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GUILLELMO VERDECCHIA'S NORTHERN BORDERLANDS

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Many North Americans associate a Latina/o presence with the southern rather than the northern reaches of the continent.¹ However, Canada's small but growing Latina/o population is indicative of new connections with Latin America that destabilize the United States from its position as the mediator of continental relations and as the desired endpoint of all Latina/o migration. As Latina/o Canadians develop the opportunities and resources to represent their experiences, they draw attention to the circumstances that are shrinking historic divisions between Canada and the rest of the Americas.

The author, performer, and director Guillermo Verdecchia is one of the most articulate voices to reflect on Canada's place in the Americas. Born in Argentina, Verdecchia was a young boy when his family immigrated to Canada in an effort to escape political corruption and economic uncertainty. Having left their home in the late 1960s, they managed to avoid the "dirty war" carried out under the military dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla.² They settled in Kitchener, Ontario, where, as he describes it, "there was nothing to

1 On the history of Canadian involvement in Latin America, see J.C.M. Ogelsby, *Gringos from the Far North: Essays in the History of Canadian-Latin American Relations, 1866-1968* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976).

2 On Argentina's "dirty war," see Martin Edward Andersen, *Dossier secreto: Argentina's Desaparecidos and the Myth of the "Dirty War"* (Boulder, CO: Westview P, 1993); Iain Guest, *Behind The Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War Against Human Rights And The United Nations* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990); and Paul H. Lewis, *Guerillas and Generals: The "Dirty War" in Argentina* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

do but eat doughnuts and dream of elsewhere." As a classically-trained actor who needed to earn a living, Verdecchia found himself cast into stereotypically "Latino" roles. As an author, he had greater freedom to criticize the homogeneity of the Canadian mainstream, challenging his readers/viewers to think about difference in more complicated ways. Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas/American Borders* is at once intensely personal and reflective of broader socio-political concerns of their moment, such as debates about continental integration surrounding the signing of NAFTA and controversies over the quincennial of the "discovery" of America. Positioning himself against conservatives like author Neil Bissoondath, who condemned Canada's official policy of multiculturalism as divisive and hypocritical, Verdecchia used the experiences of Latina/o Canadians to explore the productive tensions arising from multiple cultural allegiances, as well as evolving relations between North and South that were changing Canada's place in the Americas.³

The title *Fronteras Americanas* prompts us to read the play as centrally concerned with redefining the location and significance of the borders between North and South. By the 1990s, this emphasis on borderlands would be rather unsurprising in the work of a US Latina/o author. However, Verdecchia situates his reflections in a decidedly Canadian context where borders have a very different resonance, and where allusions to Latina/o and Latin American cultures have very little resonance at all. His work is influenced by the art and politics of US Chicanas/os, but it also challenges the tendency to conflate all Latina/o border cultures with the US-Mexico borderlands, as well as the erasure of Canada from accounts of inter-American culture that tend to focus exclusively on relations between the United States and Latin America. So too, it turns a critical eye on the Canadian mainstream for its distant and ill-informed posture toward Latin America.

The view of American borders offered by *Fronteras Americanas* must be seen as a form of situated knowledge that emerges from Verdecchia's identity as a Latino Canadian who claims Canada as his long-time home. It presses

3 Neil Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (Toronto: Penguin, 2002).

the audiences toward a more capacious and varied view of the borderlands that enhances and challenges the perspectives offered by US–Mexico border studies. The latter tends to condemn borders for restricting human mobility, perpetuating inequalities, and creating artificial divisions among people and environments. The Canadian vantage reminds us that borders can also be a means of protection and a guarantor of rights and services to those who reside within them. Whereas the United States's border with Mexico is associated with a history of violence and dispossession, there has been no armed conflict between the United States and Canada since the War of 1812. Instead, their shared border provides a model of peaceable coexistence designed to enable, rather than impede, the flow of goods and people from one side to the other. In the nineteenth century, crossing the US–Canadian border was so important to escaping slaves that they equated Canada with the biblical Promised Land. In the twentieth, many Canadians look to their southern border as the last line of defence against the hegemony of US culture and politics.⁴ Many are proud of policies that distinguish Canada from the United States, such as government-funded health insurance, legalization of gay marriage, state-sanctioned multiculturalism, and the absence of the death penalty. Their demands for more stringent border management are motivated by quite different political convictions than those articulated by the US conservatives who advocate the erection of a massive fence along the border with Mexico. To be sure, Canada has its own strains of xenophobia, but the call to reinforce the border with the United States often has more to do with a desire to protect Canada's culture and political system from engulfment by its southern neighbour. Unlike the US, Canada has only one border of any consequence, and the majority of its population lives within one hundred miles of it.⁵ It has

4 Bryce Traister, "Risking Nationalism: NAFTA and the Limits of the New American Studies," *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines* 27.3 (1997), 191–204.

5 Roger Gibbens, "Meaning and Significance of the Canadian-American Border," *Borders and Border Politics in a Globalizing World*, ed. Paul Ganster and David E. Lorey (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2005), 153.

no border region comparable to the US Southwest, with its distinctive culture and distance from centres of national power. Instead, Canada as a whole is often characterized as a "border society," a view maintained by Verdecchia himself.⁶ Thus, without romanticizing Canada as the antithesis to all that is wrong with the United States, we can still acknowledge that including it in a discussion of the continent—and the hemisphere—encourages us to think about the differences between American borderlands and the relationships between nation and region that they engender. This is one of the central insights of Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas*, which experiments with a range of narrative and theatrical devices that seek to integrate Canada into a portrait of American borderlands.

Written in 1991–1992 and first performed in 1993, Guillermo Verdecchia's one-person play coincided with the controversial quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in the Americas and the signing of NAFTA. Both events underscored Canada's interconnection to the continent and the hemisphere. Whether the quincentennial was seen as a cause for celebration or a commemoration of the brutalities of conquest, it represented a history of Indigenous dispossession and European settlement in the New World that Canada shared with its American neighbours. Two years later, NAFTA looked like the first step toward a more integrated continental community as it ushered in a new era of economic interrelation, creating an unprecedented bond between Canada and Mexico and opening the way for subsequent accords that might include Central and Latin America. *Fronteras Americanas* provides a Canadian perspective on the human consequences of this regional integration. More specifically, it reflects on how Canadian understandings of home and nation are being transformed by a greater awareness of belonging to an inter-American community.

The primary audience of Verdecchia's play is Canadian and it has been performed predominantly in Canadian venues before the middle-class, white constituencies that make up the majority of Canada's Anglophone theatergoing audiences. Although it resonates with the work of US Latina/o authors

6 *Ibid.*, 157.

and performance artists, Verdecchia claims his primary influences came from Brechtian modernism, and the Toronto alternative theatre scene of which he was a part.⁷ Verdecchia explains that the play was conceived in part as a personal endeavour to understand his own feelings of alienation as a "hyphenated Canadian" and in part as a challenge to a theatrical world that did not reflect the diversity of Toronto's population onstage.⁸

From the beginning, *Fronteras Americanas* insistently challenges prevailing understandings of Canadianness by insisting on Canada's necessary entanglements with a greater American hemisphere. At one point in the play, a character named Verdecchia explains to the audience, "when I say 'AMERICA,' I don't mean a country, I mean the continent. Somos todos Americanos. We are all Americans." His assertion echoes Latin American thinkers from Simón Bolívar to José Martí, who argued for the importance of regional solidarity under the banner of a collective American identity. Looking back to older models of hemispheric community, Verdecchia envisions America as a single continent. But what makes his perspective new is that he speaks as a Latin American in Canada; his reference to the continent positions Canadian themes and settings within a broader American framework.

Fronteras Americanas is less a narrative than a performative collage of voices and "found objects" such as quotations, video and film clips, and sounds and images lifted from other sources. What holds these disparate materials together are monologues delivered by the character Verdecchia and his more edgy, streetwise alter ego, the Latino Facundo Morales Segundo, who goes by the ironically-adopted Canadian name Wideload McKenna. The anxiety-ridden, middle-class Verdecchia is at once an autobiographical figure and a fictional character who confuses the line between presentation and representation. As the play continues, he delivers a series of confessional speeches that describe his family's departure from Argentina, childhood encounters with cultural intolerance in Kitchener, Ontario, and his eventual return to the place of his birth. "I Am Going Home. All will be resolved, dissolved,

revealed," he tells himself as he plans to visit Argentina for the first time as an adult. But Verdecchia undermines his own assertion, shattering the fantasy of homecoming and proving that his goal of recovering an authentic point of origin is impossible. When he announces, "All sides of the Border have claimed and rejected me," he suggests that the border is less a specific location than a powerful figure for those who understand themselves as belonging to more than one culture, and thus unable to feel at home in any one geographical place. Through a series of fragmented monologues, *Fronteras Americanas* charts Verdecchia's evolution from a tormented sense of loss and alienation to recognition of the productive tensions arising from multiple allegiances.

Fronteras Americanas consists of two voices whose monologues eventually merge into one. The second character is the much rougher, more in-your-face Wideload, who at various points calls himself a "Chicano," while also admitting, "I wasn't born in East L.A. I wasn't born in de Southwest USA. I'm not even from Mejico." Both parts are played by the same actor, a device which gestures to a *latinidad* that transcends class and national borders. This decision is significant for Verdecchia, an actor whose elite training has allowed him to escape the kind of ethnic typecasting that he encountered during his early career.⁹ Instead of passing as part of the cultural mainstream, Verdecchia cuts himself through his identification with an unmistakably Latino character, as if to suggest that acknowledgement of one virtually requires recognition of the other. While Wideload might strike some as a mere compendium of offensive racial clichés, Verdecchia's deployment of stereotypes is strategic. He describes Wideload as a self-conscious composite of the many bad Latino parts he had auditioned for over the years, with an admiring nod to the performative politics of Luis Valdez's *Zoot Suit* and Teatro Campesino.¹⁰ The insertion of Chicanoism into the play is a meaningful symbolic gesture. According to Michelle Habel-Pallán, Chicana/o popular culture has been appropriated by a new generation of Latina/o Canadians, who have seized on its

7 Verdecchia, email to the author, 17 Jul 2007.

8 Verdecchia, personal conversation, 13 Jul 2007.

9 "Verdecchia, Guillermo," *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*, accessed 18 Apr. 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/d487j7>.

10 Verdecchia, personal conversation.

association with militant oppositionality to articulate an ethnic identity that resists the cozy version of cultural pluralism promulgated by the state.¹¹ In the Canadian context, Chicano is a referent that floats free from its attachment to the highly specific geographic locales mentioned by Wideload, becoming instead a signifier for a proud and defiant Latina/o ethnic nationalism. If Verdecchia represents the internal conflicts of the assimilated middle-class Latino Canadian, Wideload is his unruly, irrepressible double and the two cannot be disentangled.

Issuing from the mouth of the same actor, the voices of Wideload and Verdecchia attest to the diversity and complexity of Latina/o experiences in Canada. As the play continues, the differences between their characters become less pronounced until they deliver the final speech in one voice. It is also crucial that, throughout the play, the two personae speak directly to the audience, modulating the tone and substance of their performances in accordance with the responses they elicit on any given night. The spectators of *Fronteras Americanas*—which was often performed with the house lights partially illuminated—could not sit passively as if unaffected by the dramas unfolding onstage. Instead they had to become participants who recognize that they too are implicated in the events that brought Verdecchia/Wideload before them. In this, *Fronteras Americanas* moves beyond the representation of Verdecchia's own experiences, or even the particular experiences of Latina/o Canadians, to become an exploration of Canada's changing place on the American continent.

Verdecchia's comparative approach to the borderlands allows him to imagine the need for solidarities among Latina/o Canadians, US Chicanos/os, and other Latin Americans that might be less apparent in a place dominated by a larger and/or more singular Latina/o presence. His deterritorialization of the borderlands may be explained, at least in part, as the product of his experience as a Latino living in Canada, rather than the US, where the border

with Mexico has become virtually synonymous with the very notion of borderlands. His work is an example of how Latina/o Canadian culture complicates the US-centric view that "the border" refers exclusively to the place where the United States and Mexico meet. Drawing on the oppositional connotations of US-Mexican border culture, it unmoors the borderlands from their particular location to show how the hemisphere itself has become a crucible for the complex intermixture of Anglo and Latin Americas. It does so without losing sight of the nation, which has the power to enable liberating forms of movement, to force the desperate flight of its citizens, and to constrict routes of freedom and economic opportunity. By introducing Canadian characters and settings, his work gives new coordinates for locating "El Norte," while at the same time disrupting the binary between North and South with a necessary third term.

11 Michelle Habel-Pallán, "Don't Call Us Hispanic: Popular Latino Theater in Vancouver," *Latino/a Popular Culture*, ed. Michelle Habel-Pallán and Mary Romero (New York: New York UP, 2002), 174-75.