

THE OTHER SIDE OF ECHO: THE ADVENTURES OF A DYKE-MESTIZA-CHICANA-MARIMACHA RANCHERA SINGER IN (ROBERT) ASHLEYLAND

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I. Introduction

Robert Ashley's avant-garde opera *Now Eleanor's Idea* (1994) was inspired by the low riders of the Southwestern US, a predominately male and Chicano culture focused around artistic car decoration and modification.¹ Ashley, an influential composer-performer who directed the premier avant-garde music school at Mills College (1961-1981) and created a 14-part video documentary about contemporary music (*Music with its Roots in the Aether*, 1976), had conceived a glowing admiration for low riders and Chicanos. He particularly esteemed their language and the sincerity of their religious feelings and wanted to learn more about them, but was long rebuffed. Upon gaining a few points of entry, Ashley endeavored to incorporate them into his work in a variety of ways, to wit: in the libretto, Chicano dialects and a scene modeled on a personal advice column in *Low Rider Magazine*; in the staging, low rider cars with hydraulic chassis that raise and lower and recorded interviews; and for the cast, local Spanish-



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*Marghreta Cordero in Now Eleanor's Idea,
Music and Libretto by Robert Ashley*

speaking singers. He hired a New Mexican Chicana with connections to low riders—Marghreta Cordero—to organize translations, cast local Chicanos, and herself perform in the ensemble as a low rider. While Ashley thus includes many *incorporations* of low rider culture in his work, his *representations* of them fluctuate between capturing historically apt sentiments of Chicanos with fabulous and sometimes exoticizing characterizations. This parti-colored garment gains shape when wrapped around the narrative of the protagonist, an Anglo T.V. anchor named Now Eleanor.

What a strange name Now Eleanor has! How did she come by it? It suggests that her time has come, that she is exceedingly present—as a T.V. broadcaster she is “always on-camera” (1992, introductory page). Ashley says the name comes from an experience Now Eleanor has whenever she starts to act, decide, wish, or try to “find herself.” At those times, she hears a “small, but urgent, importuning voice in her head” from “some time in the distant past” that says “now, Eleanor....” And out of “self-respect” she dropped the comma and ellipses. “A lot of us have that voice of warning. [...] It was loud in Now Eleanor” (1994a, 1-2). Like Ashley, this character makes a pilgrimage to the Southwest where she raises a high affection for the low riders. But unlike Ashley, she is an instant hit, rapidly becoming a “member” and high priestess of the community. In becoming a member, Now Eleanor evinces an ideology of non-difference and transparent communication between peoples, leading to elision of linguistic, class, and cultural differences.

Enter Cordero, who acted as guarantor for many of Ashley’s realist representations and incorporations of low riders. Although Cordero considers herself an experienced border-crosser, she found herself struggling to maintain historical, class, ethnic, and gender distinctions in the production. At stake was her responsibility—as performer, translator, and casting assistant—to faithfully represent Chicanos in this Anglo production. She also was concerned about her own representation as a Chicana in the libretto and performance. She linked her representative destiny to that of the low riders, finding that when identity-supporting differences were elided, both she and the Chicanos disappeared or became ghostly. Her critiques, from extensive interviews, form a

major part of this essay; I expand them in critiquing the conception of Now Eleanor.

I argue that Now Eleanor's ideology can be understood by analyzing the construction of her subjectivity out of an inner conversation—as evinced by her name—that excludes and reduces differences. This loop of Now Eleanor's talking-to-herself is echoed in the narrative, composition, and performance of the opera and provides a key to understanding its identity politics. At the same time, Now Eleanor's split subjectivity, her openness to an internal voice, emblemizes another tendency in Ashley's works towards openness to alterity, to others' differences. I argue that for the most part the differences that Ashley acknowledges in his work, while important, are aesthetic and static with respect to one another, and project a world with little real interaction between persons and cultures. For this, Cordero's experience of disappearance provides the most compelling argument.

II. Here and Now Eleanor

The story of *Now Eleanor's Idea* is not directly about low riders, but about Now Eleanor's enchantment and encounter with them. With an apocalyptic "end of the world feeling," Now Eleanor travels from the Midwest to the Southwest in search of herself, clues to a bank robbery, video footage for her show, and a mysterious foreigner—in Ashley's opera *Perfect Lives* he is called a Mexican in a fancy suit—with whom she falls in love (at first and last sight). Ashley, who performs as a narrator in his opera, intones

This foreigner is
foreign to the larger area
(That Now Eleanor imagines herself)
(To be in the very center of.)²
(1992, Act I, 13)

Eleanor comes from a place she experiences as the *very center*—of the universe? Of (middle) America? Of Kansas? It is a spatial equivalent of her being "now," an indication of pure immediacy. From this center, she moves to a periphery, where she becomes

enamored of the "exotic" low riders whose world she will bring back on videotape to the center (Act I)³. She previews her video footage for the low riders (Act II), and ends up hosting a local call-in show offering personal advice to them (Act III). Impressed by Now Eleanor's empathy, a mysterious low rider "secret society" deploys her as a channeler by having her sing on T.V. a cosmos-renewing song—the "Song of the Three Lost Tribes" (hereafter "the Song")—in order to bring happiness to the low riders (Act IV).

Now Eleanor is not only important for the destiny of the low riders, but also for the destiny of Europeans and their descendants in the Americas. *Now Eleanor's Idea* is the final opera of a series Ashley has written which he says portrays the history of American consciousness (1986, 106)⁴. The settings of the operas move, pioneer fashion, from East Coast to West Coast. As the last of the operas, *Now Eleanor's Idea* supposedly represents a culmination of this history of consciousness. But for Ashley it is a melancholy conclusion. He says he experiences sadness coming to the West Coast. One can no longer "return" east. This sadness at reaching the Pacific Ocean symbolizes the end of pioneer and colonial frontier expansion: as Ashley says, there's a problem of "what to do now" (1991, 172-4). Now Eleanor's apocalyptic "end of the world feeling" suggests symbolization, moreover, of a fall or decline of the Anglo world, suggested by Ashley's comment, "The thing that saves it is when you get to LA you meet the guys who came around the other way. The Spanish people" (1991, 172-4).

Ashley's (allegorical) idea is that in 1492 the destiny of the Europeans shifted to events in the New World, but split into two parts, dividing geographically between north and south. The northern branch pursued idealist ends, presumably e.g. the Puritan's asceticism. The southern branch, "so called colonialists" (as he explained in an interview, Ashley 1997a), were bent on material ends, presumably e.g. Cortés's search for cities of gold. The northern branch pursued idealist ends, presumably e.g. the Puritan's asceticism. This suggests a body-mind split, in which the North Americans are mind, the Hispanics, body, appetite. Ashley proffers the geographic site of Española, New Mexico for the meeting place of European consciousness separated from itself in 1492. Now Eleanor's encounter with the "Spanish" coming the

other way thus represents a relinking of destinies. The Europeans re-find themselves, close a loop, return to themselves in the immediate medium of *Now Eleanor*, who is herself constituted by a loop. In fact, "in *Now Eleanor*, mind and body are united," Ashley 1992, 16).

III. Cordero vs. *Now Eleanor*

Cordero stands as an example of hybridity against *Now Eleanor's* (and sometimes Ashley's) monolithic notion of the low riders as a single ethnicity or as allegorically European.⁵ Cordero, who composes and records music, thinks of herself as Chicana and American, and counts among her ancestors not only Spanish, but Jews, indigenous Tarahumarans, and Africans. It is no surprise that this former Ranchera singer, who used to sing to women in her horse-training father's barns and stables, and later sang in punk bands, focuses her critique on the pristine and pure character of *Now Eleanor*.

Ashley made contacts in the Santa Fe area and eventually in Chimayo, New Mexico (which Cordero calls the "low rider capital of the world") through anthropologist and historian Benito Cordova and low rider artist Dennis Martinez. With their help, Ashley conducted video interviews with low riders, evincing that *Now Eleanor's* similar documentary efforts may be taken as autobiographical. Ashley would have liked to have engaged in more in-depth research, according to Cordero, but was thwarted. Ashley attributes his exclusion from the low rider "community" to a generation gap, while Cordero says it was because the community is close-knit and wary of Anglos (Ashley 1997a). He contacted Cordero in the fall of 1992 to help cast and translate parts of the opera and ended up bringing her into his ensemble. Ashley hired Cordero to perform in *Now Eleanor's Idea*, singing ensemble parts and playing two roles, and to perform in two other operas of the larger, more inclusive quartet of the same name, *NOII ELEANOR'S IDEA*. The quartet premiered in Avignon, France July 1994, then toured in Japan, Germany, and New York (the performance I saw, in November 1994 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—BAM) and Santa Fe in 1995.

Cordero tried to cast persons involved with low riding for a "Hispanic chorus" and as callers for Now Eleanor's talk-T.V. show but ran into trouble.

It was difficult to cast a Chicano chorus for the last act because the people I had asked rejected the idea. There is a long history of colonialism in the Southwest, and on some level I suppose *Now Eleanor's Idea* appeared as exploitative. That was not Bob's intention. Had Bob spent more time in New Mexico then I think a true collaboration could have happened. (1997c)

In the end Cordero helped find singers and callers of multiple ethnicities to play "Hispanics," including Honduran, Chicano, Native American, Chilean, Lebanese-American, African-American, Cuban-American and "Hispano."

Cordero was then to translate some of Ashley's text into Chicano Spanish for the chorus, callers, and Now Eleanor.⁶ Cordero tackled the partial translations with a passion for exacting realism, ethnic, social, and historical. The opera was conceived in 1980 and Cordero considered it to be something of a period piece of the 1970s (including in its identity politics), so she wanted her translations to reflect coeval idioms. She also wanted the translation to include dialects reflecting the diversity of the region, which would also make the opera more accessible to local audiences. She did not translate any of Ashley's English into Castilian, the language spoken by the European Spanish, which would reduce the complex ethnic, regional, and class differences into a single, colonialist Hispanic voice. Castilian text (translated not by Cordero but by someone else) *was* used in the opera, however, at some points when Now Eleanor sings the Song. The use of Castilian for the Song suggests that the secret, authoritative heart of the Chicanos who broadcast the Song through Now Eleanor allegorically or spiritually symbolize the Colonial Europeans. This repeats Ashley's notion that Chicanos are, for this opera, Europeans migrating northwards. In spite of making such a reductive linguistic move, Ashley evinces a sophisticated awareness of the issues. At one point in the opera, Ashley as the narrator points

out that Castilian is itself hybrid, gaining an artificial unity only because of power. "The Moor and Hebrew all mixed up with/The peoples from Phoenicia and the Romans and/The invaders....and finally/the official correlation of the/Language under the high direction of (Some of those who made it to high places...)" (1992, 20).

Cordero's translations were to be read-sung by the callers and by Now Eleanor, who learns standard informal Spanish (as spoken in the Americas) in the course of the narration. In Act II, in introducing her T.V. show to the low riders, Now Eleanor comments on her reasons for learning Spanish. As she speaks, Cordero's character doubles many of her words and phrases, simultaneously and in alternation, in Chicano Spanish. In the script below, Now Eleanor's lines are in English, Cordero's in Spanish; the mixture of the two, "Spanglish," is a common feature of Chicano Spanish. Reading from left to right across the columns, Now Eleanor sings "I love your language...

It is full of	<i>Esta Lleno</i>	Ideas I
Barely understand.	<i>Comprendo apenas</i>	In my home
Town many of	Your words have	<i>Sus palabras tienen</i>
A different meaning	<i>Un sentido diferente</i>	I would like to
Use your words	<i>Usar sus palabras</i>	As much as possible
In these programs.	<i>En estas programas</i>	And so the programs
Will be partly	In your language	<i>En su lengua</i>
And partly	<i>Y un tantito</i>	In mine.
/ I know that	Everybody	<i>Todos</i>
Will understand.	<i>Se comprenderán</i>	I think there are
Not so many	Differences	<i>Diferencias</i>
Between people.	<i>Entre humanos</i>	Our real
Experiences	Can be translated	<i>Se puede traducir</i>
Somehow.		
(II:1) ⁷		

Cordero's character translates Now Eleanor's words for the low rider audience, repeating her (Cordero's) production role of making the opera accessible to an ideal low rider audience. Likewise her character also teaches Now Eleanor Spanish,

repeating her production role as language and pronunciation instructor.

In these roles, Cordero found herself in the vulnerable position of main guarantor for the legitimacy of Robert Ashley's and Now Eleanor's border crossings. This carries over to her role as the Low Rider Companion. When in performance she spoke Ashley's lines in Spanish, lines which she herself translated from English, the effect for me as an audience member was to frame those lines as Cordero's own words, as if she had written that part of the script. The effect was accentuated by conjunct events. As she sang, English text was projected to the side of the stage. Not speaking Spanish, I mistook it as a translation of what Cordero was saying. The projected text was a separate text authored by Ashley, however, critiquing Now Eleanor from the view of an insider. Although Cordero's part could have been played by an Anglo, the different "insider" elements mutually reinforced one another: in performance, Cordero also guaranteed the border-crossing.

Cordero is particularly disturbed that in the story's call-in scene Now Eleanor is figured as intimately trusted by the low riders—trusted strongly enough that they could call her about personal problems normally told only to family intimates or priests. Now Eleanor opines that the "real experiences" of people can be translated (somehow) and that there are anyway "not so many differences between people;" she thus rationalizes away problems of being an outsider in a position of power by focusing on common humanity and a common "unnamable existential feeling" (Cordero 1997a). Now Eleanor's role as personal advisor is "truly bizarre" to Cordero (1997b).⁸ The opera's protagonist "is not slumming [but] makes an effort to speak Tex-Mex, Spanglish, Calo, Pachuquismo, archaic phrases. She is well-intentioned, as when William Hurt dripped a well-intentioned tear in [the movie] *Network*" (1997b). In that film, Hurt's character, also a T.V. anchor, fabricates a tear in order to simulate emotion and evoke an emotional response from his T.V. audience.

Cordero stops her critique here, but Now Eleanor goes further—from ingratiating herself with the community to becoming a member of it. The narrator comments (in English):

As Now Eleanor answers these questions,
 one upon another—a torrent of
 concern, the burdens of a people,
 in times of great difficulty—
 she begins to speak as one of the people.
 (1992, III:2, 8)

As the calls progress, the proportion of English spoken by both Now Eleanor and the callers decreases and that of Spanish increases until the dialogue is entirely in Spanish, at which point the narrator says of Now Eleanor:

She “is” a part of the family. She
 has always “been” a part of the family.
 Now Eleanor is home.
 (1992, III:2, 11–12)

At first, Now Eleanor only *speaks* to “the people,” then she speaks “as” one of the people, and finally she “is” one of the people (family). Increasingly through the call-in show, Now Eleanor negates the differences between her and her low rider audience and the historical differences of a society that in part defines itself against Anglos and the middle class—Ashley’s scare quotes around “is” notwithstanding. The call-in show is not really a dialogue, a mutual development of positions that take another’s words—fully translatable or not—into consideration. As she gets “closer,” rather than becoming a peer Now Eleanor “becomes” a low rider. A dialogue is not possible when the person you are speaking with is in the process of losing her identity and becoming you.

Cordero apprehends that her translating (and recruiting) efforts evoked or represented the evocation of false intimacy and that she could be held accountable for breaching her community’s privacy. (No doubt Ashley’s ability to faithfully represent Chicanos was made harder because of their desire for privacy). Indeed, while working on the production, Cordero found herself identifying with Malinche, an indigenous woman who acted as a translator for Cortés. Malinche bore Cortés a child and is by legend the mother of the Mestizos. Colonialist accounts praise Malinche for her help

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in subjugating the natives (Cypess, 1991), while Anzaldúa and other Chicanas now take her as something of a patron saint⁹. Cordero identifies strongly with Malinche as an ambiguous, hybrid bridge between cultures, staking betrayal of her own people¹⁰.

IV. Ashley vs. Now Eleanor

The journalist Rueben Salazar, a spokesman and martyr for the Chicano Movement, wrote in the 1970s

Mexican-Americans have to live with the stinging fact that the word Mexican is the synonym for inferior in many parts of the Southwest. That is why Mexican-American activists flaunt the barrio word Chicano—as an act of defiance and a badge of honor. (1995, 237)

The term Chicano gains prominence in a semiotic landscape characterized by extreme hierarchical oppositions. Salazar's use of "defiance" suggests an oppositional strategy in response to Anglo deprecations of Mexican-Americans which affirms the designation Chicano (and Anglo) as a real, unified entity. Salazar avoids the trap of constituting Chicano as an essence by defining it in negative terms. "A Chicano is a Mexican-American with a non-Anglo image of himself" (1995, 235). Salazar's suggestion that Chicano be taken as a "badge of honor" suggests an appropriative strategy. The Chicanos take an externally applied negative designation and make it their own. In this case, too, Chicano is not given to an essential nature forged out of oppositional fabric, but something in the process of being rewritten. Ashley reflects upon these issues in the call-in show.

CALLER #2:

*"Mi familia se preocupa mucho
con nuestra RAZA.*

[My family preoccupies itself much with our
RACE].

They worry about who we are.
 They argue about it all the time.
 But aren't we more than one thing? Don't we
 still have in us what came from the Old World
 mixed with what was native to the New World?
 And whatever *gabacho* [Gringo-ness] is, we must
 have that, too
No sabemos en que frontera plantamos los piés.
 [We don't know on which border our feet are
 planted]
 We just answer to the pressures on us.
 We think of ourselves by what happens
 on the "outside."

ELEANOR:

Be on the side of "*la RAZA*," your people, and
 your actions will make people see that we are
 all of one *sangre* [blood], because you haven't tried
 to hide anything. If it were a better world, there
 would be no "outside."
 (1992, III:2, 12, 5-6)

Now Eleanor would seem to take the strategically essentialist view, affirming the value and legitimacy of *la Raza*. If there were no outside (i.e. surrounding privileged Anglo world), she suggests, then perhaps the term would not be necessary. This is characteristic of Now Eleanor, who makes her tendencies clear in the next line—"Your action will make people see that we are all of one *sangre*." Now Eleanor's message is "Be true to your ethnic identity and you will become translatable to and ultimately one with all races." The problem here is that this is too easy, especially coming from Now Eleanor's mouth. Recognizing hierarchical terms and attempting to eliminate them by eliminating the referential power of the names, i.e. by eliminating the names, is a good-hearted strategy. But whitening out these terms also whitewashes historical and contemporary prejudice and differences in material conditions colluding with these semiotic attributions. Anzaldúa clarifies the point.

We need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect. (1987, 85)

Anzaldúa makes a strong plea for recognition of Chicano history and of differences not hierarchically established. Lacking such recognition, the next best thing, after Salazar, would seem to be effective self-definition and naming (neither wholly oppositional, nor essentialized). These issues would seem to be what is at stake for Cordero, too. "When I see a low rider I see a person who has created his or her own identity. This opera should say to people that the Low Rider culture is alive and well (qtd. in Villani, 1995). But Now Eleanor, coming from the outside with the power of a syndicated T.V. show at her disposal, would elide these differences.

At this point, we will examine Ashley's compositional practice, which I argue incorporates an ambivalence between forces of differentiation and reduction. (We will "surface" again thereafter to examine their application to Cordero). We move for a time into a view of sociality from the point of view of aesthetics.

V. Ashley's Compositional Practice: Difference vs. Self-Recuperation

Ashley said of his first produced opera, *Perfect Lives*, "it is required that [it] represent as many voices as it can sustain;" these voices "should be as distinguishable as the technique will allow" (1989, 7). Ashley's operas favor relatively large numbers of layered voices, live and recorded, leading to a question of technique, an initial aesthetic problem of maintaining (audible) differences between voices. Ashley sought, moreover, to make literal the metaphor of musically-distinct "voices" by modeling them on persons:

It is hard, if not impossible, for real density of nuance or detail to be done singularly [by a single author-composer], even allowing for multiplying

oneself electronically. The presence becomes repetitious and redundant. Real density is modeled on society, where differentiation is a supreme value. (1989, 7)

In this quotation, society is apparently deployed as a model for the aesthetic end of achieving an articulated density. But Ashley determines that his work will not only imitate the complexity of society, but will be of its substance: his music will *be* social.

I think of music in a dramatic sense. I think of it as being a product of a lot of people having a rather complicated relationship with each other, and the moment-to-moment part of it can vary a lot. It's as variable as any sort of social relationship.... (...) [T]he idea of the music [is] *about* the people who make it.... (1991, 183)

It is likely that these values at least in part guided the "spontaneous conversation performances" that he organized in the 1970s. In 1974, Ashley created and performed *Your Move I Think*, a piece consisting of a more or less spontaneous conversation Ashley had with two others sitting at a dinner table lit by floor lamps. Tom Johnson wrote in his *Village Voice* review that the audience was disturbed by the piece because "the performers insisted on being themselves rather than playing roles." Ashley was "offering a provocative real-life situation and allowing us to make of it what we would." As for subject matter—

The performers observed how artists tend to put themselves in positions of power, particularly when they perform, forcing people to listen, manipulating their perceptions, and titillating their emotions. Ashley's attitude toward the artist's power trip was strong. "You don't have to do that anymore," he stated several times. (Johnson 116-7)

Insofar as each of the three performers authored their own parts, Ashley's performance piece reflected these ideals. He says "For me

it's almost impossible to make anything interesting if I make it by myself. I have to have a band—a group of people—to make music with" (1991, 152). Ashley favors working with an ensemble to actualize the promise of sociality and to sustain aesthetic differences within a dense composition¹¹.

There are striking differences in his opera composition. The libretti, which include little dialogue between characters, are written in advance, while in *Now Eleanor's Idea*, the singers face and address the audience (with the exception of Cordero who at times faces and addresses Now Eleanor). This accentuates an effect of simultaneous monologues. As Ashley says of his first opera, *Perfect Lives*, "The characters do not interact....Those parts are all invented *privately*; they're totally *independent* of each other" (1982, 30-31, emphasis added). It is "a large case of some number of people *talking to themselves*. The largeness is in the miracle of the commonness of the topic" (1989, 11, my emphasis). How did Ashley proceed from his spontaneous conversation performances of the 1970s to the creation of "private," "independent" performers *and* characters whose independence is apparently in part constituted, by *the opposite of conversation*, that is, by a sense of talking to oneself? The question addresses the limits and paradoxes of Ashley's claim that his works are about the social relations and differences of the people who perform in his works.

Ashley may consider talking "spontaneously" to be a value he carried through from conversation works to his operas. "Independence" in the score permits, in a tradeoff with sociality, the spontaneous, original contributions of his performers not to the libretto but to performance aspects, as discussed in section VII below. But we may consider even Ashley's compositional practice and libretto to involve a unusual form of spontaneity. Composing a libretto is usually a process involving constant editing, even if only in order to create an effect of spontaneity, but Ashley practices stream-of-consciousness writing. "[W]ith most of the things I do now, I start at the beginning, work to the end and I *never* think twice" (1991, 150). He does this because

when you *talk* you just open your mouth and the words come out, as I'm talking now. It's completely

original to this moment, and we can all share in it.
(1989, 151)

The meaning of this becomes clearer when he establishes it through an opposing notion.

Now, if I'm going to improve on [spontaneous talk or composition], I have to apply a whole range of social opinions, including Nancy Reagan's opinion. Everybody is involved in whether I'm going to improve on what I just did, or whether I like what I just did. If I like myself, I actually have to *like* what I just did. And that's what makes you *original*. (1991, 180)

In Ashley's thinking, spontaneity evokes originality, which in his view escapes the push and pull of a shared language. Through sharing his recorded spontaneity with audiences, Ashley would retain from his spontaneous conversation pieces the value of a pure individual expressiveness.

Another carryover from the conversation performances is the way Ashley incorporates multiplicity into his compositional practice and libretto. As we recall, Ashley felt that "singular composition" does not allow for density. During the second half of the 1970s, Ashley experimented with "involuntary speech," developing an inner voice beyond his authorial control. Simulating what he considered to be his own mild symptoms of Tourette's syndrome, he created a sound performance, *Automatic Writing* (1979), that was the birth of a kind of homunculus, or quartet of homunculi, that was never to go away. We hear three other "characters" (as Ashley terms them) in the piece: a Moog synthesizer, Mimi Johnson murmuring a "translation" in French, and organ harmonies. Ashley says he "transcribed faithfully" these other voices from a "fourness" in his involuntary speaking after he "got over the shock of hearing it in [his] own voice". These other characters were unplanned, uncontrolled, and yet musically structured. Ashley came to think of them as operatic (1979, 4). In the end, involuntary talking proved to be too hard for composing a large work, but he says that the fourness was his inspiration for beginning to write operas. "[I]t caused in me the natural beginning

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of this long narrative piece that is made up of *Atalanta*, *Perfect Lives*, and *Now Eleanor's Idea*" (1991, 178-9; cf. 1996, 4). The four operettas represent four characters' lives, including Now Eleanor's, and simultaneous dreams (with parallel musical structures between the operas) that fork from a common experience (an apparent bank robbery) which each experienced differently (1991, 177-178).

When [the bank manager] announces that "The Bank has no money in the bank," the tellers all see something different—different men connected to the symbolic meaning of that statement. Maybe they are just hallucinating. It is a great moment in opera. (1991, 177)

In his "singular" voice Ashley heard an ensemble and was able to constitute difference in himself. This may be posed as a paradox for Ashley: tension between desire to author and resistance to authorship. This resistance may emerge from a lack of wherewithal (his professed inability to compose singularly), for aesthetic reasons ("I find the idea of a single vision, the idea of the 'auteur,' incompatible with the demands of maintaining a mode of actuality," 1989, 8) or for theoretical and ideological reasons. (Ashley may have been influenced by John Cage's Zen/postmodern stance of anti-subjectivity; cf. also Ashley 1986, 104). Continuing to hear the echoes of a fourness, an intrinsic ensemble, internal alterities in his "singular" voice, gave him the opportunity he needed. He was able to be one and many, himself and other, generating a (virtual) spontaneous conversation performance within himself and faithfully transcribing it.

All these threads (of spontaneity, involuntary speech, multiplicity) tangle in Ashley's composition of music—and a notion of talking-to-oneself (thinking aloud while alone), which has an element of madness, lawlessness, and criminality for Ashley. What he says of involuntary speech—"This is dangerous territory for a performer. It is against the 'law' of our society" (1979, 3)—carries over to talking-to-oneself—

In composing *Perfect Lives*... I got into the very very bizarre, for me, condition of feeling that every time I started to compose a piece of music I was making a social crime, or I was insane, as it were. That I was like one of the people who talks to himself on the street. (1991, 179)

Like involuntary speaking, Ashley says that talking-to-oneself led to the creation of operas.

In working on *Perfect Lives* I was able, almost for the first time, to direct speech, or the sound of myself talking to myself, into specific forms. In other words, to compose.... (1989, 7)

What is interesting here is that Ashley thinks of his characters and performers, too, as talking to themselves ("This is a large case of some number of people talking to themselves"). They too represent the kind of "singular" authorship emblemized by Ashley. They are represented thereby as creative, spontaneous, original; they like to listen to themselves, they become proto- (split or multiple) subjects, projections of Ashley.

What kind of subjects are these constituted by talking to themselves? They have a Cartesian ring to them, insofar, as I argue, they constitute themselves through a performance, an enactment of thinking (to) themselves. Insofar as they are split, as it is not always clear "who" is talking and who is being addressed, they are only Cartesian in a broad sense: they are subjects constituted by loops that Derrida might call examples of autoaffection¹². The effect of subjectivity is epiphenomenal to a folding-back, particularly as in the performed fold of speaking and hearing oneself speak—no matter how long the journey nor what sort of alterities are passed through on the way.

Now Eleanor is the most profoundly autoaffectively-constructed projection of Ashley's talking-to-himself in that the idea of her character, as indicated by a name that goes beyond being a mere proper name (Now, Eleanor...), is about bending back towards herself, on-going self-address, and multiplicity (in her case not a fourness but a twoness). As such, the auto-affective

loop comprised of Eleanor and her inner voice becomes autonomous, self-contained and repeating through time. Now Eleanor gains a kind of subjectivity in self-naming through performing a loop of speaking and recuperative self-hearing.

The notion of autoaffection also suggests that folds, repetitions, or networks in language—such as proper names—can equally constitute the unities and subjectivity effects. Ashley suggests in one place that his characters are no more than proper names. Speaking of the characters in *Perfect Lives*, he writes “I started out writing without naming anybody. I was just describing imagery....If you attach those things to a name, even though the name is doing many different things, people connect it in some way” (1991, 186). This is a profound de-emphasis of the speaking subject, suggesting another reason why there is little interaction in Ashley’s operatic experiments: the works represent language at play, thoughts. If there are no real subjects, there is no interplay of recognition, desire, transference—there are no relationships. Now Eleanor’s self-constitution acts against radical heteroglossic forces of language in which her “name is doing many different things.” Now Eleanor pins down and repeats the function of her name, forging a minimal relationship—with herself.

Ashley’s various ideals—of actuality, originality, of composing, at least symbolically beyond singular authorial control—concretize in the configuration of Now Eleanor. She is an ultimate symbol for Ashley’s technique and self-projection as author-composer. Now Eleanor does her author one better. Although she is split in herself, in another way she represents a more Cartesian self-presence, an integration, a complete unity. For Ashley thinks of Now Eleanor as a penultimate integration of his fourness, a complete consciousness, in that Now Eleanor’s *idea* is of experiencing different views simultaneously, of combining the four disjunct realities occurring in *NOW ELEANOR’S IDEA*.

Eleanor’s idea is the idea of everything happening simultaneously, synchronously. That is her idea...the four different realities that are concurrent, and they are all real. (1986, 111)

By the end of the performance, Now Eleanor contains all alterity in herself (as she puts it below, there is no longer any "outside" for her) and is complete in herself.

VI. Cordero as (Now Eleanor's) Echo

Now Eleanor is uniquely self-constituting via her inner voice. Even if she does not consider the voice she hears inside her head to be her "own," its autoaffection here tends towards a closed loop vis-à-vis social or real others outside of herself. The question of "real" is important here, since the voices she hears internally are from the "distant past" or the mystically channeled song from a secret society—never voices from her social, historical present or past. Now Eleanor thereby becomes potentially more independent of the need to be recognized and so co-constituted by others around her. Talking to oneself is practical, necessary, an everyday occurrence, but carried to an extreme, forming too close a loop of self-definition, can result in a failure to hearken to others in the struggle for mutual hearing and recognition.

Like the other performers, Now Eleanor, in her privateness and independence, looks forward only to the audience, like a funerary statue looking into the next world. Cordero is *the only one* in the performance who looks at another (Now Eleanor), an other who does not return her gaze. Cordero says this was not Ashley's staging, but something that "just sort of happened in performance." At one point, when asked whether her character taught Now Eleanor Spanish in the story, Cordero replied "I don't get the sense that I'm teaching her per se. How can I when she is looking the other way?" Cordero strives for sociality and "heteroaffection" but finds in the performance independence, privacy, self-echoing. This would seem to reveal her personal, different (and confounded) sensibility as well as her different placing of the boundaries of art and social relations.

Now Eleanor's autoaffection is manifested not only in her name and inner voice but is repeated in the distribution of voices and roles (Act II:1 and 3). Now Eleanor's lines are echoed by two other singers. The *musical* element of Now Eleanor's voice is doubled by her "Alter Ego," played by Amy X. Neuburg, who sings the same

material as Now Eleanor in the same range. The two voices weave together, and it is at first difficult to distribute them between two bodies. Neuburg's voice reinforces and through doubling helps constitute Now Eleanor's character, but at the same time is incompletely separable from it. This doubling, like Now Eleanor's internal voice, is not separate but creates a positive feedback loop that amplifies Now Eleanor's voice.

The *discursive* element—the words in Now Eleanor's singing—is doubled by her “Low Rider Companion,” that is, by Cordero, who repeats many of Now Eleanor's lines in Spanish in a lower register. Unlike Neuburg's voice, Cordero's retains its individuality, not with a particular, embodied, or historical identity, but as a kind of generalized didactic or admonishing voice. According to instructions in the libretto, the character was to be played by a male. His voice, the libretto reads, is to be “precise in accent, muted and didactic. He is both the teacher and protector” (1992, vocal instructions & synopsis, Act II). This admonishing voice doubles or is a projection of the didactic tone of Now Eleanor's inner voice (“Now, Eleanor...”), without words different from her own. To the extent that Cordero's character is an echoic device for Now Eleanor (who is in turn an echoic projection of Ashley), Cordero's character is barred from the autonomy that she abets in Now Eleanor by echoing her.

Nor does Cordero's character, since it is in Now Eleanor's aural shadow, engage in the same performance of talking to herself (e.g. in looking and speaking as if in a monologue) as the others do, which could give her character “privacy” and “independence.” Cordero's main critique arises from this situation. Cordero protests that her character—at least its discursive, narrative part—is *ghostly*. This is intended.

Now Eleanor is always on-camera—and in the Low Rider T.V. studio she is always accompanied by the same unidentified and unexplained man (imposing and otherworldly), who interjects translations of some of her phrases, but who otherwise appears to be a kind of “guardian angel.” He stands slightly behind her, always on-camera. It is never clear whether Now Eleanor is aware of the presence of this

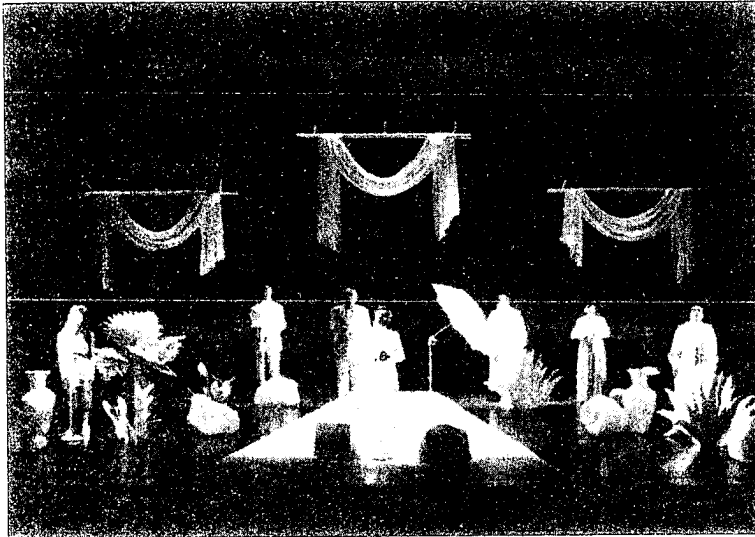


Photo: Dan Rest, ©1994

Robert Ashley's Now Eleanor's Idea.

man, and his presence is never remarked on by other characters (1992, synopsis Act II).

Although, like *Now Eleanor*, Cordero is “always on-camera,” her character is “unidentified and unexplained,” “otherworldly,” and remains unrecognized by the other characters. This is disturbing to Cordero personally and as a representative of the low riders. Towards the *personal* side,

The role of Guardian Angel brings up issues of being defined, spiritualized and eroticized and ultimately disembodied....it wasn't easy for me to insert my own gendered presence, which was about being very real. I thought I was going to disappear into thin air after a while. It was my desire to put out my Chicana lesbian personality. (Cordero 1997a; 1997b)

As a character who is unacknowledged in the script and reduced to an echo or a nameless caller, Cordero is spiritualized and “ultimately disembodied.” As an angel, she is ungendered, unraced, unidentified, anonymously eroticized. But her sense of being is closely aligned with an identity constituted by its performed differences and oppositions—as a Chicana vs. mainstream Anglo society, as a dyke in homophobic Chicano society, and as a woman in Chicano and low rider society, which proffer limited female social roles. There is no tension or sociality (except in an invisible and private experience Cordero has in the performance as discussed below). When her differences are not given space in performance and representation Cordero feels, in contradistinction to Now Eleanor, *exceedingly absent*. As a performer in an opera, of course, there is no reason she should have her individuality expressed or recognized. We must be wary of the personal element of her critique but also educated by what it reveals about the order of sociality within Ashley’s work and between it and the low riders.

Prior to examining how Cordero linked her own disappearance and ghostliness to that of the low riders, we must examine some ways Cordero succeeded in expressing personal differences in performance.

VII. Ashley’s Collaborative Practice: Difference in Performance

Ashley has written that his openness to his collaborators’ contributions lets them become “surprisingly different” from what he had intended while composing and during rehearsal. This is probably the greatest similarity with his spontaneous conversation pieces of the 1970s. While working with the ONCE performance group in Ann Arbor he learned to develop performances without notation, permitting more casual agreements between composer-director and performers on the “evanescent” level of performance. He devised a “template” that would establish a shared set of rules ensuring synchrony of timing, tone, and image, while allowing room for private and independent creation by the performers (Gagne 21; Ashley 1989, 8). In the BAM program for *NOW ELEANOR’S IDEA*, for instance, Ashley wrote that performers

are given a certain "character defining" pitch to which they may contribute their own ideas for pitch changes and vocal techniques—always in the service of expressing the meaning of the libretto. The performers need only follow harmonies implicit in the orchestration and sometimes certain pitch sets.

Cordero negotiated at least one aspect of her part. Ashley wanted her to speak in what Cordero calls Ashley's Midwestern drawl, which she thought inappropriate to the story's setting in the Southwest. She also felt it inhibited emotional expression. Ashley capitulated and Cordero developed a vocal character based on her radio experience and on non-vibrato Alabado singing.

On the other hand, Ashley insisted on a certain profound change in Cordero's performance: he had Cordero lower her voice by an octave (less one note). A part in Ashley's opera *Improvement* was originally written for and developed by a man; when Cordero took the part, Ashley wanted her to lower her range from mezzo soprano to tenor, the tessitura for which the part had been written. Cordero carried over this pitch range into *Now Eleanor's Idea*. She liked it. "Soprano gives the impression of ethereal, waif-like, up high; as you get deeper tones, you get that sense of age, authority, power" (Cordero 1996). In this way she counteracted feelings of ethereality. She also found that she received positive responses from (female) audience members, restoring to presence a critical part of her identity—as singer and a dyke together—that had been forged in her youth: sex and gender organized around singing to women.

Cordero still felt a deep-seated need for sociality. In order to "settle those barbed borders" of misrecognition (or non-recognition) of the low riders, she says she concentrated her attention on the part of the role that gave her pleasure. In performance, she focused her energies on singing to Joan La Barbara (Now Eleanor) as a woman. Hearing La Barbara's voice in the tiny earphones everyone wore also felt to Cordero like a (libidinal) interaction (Cordero 1997b).

In my headphone mix, I am listening to Joan to hear my cue or pitch. Her singing character and tonality is half of this and half of that, she enters me. (Cordero 1997b).

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The returned gaze (from Now Eleanor) was denied Cordero, but she experienced a one-way aural interaction (penetration), and so was able to feel less ghostly, less echoic. At least on a performative and personal level, Cordero experienced some sense of freedom—if not in being recognized, at least in expression.

Never mind that the libretto has nothing to do with the Chicano people or Chicano consciousness. I am a fan of Bob's work....this space of the sexualized world of contemporary opera that I am able to insert myself [into] and move in and out of. I bring to the performance everything that has formed my identity. I bring my class, my Mestiza voice and my Marimacha desire. (Cordero 1997b)

In the private world of Ashley's opera, Cordero achieved a private relationship, a relationship that only she experienced, an incorporation into her imagination of another on a performance level that let her keep her heteroaffective sanity. She also experienced her alternating presence and absence in the opera as an active penetration into it.

VIII. The Chicanos of Oz

Cordero affirms her ambivalence. In the same letter from which the above quotations come, Cordero underscores her disappearance and, insofar as she represented them, of Chicanos generally.

It brought up very deep feelings of remorse and a sense of failure to convey a real presence on stage and I had the subtle feeling I had betrayed my culture, my people, but I know this is not true. (Cordero 1997b)

As with her fear of being a Malinche-like betrayer by translating for Ashley, she feels responsibility for abetting the disappearing act of herself and Chicanos generally in performance. (Note her "but I know this is not true"; her critiques are sincere, but she

doesn't take herself overly seriously.) This experience of personal and representative derealization occurs not only because Cordero is a ghost and echo in the scenes enumerated but because of the non-realist style of all the scenes other than the call-in scene. It's not just that the Chicanos are not present, but that, at least for some audiences, the overall effect in the opera is that they are ghostly and fabulous.

The Chicano people are these sort of ghosts and angels and they're not really alive; it gives it that sort of fantasy feeling that Bob is trying to create.... The people in France thought that Bob had created these characters. People in France thought the low riders were fanciful; even in New York City. (Cordero 1997a)

The weight of representation of the low riders as a living community rests upon the voices of low riders in the call-in show, as mediated by Now Eleanor, and also the recorded voice of Lolo Medina. Medina's auto-biographical voice-over breaks out of both Now Eleanor's framing *in* the story and Ashley's framing of events *as* a story in such a way as to at least provide a clue to French and East Coast audiences of the low riders' historical reality. Medina's voice is layered in with live voices during a dense musical moment, although the words are easily distinguished.

Exemplary of *fabulous* representations of the low riders is the Song, "understood to contain a coded message for certain listeners" (1992, Act IV synopsis). Its themes, evoked in a chant-like, collage-like manner, include 1) the Three Great Families (presumably low riders) celebrate four seasons with symbolic events; 2) intuitive knowledge has advantages over probability and logic 3) the three families are contingent vs. enduring; 4) humanity passes through seven ages; 5) loyalty is a prime value. These themes are interspersed with fantastic imagery. The families, for instance, are named "The Climbing Roses Have Covered The Wall On the Dark Side Of The House;" "The Snake Sleeps In The Sun;" and "The Metal Roof Holds The Memory Of Thunder Lightly" (1992, Act IV).

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Arthur Sabatini justly argues that Ashley's style should not be judged for its degree of realism, because it is not realist. He suggests regarding it as having surrealist elements (and plans to write about this). I address the issue briefly. A famous surrealist definition of beauty: "the chance encounter on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella" (Lautréamont). The surrealists were influenced, according to James Clifford in his well-known essay on ethnographic surrealism, by an ironic experience of (French) culture's institutions in the face of the many cultures revealed by ethnography. The surrealists tried to express this in their work.

Their attitude, while comparable to that of the [ethnographic] fieldworker who strives to render the unfamiliar comprehensible, tended to act in the reverse sense, by making the familiar strange. The contrast is, in fact, generated by a continuous play of the familiar and the strange. (Clifford 1981, 542)

Certainly Ashley makes interesting "plays" between representations of the low riders as realist (familiar, political) and "strange" or miraculous. This carries over into Ashley's musical style, as when narratively unremarkable words and phrases are unexpectedly chanted chorally as if in a religious service, conveying an intended effect of sacrality (1992, introduction). Moreover, in his interest in Mexican-American culture, Ashley joins, with André Breton, Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud, and Alejo Carpentier, a surrealist (and in the latter case also magical realist) tradition of fascination with Mexican and Mesoamerican culture.

Discussing participant observers, Clifford's essay addresses the political dimension of surrealist representation; he quotes Carl Einstein, writing on an artist. "One thing is important: to shake what is called reality by means of non-adapted hallucinations so as to alter the value hierarchies of the real" (qtd. in Clifford 1981, 549). We can then ask whether Ashley's hallucinatory visions alter repressive "value hierarchies of the real" or abet them in the service of commodification or supporting Euro-American norms by casting low riders as exotic. Now Eleanor, as usual, can be fingered here—she returns to the Midwest, in spite of her trans-

formation, with videos of the "exotic low riders." As she tells her T.V. audience, "I went to El Dorado,/the land of/Miracles. I saw and heard miracles./And I have them, here, on tape, for you." (1992, I:1, 22). If she and her "home" are not constructed as "rational," they are constructed as "normal:" she is given her job as a T.V. anchor because she is "unusually comely and yet reassuring in her appearance, not exotic at all, and well-read and knowing how to pronounce most words" (1992, I, 15; performance notation omitted). Unlike the low riders, she is not exotic, she speaks from the place of mainstream culture, her use of language is transparent, and she commodifies low riders for her job.¹⁵

Ashley engages Cordero's concerns about derealization by having the final caller (#7) raise them in a realist mode in the call-in scene. Whether intentionally or not but certainly ironically, the caller in this case is performed by Cordero. By this point in the call-in show, Now Eleanor and the caller speak entirely in Spanish; the following is a "quick" retranslation back into English by Cordero.

CALLER #7:

...I feel unreal
 People on television, in magazines are real, yet I am
 not....
 The world feels small...
la Raza is like something from the past
 as if we were in a T.V. documentary
 in some faraway place no one has ever heard of
 How can I tell my friends that I want to be another
 person
 That I want to be where things are real
 I don't want to think of myself as Chicana...
 What do I do with these feelings?

We remember that Now Eleanor kicks off her call-in program by showing her video documentaries of the low riders. Caller #7 responds to the documentary's unreeling. She feels that her presence is far away and long ago, in contrast with Now Eleanor's immediacy. Live T.V. and current periodicals inflate the nowness of the real and constitute everything outside their frame as mediated.

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But Caller #7 has her moment on T.V.. She explicitly addresses Now Eleanor's role of being a T.V. anchor making a documentary of the low riders (thus also addressing Ashley's own video documenting of the low riders). But instead of holding Now Eleanor responsible for making her feel framed and derealized as the subject of a documentary, Caller #7 seeks Now Eleanor's affirmation of her right to be (present). Now Eleanor grants it.

NOW ELEANOR:

There is nothing wrong with you....

It is the feeling of your "self" [*alma*]...

who has just appeared and wants attention

Like a baby crying.

I am here because I had that feeling.

The world was too small and I had to leave
everything behind and come here

I thought it was important to listen to myself

but I discovered that where I come from was
really the center of the world.

There is no "other place"

Now Eleanor's advice is a variation of her earlier suggestion to be true to yourself, but here it is: Go home, stay in your place; like me, form an autoaffective loop with (what I take to be) your true self and you will feel at home everywhere (there will be no outside).

As for herself, Now Eleanor says she sought an other place, the place of her other (the colorful world of the low riders), but now understands that there is no place like (her black and white) home—she has extinguished her desire for alterity, which is possible because there is no alterity, no "other place". Now she can click her ruby-slippered heels three times, leave her echoes behind, and go home. Instead of grasping after alterity, Now Eleanor rejects it. There is no place in-between, no balance between inside and outside. Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, she has "grown up" and, to construct her identity, no longer needs alterity nor, potentially, any internal echo—I thought it was important to listen to myself—but, of course, the low riders are real, not denizens of Oz¹⁴.

IX. Double Echoes

Now Eleanor says that what she learns of the low riders could help her "and [her] people...to understand/ourselves better" (II:1, 1), but as the call-in show nears its end, she goes further. The Narrator intones:

Somehow the deepest knowledge of herself
is revealed in the language of the callers.
(1992, III:2, 9-10)

The approach of the end of the world feeling
has disappeared. Now Eleanor is home.
She will return, of course, to the town where
she is known and where she came from.
—this time. But she will take back
with her more than images on video tape.
She has discovered that she is
"of" this people and "of" this place.
She has made the connection with herself.
(1992, III:2, 11-12)

Now Eleanor can be "of" this people and place and, paradoxically, be herself. We saw that a certain closed loop constituted Now Eleanor, a loop at once abetted by and excluding the shadows and echoes of her others. More imperially, by making herself at home at another's home, within the home of *la Raza* (contrary to her advice to Caller #2), she arrogates it to her own autoaffection, bends it to her own selfhood.

Now Eleanor's power and subjectivity is also epiphenomenal to and increased by two other folds. She is at the vertex of the fold of the Europeans meeting themselves, a meeting of body and mind. Responding to the demands of this larger autoaffection that her own autoaffective subjectivity rides like a Ferris Wheel, she finally achieves a monumental here-and-now short-circuit, discharging the performance of an inner voice, ending the "end of the world feeling," and voiding distinctions between inside and outside. Wherever she is is the center of the universe.

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Now Eleanor is also at the vortex of the low riders' autoaffection.

As a result of the people calling in, [Now Eleanor's] program becomes a way for the community to talk to itself and she becomes an oracle. People are speaking through her, addressing concerns of the community (qtd. in Steinberg 1993).

Now Eleanor becomes a kind of circuit through which the low riders engage in dialogue with themselves. Ashley (or a publicist) says that the "call-ins express some of the typical concerns of persons in contemporary Hispanic American society, and the 'advice' from Now Eleanor reflects a consensus from the community on answers to those concerns" (Performing Artservices, Inc. press release from Santa Fe, 1995?). Even if the callers raise relevant issues, doubtless they do not constitute a "consensus."

Now Eleanor's place in the circuit is focused in the narrator's comments about Now Eleanor as she sings the cosmos-renewing song. The Song is about "where the people come from" and "who we [the people] are." The singing of the Song releases the people from "whatever unhappiness they held in their hearts" (1992, III:3, 17-18.) The narrator intones

It became more and more apparent that
Now Eleanor was the "face" of the people,
Almost a kind of mask through which
The voice could speak without hesitation or fear.
(1992, III:3, 16)

Now Eleanor does not lecture to the low riders as an expert, but acts as a means by which the low riders touch themselves, gain capacity for self-reflection and political solidarity, soothe themselves, and, given the messages Now Eleanor conveys, *become* themselves (stay on the side of *la Raza*). She is a short-circuit for the low riders, permitting them to have an *immediate* connection with themselves, unobstructed by "hesitation." The low riders don't really experience Now Eleanor, but a white mask through which to gain access to themselves.

The narrator says that Now Eleanor, a stranger, is the "least-likely one" to sing the Song (1992, III:3, 18.). Ashley says this is a literary trope, that from the time of the Greeks oracles have always been outsiders (1997a). She may be an outsider to the low riders, but, as noted above in reasons given for her being hired to be a T.V. anchor, Now Eleanor speaks from the place of an extreme *insider* to mainstream culture (let us affirm that Ashley himself, contrariwise, is not mainstream!). From her position of power as a T.V. anchor, her speaking as an oracle tends mostly to evoke a relationship of power and to suggest that power relations are behind the "mask" of identity with the low riders. In the end, we perceive the story creating a double loop, in which each culture—north and south—deploys the other in the service of its own subjectivity, but never meets, while Ashley indulges his reductive affection for autos in pursuit of his own autoaffection.

Notes

Many thanks to Marghreta Cordero for her extensive contributions to this article in interviews, discussions, suggestions. Thanks to Robert Ashley for his generosity and aid and to Arthur Sabatini for his ideas and attempts to temper my critique. Much gratitude also to Antonio Prieto-Stambaugh, Nat Herold, Guadalupe García-Vásquez, and Berta Jottar for their suggestions and feedback, and to Mimi Johnson & Lovely Music for their assistance. I am greatly obliged for the kind and wise advice of *Women and Performance* editors June Reich and Mandy Harris. Needless to say, none of the above should be held accountable for my biases and mistakes. Finally, I am indebted to Cynthia Aranow, Beverly Fields, and Debbie Recksiek for indulging me the leisure to write.

1. "Low rider" refers most obviously to lowering the chassis of a car so that it hugs the road or curb. According to Ybarra-Frausto, cars are lowered in symbolic opposition to mainstream consumer culture's interest in high, fast cars—1990, 160. "Chicano" is a name that gained particular importance from the Chicano Movement whose heyday was 1969 to 1972. Some prefer the term Mexican-American or other designations. Cf. Anzaldúa, Preface

and Chapter 5. Ashley and Cordero often seem to conflate "low riders" and "Chicanos." I refer to the more specific term "low riders" or "low rider community" unless the context suggests the more inclusive "Chicanos". Thanks especially to Antonio Prieto-Stambaugh for suggesting I clarify the difference more carefully.

2. In this typical unpitched score segment, Ashley's recitation is accompanied by a chorus which sings on the boldfaced lines and accents the underlined syllables.

3. The use of term "exotic" comes from the Site Santa Fe program for *Now Eleanor's Idea*, description of Act I.

4. The opera series, listed in order of their settings from East Coast to West Coast, are *Atalanta (Acts Of God)* (1982), *Perfect Lives* (1979-1983), and the composite *NOW ELEANOR'S IDEA* (1984-1988). This last is further divided into four shorter operas called *Improvement (Don Leaves Linda)* (1984); *Foreign Experiences* (1986); *eL/Aficionado* (1987) and *Now Eleanor's Idea* (1986), the latter of which I consider in this article (and which I distinguish from the composite opera by using mixed case letters).

5. Ashley admits leaving African Americans and Native Americans out of his history of (North) America (Ashley 1986, 106).

6. Ashley had collaborated with a Spanish-speaking translator before—*Yellow Man with Heart with Wings* (1990), and last spring Ashley and his ensemble collaborated with María Irene Fornes on the opera *Balseros*, a work about the Cuban rafters' journey to the U.S. (1997).

7. The non-standard Spanish text is quoted verbatim.

8. Now Eleanor's position regarding translatability shouldn't be conflated with Ashley's. In discussing the history of the *production* of *NOW ELEANOR'S IDEA*, Ashley says his chronicle is only one of many possible. "Whatever I talk about here would be just my history of how these three pieces have grown, and that would exclude the history of the other people who were involved with it as characters and as composers" (Ashley 1986, 104). The structure of *NOW ELEANOR'S IDEA* is formed of disjunct knowledge.

9. Thanks to Berta Jottar for emphasizing this point and for her words—"La Malinche is the patron saint of the Chicanas."

10. Anzaldúa mentions La Malinche as a counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe, forming two parts of a whore/Madonna

polarity that regulates women's roles in Latin Catholic societies (and provides a subtext for the production, if Now Eleanor is taken as the Virgin Mary). Cordero's identification with La Malinche then sets her (Cordero) up to define herself oppositionally against what's represented by Now Eleanor and to criticize it. The question of whether La Malinche can be considered to have betrayed her own people is arguable, depending on who one considers her "own" to have been. Thanks to Guadalupe García-Vásquez and Prieto-Stambaugh for suggestions along these lines.

11. Ashley also gives a more mundane reason for these performances: "I didn't have a nickel. I had to use what was available to me. ONCE Group members couldn't sing, but most of them were spectacular talkers" (1997).

12. See Jacques Derrida "Economimesis" and *The Post Card. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, and *Speech and Phenomena*.

13. His quasi-surrealist representation of *Anglos*, however, do upset hierarchies of the real cf. the feminist *Purposeful Lady Slow Afternoon* (1971).

14. Cf. Salmon Rushdie's *Wizard of Oz*; Rushdie notes that not only can one not ever return to one's point of origin, but that home, especially Dorothy's poor, black and white home in Kansas, is boring (vs. Oz's technicolor). Thanks to Nat Herold for this reference.

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Women & Performance

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