforced among Mexican-born and Mexican-Americans in the US.

It is precisely at the intersection of theatre and performance that these translocalized behaviors manifest profoundly. Alicia Arrizón’s *Latina Performance: Traversing the Stage* (1999) maintains that the role of the colonial system, engrained with contradictions, shaped the contributions of a genealogy

of Latina artists. Arrizón asserts that the space of the border for Latina dramatists “is often a paradigm for theatrical and performative interventions” (1999, 100). She further notes that “a close reading of these [dramatic] works (and related commentaries) reveals how identity becomes constructed and performed as subjects move across borders” (Arrizón 1999, 101). Building on Arrizón’s work, Linda Saborío asserts that Latina playwrights such as Milcha Sánchez-Scott and Yolanda Nieves-Powell use role playing as “a means by which characters can separate themselves from the reality of their situation in an attempt to better understand a particular ‘image’” (2012, 31). Drawing on Arrizón and Saborío’s theorizations to analyze Saracho’s work offers a way to further explore identity negotiations as images in the context of “twice-behaved behaviors” and migration.

In *Kita y Fernanda*, fractured vignettes and shifts in temporal and spatial borders signal the ways that intra-Mexican relations translocalize and disrupt Mexican paradigms of class, especially social hierarchies, emphasizing heterogeneous identities of *Mexicanidad*. Saracho shows how her two protagonists—Fernanda and Kita—repeat restored behaviors before and after their move to the US. These “twice-behaved behaviors” teach us and bend us toward established class roles. Saracho’s characters, especially Kita Gómez, realize and resist the notion that their social roles are inundated with prescribed meanings of what is considered proper conduct of her social class in the Valderrama home and beyond. Schechner explains that it is possible, but certainly not easy, to destabilize class norms, “to enact a subversive act” (2006, 29). In this way, Saracho stages Kita’s journey toward *conocimiento* as a possibility, where the audience witnesses the way she sees, believes, and behaves subversively. For Anzaldúa, the process of knowing, or understanding oneself, is a complex, ever-evolving one and is repeated at different stages in one’s life and under different circumstances, which enables one to cross the bridges between

the worlds the mestiza inhabits without the need to choose one way of being over the other (2007). Saracho conveys this growing awareness by presenting multiple ways of behaving, seeing, and believing, juxtaposing two different life experiences and lenses, as represented through her two characters Kita and Fernanda. The character of Fernanda, on the other hand, exhibits how difficult it is to break away from traditional class structures, especially when these are reinforced by society, culture, and mass media. By the play’s end, she is still unable to partake in a transformative journey. These ways of seeing and being uphold the status quo—as represented by Fernanda—critique the status quo, or present the potential for changing the status quo—as Kita does via her journey of *conocimiento*.

### **Transcultural Identities in the US**

Early in its run, *Kita y Fernanda* received mixed responses on its structure. Jack Helbig of the *Chicago Reader* observed in his review, “Parts of the 90-minute play drag, especially when Saracho has her characters deliver longish speeches about who they are, what they believe, and what we should learn from them about life” (2008, par. 1). As some scholars note, the transcultural hallmark of twenty-first century Latina playwrights is a desire to maintain a connection to each culture on equal footing, rather than solely witnessing the subaltern subsumed into the hegemonic (Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach 2001, 25). Saracho’s use of vignettes from each character’s point of view create this bicultural perspective. Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach provide a framework from which to analyze the unconventional aspects of Latina theatre: “A primary characteristic of this new genre [of Latina theater] is its non-linear structure: It tends to be fragmented and non-chronological, allowing for the staging of short scenes and vignettes that are frequently autobiographical” (2001, 53). The structure of this play not only provides the readers and viewers



with a testimonial-type delivery of the border experience, but it also allows them to experience the evolution of a mestiza identity, one that oscillates between time periods and geographical spaces. Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach also state, “Transculturation calls into question the notion of homogenous, mononational identity. That is to say that these border identities are simultaneously constructed and deconstructed as the unitary concept of national imaginary communities disappears” (2001, 33). The structure functions as moments where conflict catalyzes the action of the play to illuminate characters’ negotiation with class identity in the US. The discord further evinces how movement between roles and spaces catalyzes identity negotiation. As a later section will reveal, the play’s structure is harmonious with twenty-first century Latina women’s expression and it is an effective way to show how Kita’s character negotiates an intersectional identity in the US, especially in regard to class hierarchies.

Saracho emphasizes that her play is about what it means to live and grow up in the US. In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Saracho affirmed, “To me, ‘Kita y Fernanda’ is very much an American story and I know some people are going to think it’s a Latina story, but it’s about shifting people’s paradigms and views of what it is to be American” (Metz 2008, par. 11). Not surprisingly, Saracho has expressed her discomfort with the moniker “Latina” and the pressure of writing to represent all the diverse positionalities possible within this ethnic identity. Instead, Saracho’s work highlights the varying Latinidades, allowing audience members to understand the Mexicana subjectivity as a fluid and unfixed transcultural position that acts and enunciates based on individual lived experiences. The class-based conflicts depicted in the vignettes of this play, for example, focus on moments that enable Kita and Fernanda to negotiate transcultural identities. By portraying socially constructed behaviors and expectations, Saracho represents class conflict and self-realization.

### **Tribulations and Transformations**

Kita's Chicana identity emerges through her journey of *conocimiento*, though it is not necessarily presented sequentially. As such, Saracho adeptly uses a series of flashback vignettes or memories to depict the evolution of Kita's Chicana identity that ruptures the class hierarchies that have been translocalized for the Mexican immigrant female lead character, as well as the way these class norms are upheld by and limit the transformation of the second lead character. The following sections describes ten different episodes from the play through the different stages of *conocimiento* explored both in *Borderlands* (Anzaldúa 2007) and in "now let us shift..." (Anzaldúa 2002), and through restored behaviors or "twice-behaved behavior" (Schechner 1985, 36). Moreover, moments from these vignettes also can be understood as depicting the growing *conocimiento* that Kita acquires while establishing her Chicana identity.

In the vignette, "Del otro a este lado" ("From the Other side to This One"), Kita and her mom Concha are brought to the Valderrama home in the Rio Grande Valley to work, duplicating a power structure already present in the Valderrama home in Mexico and emphasizing that class hierarchies in Mexico outlast even two distinct types of migrations, to and within the US. As such, Kita and her mom are unable to shift prescribed roles upon their arrival in the Valderrama home, perpetuating certain roles that dictate fixed behaviors regardless of location. These roles and behaviors are taught and reinforced by society through socialization that includes "the training and practice, of learning appropriate culturally specific bits of behaviour, of adjusting and performing one's life roles in relation to social and personal circumstances" (Schechner 2006, 28). In fact, when Fernanda mirrors her mother's behaviors in her first interaction with Kita, this moment of their encounter can be read as Kita and Fernanda entering the first stage to *conocimiento*, the rupture. In this stage, Kita and Fernanda experience a jolt of awareness, which jerks them from familiar places to ambiguous terrains.

### **The Rupture**

The characters' restored behavior is strong and outlasts the experience of migration, revealing that class differences are there from the beginning. In the opening vignette, Kita indirectly alludes to her experiences growing up in the Valderrama household as the daughter of the maid. As soon as the adult Kita and Fernanda recognize each other at the march, each explains her stories of the Gómez migration to the audience:

Kita: When I was eight years old my mother brought us to Maria Fernanda Valderrama's house en "El Otro Lado" [*The other side*]. We crossed the border thanks to a really nice lady who paid some Coyotes to smuggle us from Reynosa, Tamaulipas. Mi Ama [mom] said that Doña Silvia saved our lives. She was to let us clean her house in return for the all powerful dollar en "el otro lado" [on the other side]. . . . (Saracho 2008, 6).

Fernanda remembers this encounter differently, "It was Kita. I mean, could it be my Kita? . . . Francisca De La Concepcion Gomez was my very best friend. She walked into my house with an old pair of mismatching Keds. . . ." (Saracho 2008, 5–6). By recalling their parents' varying roles and social status, Kita and Fernanda begin to map out the varying degrees of privilege, belief systems, values, and behaviors determined by their distinct upbringings. As they share their stories as adults, Kita recalls her dangerous experience crossing the border, while Fernanda mentions only what Kita was wearing as she entered the household, an "old pair of mismatching Keds." For Fernanda, status symbols are important to show her point of view regarding class and social status. From the first encounter, Fernanda performs the materialist role, while Kita reflects upon the fact that she came to the US with the help of Fernanda's family's money. For Schechner, "performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships"

(2002, 30). As readers and audience members, Fernanda’s behavior is made evident by her interaction and relationship to Kita. Throughout the vignettes, Kita observes and responds to Fernanda’s restored behavior. Saracho demonstrates differing actions to highlight that actions influence other participants because we interact with others.

Saracho places emphasis on how class functions in a broader sense; Fernanda values status symbols because they mean culture, good taste, and knowledge. From the very first vignette, Fernanda expresses extremely blatant class stereotypes based on Kita’s background in the play. When Fernanda first addresses Kita in English and does not receive a response, she criticizes her: (*Fernanda sizes Kita up*) (*In a thick accent*) “Ju are you? Ju are you? Que estas sorda? [*Are you deaf?*] Te estoy preguntando que si WHO ARE YOU? [*I am asking you that if*] You are a mental retarded? Ja? Are you a mental retarded. Mensita? [*Dummy?*] (Saracho 2008, 8). Fernanda’s insolence points to the restored behavior of a privileged and spoiled child. Kita replies by insulting Fernanda’s disrespectful greeting by saying “mensa tu abuela” [*your grandmother’s a dummy.*] (Saracho 2008, 8). Kita reacted to Fernanda’s actions because they affected Kita, making evident Fernanda’s restored behavior. The discomfort Kita feels can be further attributed to the rupture, creating the distress that Anzaldúa states is necessary to move into the second stage of *conocimiento*, *nepantla* (2002, 546). Fernanda values and strives toward an assimilated identity to fulfill her role as young woman growing up in the US by emulating the White-American culture, while Kita refuses to stay quiet and conform to what is expected of her. By destabilizing the class dynamics imported from Mexico, Kita can transgress her part in this relationship, showing us that she sees and believes differently from what Fernanda expects. On the other hand, Fernanda’s moment(s) of rupture—anger at her parents’ decision to move or a rift with Kita—shows that something is taken from

her, but she is unable to further critique her privilege. In all, Kita provides an example from which to understand how transgression of norms helps us see the negotiation of her own identity in becoming Chicana, one that empowers her to challenge conventional ways of seeing and being.

### **In Nepantla**

In this transformative and contradictory space, Kita learns from her relationship with Fernanda, her upbringing, and her cultural memory to fuel her subversive acts. Nepantla, or the in-between space of crisis and change, Kita negotiates and reconciles her identity within, and at the same time away from the Valderrama home. As spectators, we are briefly transported to Kita's memory of becoming Fernanda's "play thing," first by acquiring a new name and then by playing with dolls. By incorporating this recollection, Saracho wants us to understand that class identities exert force even in childhood. In the vignette "Rompecabezas" (puzzle), Fernanda exemplifies how her identity as a member of a privileged class entails specific kinds of social knowledge, ways of behaving, and seeing based on class difference. She says to Kita about her nickname, "Paca," "That is the stupidest name I have heard in the entire wide world. . . . I'm going to call you Kita" (Saracho 2008, 11). Schechner's concept of "restored behavior" is useful here because Fernanda assumes control over Kita's identity as someone from an upper class may do with the people they hire to work for him or her. Fernanda's worldview is limited to what she knows to be appropriate for her class status; thus, Fernanda and her mother repeat behavior already rehearsed while they lived in Mexico and with other hired help in the past, (re)establishing what is appropriate for women in their class outside of Mexico. As such, Fernanda and her mom reconfigure a class identity based on prescribed class roles established as a result of colonialism in Mexico and informed by how Anglo-American upper-class women would treat immigrant hired help.<sup>5</sup> By ascribing this negative

view toward Kita, Fernanda and her mom continue to uphold and perform restored behavior connected to their class identity, based on colonial notions of class and race.<sup>6</sup> Fernanda believes that Kita has not learned to assimilate to mainstream Anglo cultural standards—learning English or changing her name—because she does not know any better. Kita repeats that her name is “Paca” or “Francisca” several times, but at the end she plays with Fernanda’s name for her by responding, “Que quito? [*What do I remove?*]” (Saracho 2008, 11). This witty response plays on her name because it sounds like the Spanish verb *quitar* (to remove). Early on Kita resists the pressure to fit into Fernanda’s warped world, therefore countering Fernanda’s assertion that she needs to teach Kita things in order to assimilate. Kita’s response emphasizes that she does have knowledge and that she is capable of standing up to Fernanda, displaying qualities of mestiza consciousness as she maneuvers through Fernanda’s world of privilege and domination. Kita’s response to Fernanda empowers her to further negotiate an identity that is “a weave of differences, contradictory and potentially transformative” (Yarbro-Bejarano 1992, 66).

Kita’s powerful and poignant responses to Fernanda’s socialization show the readers and audience Kita’s rehearsal of subversive acts. In the following vignette “Playing Barbis,” Kita takes her subversion one step farther by questioning Fernanda on the way she plays and what she names her dolls. In this state of nepantla, Kita moves between the two spaces she inhabits, constantly in transition, and in a place “where different perspectives come into conflict” (Anzaldúa 2002, 658). By becoming Fernanda’s toy, Kita shows how Fernanda’s social class and social status are determined by the power dynamic in their relationship, as well as their access to dolls: “. . . Cabbage Patches were babies. They didn’t talk, or have dream houses or drive corvettes and have blond plastic haired boyfriends. Barbis . . . they were a whole different universe. Fernanda’s warped universe” (Saracho 2008, 12). Kita’s description of the dolls

communicates the girls' beliefs about class and social status, while Fernanda's inherited status allows her to have multiple dolls and fancy accessories.

As such, the girls' interaction shows that ideologies function as systems of representations that entail a historical existence and a role within a given society. In the moments of conflict in the vignette, Kita can rehearse subversive acts because she can respond to and critique Fernanda's worldview. However, when Fernanda experienced the same rupture early in their relationship, she failed to reach nepantla because she was unable to question her privilege. Throughout the vignette, Fernanda upholds her inherited social status and privilege by requiring Kita to play with her and to repeat the names of her Barbie dolls. As she did in the previous vignette, Fernanda requires Kita to embody upper class cultural and linguistic values, rather than allowing Kita to be herself:

Fernanda: . . .I will let you put the name on her. . .

Kita: Xochitl

Fernanda: That's a stupid name. That is not a Barbi name . . . tiene que ser nombres Gringos Kita. [*Because they have to be White-American names Kita*] Barbi is gringa (Saracho 2008, 14).

In their playtime, the two girls map out their privilege or lack thereof, perform their class identities, and reaffirm class-based belief systems. Fernanda marks her assimilation through familiar tropes: rejection of Spanish, minimization of the indigenous peoples and cultures in Mexico, and her insistence on naming her dolls White-American names. On the other hand, Kita resists naming the doll something Americanized and chooses an indigenous name. Historically speaking, indigenous names like Xochitl have a negative connotation for people of European descent in Mexico, given the colonial legacy of class and racial hierarchies.<sup>7</sup> Kita uses an indigenous

name to assert her own Mexican identity and resist Fernanda's dominating personality. In other words, Fernanda's upper-class world has its own logic and rigidity that demands certain images, ideas or concepts that have been associated with the ruling class. It is convenient for the Mexican upper class in the US and in Mexico to uphold certain values and beliefs that relegate certain groups of people to the margins since more conservative, religious, and wealthy individuals typically form the dominant group.

Saracho wants to show us that one's class identity can constantly be renegotiated when subversive behaviors are rehearsed. As Kita resists pressure from Fernanda to assimilate, Kita becomes more empowered to stand up for herself and respond critically to Fernanda. Kita constantly rehearses subversive behavior and the more she practices, the more empowered she becomes. In an exchange about a Mexican telenovela, Fernanda points out that she wants to be the maid who then becomes the princess. To this, Kita responds, "Veronica Castro was not a princess. She then became rich because she marry the son of the house. It is not the same thing to be rich and to be a princess" (Saracho 2008, 14). As Schechner has noted, it is possible for individuals to modify their repeated behavior, and, in this example, Kita rehearses subversive behaviors to critique classist ideas. Alternatively, for Fernanda, class privilege is an impediment to achieving *conocimiento* because her upper-class behavior is difficult to alter given both her family's and society's reinforcement of those values attributed to being wealthy. It is evident in this exchange that Fernanda as teacher asserts her perspective on the credibility of telenovela-inspired life, whereas Kita reminds us that certain class statuses are created and upheld by those already in power. In this way, Saracho emphasizes that Kita can transcend those rigid class roles by questioning such roles and those in power, "How does she have money for beauty shop?" and Fernanda responds, "in this town, it's free. . ." (Saracho 2008, 15). By responding to Fernanda, Kita continues to rehearse subversive



behavior and destabilize class hierarchies to rebuke Fernanda's beliefs: "Then why is she a maid if she didn't need money?" (Saracho 2008, 15). It is evident in Kita's explanation that telenovelas create an alternate reality that perpetuates class stereotypes and bounds certain social classes to a limited set of outcomes. In responding to Fernanda, Kita demonstrates self-awareness and reflexivity in nepantla, and perhaps understands Fernanda's warped reality at a deeper level.

Fernanda is incapable of recognizing her privilege or her performance of class identity. This performance is based on Fernanda's infatuation with Mexican-elite identity, Americanization, and popularity. This suggests that Saracho questions and undermines Fernanda's privilege and asks us to put into question Fernanda's "twice-behaved behaviors" as something that upholds the status quo, incapable of transformation or transgression. It is through Fernanda's insistence on assimilating into US culture throughout the play that we notice her Mexicanidad fading into the background, as she strives to mask it. Not surprisingly, Fernanda loathes and fears lower-class associations. In the vignette "Cowgirl," Fernanda distances herself from Kita even more by privileging the lifestyle and worldview of her white teenage friend Jessica.

The powerful effects of class on Fernanda paralyze her and prevent her from breaking the restored behavior because she is motivated by the thought of attending a cotillion with the popular crowd and by distinguishing herself from Kita or anything Mexican. From an Anzaldúan perspective, because Fernanda is unreflective of her privileged position, she remains in *desconocimiento*, a state that lacks awareness (Anzaldúa 2002, 564). Jessica, Fernanda's school friend is a native of Texas from an Anglo home, who learns Spanish and interacts with Kita's mom. Early in the vignette, Jessica uses English to differentiate herself from Kita and uses Kita's background to justify her condescending treatment toward her: "I do not like her one bit. . . . I didn't come here to talk about

your maid” (Saracho 2008, 41–42). Fernanda initially tries to defend Kita by correcting Jessica, but she feels pressure to validate and negotiate her “American” identity based on markers of status that define popularity, such as English-language use. Jessica represents everything that Fernanda wants to achieve through her assimilation: rejection of all things Mexican. Jessica pressures Fernanda to change things or at least conceal certain aspects that reflect her Mexican identity, such as the music she listens to or the value of Spanish: “[about learning Spanish] Yeah, so I can know what people are saying about me when they talk Spanish around me. Not so I can listen to music in another language. You’re not getting it. There are things you need to do to . . . you know . . . Ah, how do I say it?” (Saracho 2008, 44). Jessica’s words lead Fernanda to rehearse a subversive act by saying, “Say it,” but unlike Kita, Fernanda is unable to fully break from her upper-class behavior because she wants to fit in with Jessica’s popular crowd. Fernanda is incapable of transgressing because she cannot move beyond her role as a privileged daughter, nor adopt different perspectives corresponding with her upbringing. Instead of pushing back, Fernanda retreats and allows Jessica to have the last word on the cotillion and her popularity.

### **In Coatlicue State**

In contrast, in the vignette “La Texican,” Kita’s friend Chela is a self-identified Chicana who motivates Kita to pursue higher education. Unlike Jessica, Chela places emphasis on pursuing an education and knowing history to enact change in their lives. Chela exemplifies a *nepantlera*: a mentor, a guide who is also in-between or may have already reached *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa says, “las nepantleras attempt to see through the other’s situation to her underlying unconscious desire” (2002, 567). Seeing what Kita is going through, Chela becomes the guide in her awareness that there will be drastic changes. Chela asks Kita if she has spoken to her mom about a scholarship, but Kita admits that she does not know what to do with that scholarship: “You need papers to go to

school, Chela. Papers I don't got" (Saracho 2008, 48). Through this exchange, Kita reaches a point of despair and concludes that it would be impossible to attend school, leave her mom, or even succeed in a world that considers her situation "illegal." "I just can't imagine running around the country, always hiding from the migra [immigration officials]" (Saracho 2008, 49). For Kita, it is unrealistic to pursue a higher education, while Chela's point of view makes it viable for Kita since, as Chela says: "Na, there are ways to just live normal. . . . They need us in this country or they can't have their wine with dinner. It's a whole beautifully designed system [sic] my friend" (Saracho 2008, 49). Chela becomes the motor that pushes Kita to fully grasp the situation she has lived in since she moved to South Texas. Chela represents the woman Kita will resemble because Chela has learned to transgress and rehearse her subversive acts that show what it looks like to be Chicana. Kita's transformative journey then is also supported by Chela's nepantlera ways of seeing and believing, which enable Chela to challenge Fernanda while still asserting her Chicana identity. These two vignettes, "Cowgirl" and "La Texican," invite audience members to see two different approaches to being Chicana in the US. By observing how Chela challenges assimilation and nativist discourses, Kita has a model that allows her to negotiate her own Chicana identity. In contrast, Fernanda struggles to reformulate her behavior. As the vignette progresses, Fernanda chooses to pursue Jessica's invitation to the cotillion and become part of the popular crowd by negating certain aspects of her identity, such as certain types of music, Spanish, and her relationship to Kita. In Kita's case, Chela's presence and perspective allow Kita to begin to gain a mestiza consciousness; one that will allow her to mobilize, change, and provide her with tools to have power.

Jessica and Chela function as mirrors that force self-reflection and evaluation. In effect, the behaviors performed in these vignettes are reflexive, influencing Fernanda and Kita respectively. On the one hand, Jessica reinforces White-

American society's values and norms while Chela represents an empowered Chicana identity. Kita and Fernanda try out new (old) behaviors with and modeled by their friends. Chela exemplifies the complete opposite of Jessica and Fernanda since Chela is able to articulate her mestiza identity and communicate how dominant upper-class ideals of language, country of origin, and history perpetuate class difference, ". . . I bet she knows nothing about Mexico and how things really transpired. 'Cuz she's a white-gringa-nacha-gabacha wanna-be [*derogatory terms for white US Americans*] (Saracho 2008, 52). Once Fernanda reacts to Chela's perspective, it becomes evident that Fernanda feels threatened by Chela and her relationship with Kita: "I know the history of Mexico, too. I am Mexican. . . . Where were you born? [to Chela] (*pause*) You don't even speak Spanish—How can you call yourself a Mexican?" (Saracho 2008, 53). Fernanda challenges Chela's identity because for Fernanda, class, loyalty to parents, language, and cultural memory reinforce traditional notions of what it means to be Mexican in the US. It is in this moment of intense conflict between Kita, Fernanda, and Chela that Kita demonstrates *conocimiento*. Kita becomes more critical of how Fernanda's classist behavior created a hostile environment for her and expressed her frustration when she reminds Fernanda at the march: "I've got to get out of here. I grew up in an 8 by 10 foot room that housed everything I owned in the world . . . no room to think. No room to breathe. You've had the entire world to run around in" (Saracho 2008, 57). Overwhelmed and frustrated with her experience, Kita was provoked by an awareness that change is imminent and necessary, entering the third stage of *conocimiento*: *Coatlicue*. All of Kita's subversive behavior has been rehearsed enough that she is able to upend Fernanda's privileged world, forcing Fernanda to say: "I don't want the entire world to run in" (Saracho 2008, 57). It is evident in this exchange that both women are now at a crossroads and that Kita's need to mobilize, and to change is greater than the need to maintain the status quo.

### **Moments in the Present**

Saracho stages the contrasts between Kita and Fernanda in the past, as the story of two young girls on a journey of translocalization, and also in their present at the immigrants' rights march in Chicago. The past is fraught with conflict and struggle, while the present reality brings the two women's thoughts on their journeys to us in "real time" (Saracho 2008, 2). In four key moments in the present, "At the march," "Half a coward," "Clueless," and "Voltea," the readers and spectators see how class differences continue to affect and inform Kita's and Fernanda's lives; highlighting Fernanda's privileged identity based on social status, and Kita's more fluid mestiza identity. The energy of moments of conflict like the ones present in Saracho's vignettes generates the force necessary to challenge the restored behavior and negotiate one's own (perhaps transgressive or mestiza) identity. These moments in the present reinforce "twice-behaved behaviors" of the upper class in Fernanda, while Kita's path to *conocimiento* empowers her to further examine interactions in the past that inform her present and future.

### **Crossing Bridges**

In "At the march," the vignette establishes the terrain of Kita as Chicana, as an empowered woman ready to embark on another journey as an immigrant rights activist, joining fellow marchers, ". . . It was time to speak out. The ones on the edge over there, the ones that have learned to keep quiet, to exist in the shadows? The invisible people" (Saracho 2008, 3). By experiencing a dangerous border crossing, leaving home, and now out of the "shadows," Kita is ready for her next journey (Saracho 2008, 3). Kita has been able to "reclaim body consciousness" and now, in the fourth stage of *conocimiento*, "the call . . . the crossing and conversion" (Anzladúa 2002, 553–54), she is on the path to reshape her present and forge a better future. In the same vignette, Fernanda continues to perform "twice-behaved" behavior through the monotonous

activities that she describes as she explains how she ended up at the march: “I start to wonder what . . . I mean, what was I doing here?” (Saracho 2008, 4). For Fernanda, nothing has changed; she is still the same privileged woman who is loyal to her social class and her “twice-behaved behaviors” are dramatized to reinforce certain class and social hierarchies.

Saracho’s exploration of Kita and Fernanda’s thoughts at the march provides additional perspectives on their distinct journeys that brought them to Chicago. The ambience of the march triggers certain emotions and sentiments from the past in both women. Saracho underscores her characters’ paths by showing their present ways of being, seeing, and believing. In the case of Kita, her undocumented status and socioeconomic limitations in life led her to become active in the march, whereas Fernanda’s privileged and prescribed role has led her to uphold her upper-class lifestyle. Saracho calls into question Fernanda’s ability to ever change.

In “Half a Coward,” the monologue serves as a form of self-reflection, perhaps sparking change in Fernanda. In this monologue, Fernanda claims that “everyone should learn English if they are living in the US, if not you’re “a half person” (Saracho 2008, 35). These enunciative acts serve as “twice-behaved behaviors” because she has been acting them all along, rehearsing behaviors appropriate to her social status, reinforced by her family and society. In the past, Fernanda yearned to assimilate to US culture and society and she accomplished it, yet she is unable to reconcile how racism and sexism became an impediment to achieving a more-fulfilled life journey: “. . . I turned into a coward. Being the wife of a gringo, I’m still trying to figure out when I can say this or when I’m allowed to say that. In Mexico, it’s clear. I know when I can speak and when I need to shut my mouth. . . . If I weren’t such a coward I’d say, ‘are you Francisca Gomez? Eres tu [is that you], Kita?’” (Saracho 2008, 36). Fernanda faces the

truth about her past and present in this confession and her frustration shows that she is a failure, unable to speak to Kita. The monologue demonstrates the type of person Fernanda has become—a passive yet privileged individual unable to see beyond rigid class and social hierarchies. Saracho implies that the disconnections in Fernanda's behaviors and perceptions as an adult impede her from moving beyond the powerful effects of class in her upper-class upbringing. Despite her privileged positionality in the Mexican community (both in the US and in Mexico), Fernanda is still racialized as the "other" in the US. It seems as though Fernanda, as an adult, remains in *desconocimiento*, unaware of her privilege or these hierarchies, and is unable to move into *nepantla* and beyond.

Saracho continues to highlight the characters' journey of translocalization at the moments in the march when both characters, in "Clueless," address the audience about gaining awareness through their experiences as immigrants. Saracho offers two perspectives that never quite reconcile in the story about Kita and Fernanda: we are the same or we are different because of class differences. Perhaps it is in this vignette that their opposite realities are evinced:

Fernanda: When you're young, you're clueless. You can afford to be, right?

Kita: That's not true . . .

Fernanda: . . . As a kid, you don't notice if you've gotten . . . the newest toy . . .

Kita: No, you don't WANT to notice. But kids notice. Trust me, kids notice . . . they'll keep it in there [heads] for the rest of their lives (Saracho 2008, 45).

Fernanda, as an immigrant herself, still lives in a warped sense of reality, one that only she is able to live in, because she has reinforced social hierarchies, limited by her performance of "twice-behaved behaviors" (Schechner 2006). Fernanda's comfortable and privileged upbringing has prevented her from embarking on

a transformative journey that would recognize the underlying forces that gave rise to her experience. This becomes painfully clear when Fernanda admits, “Adults, they choose not to notice . . . it’s a choice and really, by then there’s no excuse . . .” (Saracho 2008, 45). Fernanda indirectly points to and questions her own mother’s ways of seeing and believing while at the same time, including her own cluelessness. Fernanda’s lack of awareness is juxtaposed with Kita’s acknowledgement, “In my head, I’ve had the same conversation with you so many times” (Saracho 2008, 45). Fernanda’s desconocimiento “refuses to allow emotional awareness” (Anzaldúa 2002, 546). The differing responses to the importance of self-reflection in relation to class privilege propels the characters to examine their social roles in light of what happened in the past. During the moments of conflict, Kita examined her journey toward a Chicana identity.

### **Realignment and Rewriting**

In the closing vignette, “Voltea” (Turn around), at the march Kita confronts Fernanda in her thoughts as she reinforces her Chicana identity:

Kita: What am I going to say to you? There’s not one thing I want to say to you— . . . I haven’t made contact with you people for a reason. Desaparecí [I disappeared]. . . . You know what I found when I got out here? That it’s just like the Barbi world we played in your bedroom floor . . . . It’s social gravity, there’s no other way (Saracho 2008, 65–66).

Saracho portrays Kita’s realistic view of society that she now lives in. However, to maintain her power, her conocimiento, Kita had to leave her mother and her home. Kita’s journey from South Texas to elsewhere ends in disappointment because it becomes clear that “social gravity” makes it possible for people like Fernanda and her family to exist at the top while the rest live at the bottom (Saracho 2008, 66). Kita acknowledges the complexity of her mestiza identity



and her lived experiences, entering the Coyolxauhqui stage. Here, Kita puts the fragmented pieces of her identity together and transcends the pain, empowered and confident in her own mestiza identity emerging whole and complete, ready to “compose a new history and self. . . .” (Anzaldúa 2002, 558). Fernanda sees her journey that brought her to the march differently, “If you’d just turn around you’d see I’m different now. . . . We’re Americans now. Everything’s different. I want to tell you that I notice things now . . . that I’m sorry we brought Mexico with us . . . I’m sorry we trapped it all in our little house, I didn’t know any better” (Saracho 2008, 66). Fernanda’s assimilation ultimately led her to disempowerment, loss of friendship, and regret. Fernanda wants to reconcile her differences and show Kita that she has developed an awareness of her situation, but, it is impossible for her to fulfill those desires.

The play closes with both women moving toward one another: “Very slowly. They’re about to talk. Fernanda breathes to say something and Kita turns to go . . . Kita stops. She almost turns. Almost. . . .” (Saracho 2008, 67). Saracho highlights how Kita has gained a critical consciousness about her subordinated position on her way to her transformative journey as a Chicana. Kita breaks from her previous behaviors at the rally and walks away, leaving Fernanda on stage by herself, screaming out Kita’s name. Yet, as their journeys come to a conclusion, we are left with an open ending, one that leads us to further problematize these representations that continue to complicate our understanding of identity, especially a Chicana identity. Even though Fernanda acknowledges Kita through most of the vignettes in the present and at the end by speaking her name, her state of desconocimiento prevents her from challenging her privilege.

### **Conclusion: Toward conocimiento**

Since the premiere of *Kita y Fernanda* in 2008, the Obama administration passed Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012. The DACA

program allowed certain individuals who entered the US undocumented to receive deferred action from deportation and be eligible to work and attend school.<sup>8</sup> Despite uncertainty with DACA, Dreamers and their allies mobilized a political movement deep in walkouts and demonstrations. In Saracho’s play, Kita also comes out of the shadows and becomes politically active to enact change for immigrants. Kita is a Dreamer who achieved *conocimiento*, and her struggles resonate with many working-class immigrants. For Kita, these experiences lead to what Gloria Anzaldúa calls spiritual activism, the seventh stage of *conocimiento* (2002, 568). Here, *conocimiento* is about alliances, “es otro modo de conectar across colors and other differences.... and develop a spiritual-imaginal-political vision together” (Anzaldúa 2002, 571). In the current sociopolitical climate, *conocimiento* continues to shape immigrant rights and community activists’ and Dreamers’ responses to changes in DACA and anti-immigrant policies set forth by the current administration.

In *Kita y Fernanda*, Saracho stages a series of vignettes depicting the lives of two translocalized women, illustrating two trajectories: Fernanda’s assimilated, comfortable, passive lifestyle, made possible by her upper middle class upbringing in Mexico, and Kita’s Chicana identity, one that questions class and culturally-based ideologies to move beyond the traditional binaries of the haves versus have-nots. These social norms are difficult to resist, especially for Fernanda; however, they are not predestined and can be changed. Fernanda repeats her role throughout the play as a privileged daughter of an upper middle class family, through passivity and multiple efforts to become Americanized. Fernanda’s lack of self-awareness has made her a complacent individual, stuck in *desconocimiento*, who reaffirms her upper middle class status, perilously unaware of how their actions affect others. Fernanda maintains the status quo as she is incapable of improving herself, gaining empathy, or mobilizing to enact social change.

From early on, Kita expresses an empowered identity in conflict with Fernanda, an active subjectivity that counteracts Fernanda's passivity. This dynamic is further complicated by Saracho's analysis of class difference, since these characters' behaviors are conditioned by their distinct worlds, corresponding to their social classes. By not being aware of her complicity in maintaining social barriers, Fernanda will inevitably have a damaged relationship with others from different social classes because she enjoys her privilege and ignores their plight. Without *conocimiento*, Fernanda will never become politically active to go out and vote to fight for programs like DACA or mobilize for immigrant rights. Unlike Fernanda, Kita achieves *conocimiento* because her personal experiences, including emigrating to the US, being undocumented, her relationship to Fernanda, and leaving home, caused a great deal of pain and additional challenges. Negotiating all these factors corroborate Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento*. A painful journey for a *mestiza* whose hybrid identity is forged by reclaiming her story, her agency, her self-realization. A truly personal, transformative journey.

Kita becomes a multifaceted character capable of questioning and subverting actions and words that are constantly imposed upon her by Fernanda. Fernanda's access to power and privilege make her complacent and unempathetic of others. Through Kita's story of translocalization and journey to *conocimiento*, Saracho emphasizes that not gaining knowledge or awareness, but instead responding to the status quo leads to *desconocimiento*. Saracho invites audience members to confront and question their own identity within the US, the class roles and behaviors they perform and how they respond to their own and others' behaviors and the journey toward an empowering state of *mestiza* consciousness.

## Acknowledgements

For the DREAMers.

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments and thought-provoking questions, which have greatly strengthened this essay. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Jennifer Domino Rudolph, Martín Ponti, Susan Kanter, and Aaron Black, for their most constructive feedback and suggestions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2006, millions gathered across the US to protest a proposed change to US immigration policy, the Immigration Control Act of 2005 (H.R. 4437), a bill introduced in the House of Representatives that seeks to criminalize unauthorized immigrants, subjecting them to detention and deportation. A major demonstration against H.R. 4437 took place in Chicago on March 10, 2006 estimated at 100,000 people. Avila, Oscar and Antonio Olivo. 2006. “A Show of Strength.” *Chicago Tribune*, March 11, 2006, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-03-11/news/0603110130\\_1\\_immigration-debate-pro-immigrant-illegal-immigrants](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-03-11/news/0603110130_1_immigration-debate-pro-immigrant-illegal-immigrants).

<sup>2</sup> The unpublished version of *Kita y Fernanda* analyzed here was first presented at the 16th St. Theater in Berwyn, IL in 2008. Italicized translations are Tanya Saracho’s, all other translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup> The seven stages are as follows: (1) rupture; (2) *nepantla* (state of transition); (3) *Coatlicue* state (internal turmoil); (4) the crossing; (5) realignment (*Coyolxauhqui*); (6) clash of realities; (7) shifting realities (taking action). The terms *nepantla*, *Coatlicue*, and *Coyolxauhqui* are all Náhuatl words, meaning: the place between crisis and change, the Aztec goddess of birth and death, and Aztec goddess of the moon and daughter of *Coatlicue*, respectively. Anzaldúa, “now let us shift...” 543–45, 548. Bezanilla, *A Pocket Dictionary*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> For Schechner, performativity is any action that is repeated twice. His definition is useful because it allows us to analyze actions and communicative acts that are repetitive on stage that we would traditionally only see or read as just actions influenced by social class. It is not to say that class is the only element that is twice-behaved. Schechner, *Performance Studies*, 28–29.

<sup>5</sup> In 2010, New York became the first state to approve the nation’s first Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights. “Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights.” 2010. Accessed November 9, 2017. <https://labor.ny.gov/legal/domestic-workers-bill-of-rights.shtm>.

<sup>6</sup> In colonial Latin America, the colonial economy served as an arena where individuals and groups defined social status, race, and ethnicity as well as material needs. Securing an adequate income necessarily meant satisfying class and ethnic cultural norms and realizing individual ambitions for social status. Burkholder, Mark A. and Lyman L. Johnson. 2004. *Colonial Latin America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 183–84.

<sup>7</sup> Burkholder, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Walters, Joanna. 2017. "What Is DACA and Who Are the Dreamers?" *The Guardian*, September 14, 2017. Accessed November 18, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/sep/04/donald-trump-what-is-daca-dreamers>.

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