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Cross-cultural Drama, Tragic Anomalies, and Queered Spaces: The Case of Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman*: A Mexican Medea (1995)

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Mostly received as a New World, rebellious re-writing of the Greek myth of Medea, or as a queer and feminist intervention against machismo, Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* actually revisits tragedy with ambiguous codes. Never explicit, the orders and disorders of the play structure plotlines, characterisation, and settings which are difficult to interpret in any single direction. This article argues that the cross-cultural dimension of the second generation of Chicana writers provokes "anomalies", or resistance to any norms: a theatrical experimentation which collapses all previous discourses, however emancipatory they might be, and pushes towards the emergence of collective knowledge through performative experience.

Keywords: cross-cultural drama, Chicana literature, Cherríe Moraga, Medea, re-writing

Between Postmodern Intertextuality and Postcolonial Reclaiming: *The Hungry Woman* as Cross-cultural Drama

Literary experimentations have punctuated the twentieth century, with a particularly marked imperative to "make it new", according to Ezra Pound's injunction. Such an emphasis on revisiting and renewing previous forms, patterns, plots and narrative devices, has arguably reached a form of exhaustion with late postmodernism and its vortex of intertextuality and intermediality. These critiques of the limits of postmodern experimentations have most notably emerged from Marxist (Callinicos, Jameson, Eagleton) and postcolonial (Ekpo) viewpoints. While postmodern forms came with the awareness that everything has already been written and read, or – in the context of drama – performed and watched, resulting in a failure to intervene in structures of power and domination, the situation is arguably different with postcolonial aesthetic interventions. With the agenda of resisting hegemonic discourses, the creation and reception of postcolonial texts have premised a continuity between text and social context, with an eye to reclaiming a sense of community and cultural cohesion. This has often led to experimentations still very much aligned with the aim of referencing the world out there. Drama provides a potentially privileged site of reconnection with social worlds, through its immersion in a material reality of stage, bodies, props, and settings. Postcolonial drama has actually been a source of major inspiration for the theatrical experimentations in the Euro-American world of the 1960s, and 1970s as they were looking

for ways of reinventing rituals bringing communities together. In *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner recalls how “the tendency to transform entertainment into ritual by means of theater had been present in Grotowski almost from the beginning” (160), but sees an acceleration of the prominence of ritualistic meaning when, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “Western directors looked not only to Asia but to Africa, the Caribbean, and native America” (146). Paying attention to non-European forms became a distinct element of experimentation of the recent decades; it is a form of postmodern intertextuality and intermediality which maintains a strong link with commitments to world change.

By the end of the second millennium A.C., norms had been all the more attacked from all sides since artistic voices emerged from an ever more common experience of diasporic lives. The very distinction between Western and non-Western positionalities was in itself potentially irrelevant, and was certainly destabilised by the transnational turn which took place around 2000 as well. Registering the increasing diversity in writerly profiles, the transnational turn addressed the increase in formal generic hybridity and linguistic code-switching. This was particularly striking in the case of the United States, where migratory trajectories continued to diversify the population: “once the study of literature became engaged with texts by writers both male and female of African, Native, Asian, Mexican and Latin American descent, the roots *and* the routes of American literature, and the histories of those who both produced and populated its texts, became a transnational affair” (Jay 21-22). Formal experimentation was, from 2000 onwards, mostly led by reflections around cultural differences and by practices authored by non-white, non-heteronormative artists.

While studies of postmodernism have tended to minimise issues of context, the transnational turn emerges from poststructuralist thought and acknowledges the central role played by any artist's positionality. However, areas of ambiguity will remain generated by the form itself, regardless of the artist (see De Souza Santos). In this article, I follow the line of flight away from postmodern devices and postcolonial resistance, to ponder on the ambiguities of recycled myth as opposed to the clarity of a political agenda. Transnational drama is particularly illuminating in its circulations away from both “posts” and its exploration of the possible futures of drama. I take as a case-in-point a play by Chicana¹ author and activist Cherríe Moraga. Her *Medea, A Hungry Woman* is a

¹ The terms “Chicano” and “Chicana” designate elements and agents of culture which result from the bilingual and dual legacy of the Southwest of the USA. They evidence a Mexican and Hispanophone influence which has been maintained throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as opposed to what the Manifest Destiny ideology narrates in terms of Anglophone exceptionalism. The Chicano movement of the 1960s has been “taking shape from a cultural and an institutional politics that called for the affirmation of a working-class, Mexican-mestizo heritage” (Calderón and Saldívar 5). Before this 1991 volume edited by Calderón and Saldívar, where they position Chicano culture as “four hundred years of a Mexican-mestizo presence in our borderlands,” critical landmarks for Chicano/a culture had been Joseph Sommers's and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto's *Modern Chicano Writers* (1979) and Vernon E. Lattin's *Contemporary Chicano Fiction* (1986). “Chicano” is sometimes spelt “Xicano”, as a tribute to Mexican spelling and legacies of Autochthonous languages.

piece of “writing back” as it adapts the myth of Medea to an apocalyptic USA-Mexico border through its Greek and Roman versions by Euripides and Seneca respectively. The re-direction of the classical plotline reveals an emancipatory political agenda, as it stages negotiations between the national and the transnational; but it also operates a deconstruction of plot and character which “queers” conventional codes from a gendered but also cultural point of view, introducing elements of Mexican mythologies and addressing LGBTQA+ discriminations through a linguistic oscillation between English and Spanish.

The play, which was first performed in 1995, has been studied as a central piece in the constitution of a Chicano corpus. Critical attention has been paid to the ambiguities of pre-Columbian references in the context of a feminist play (He, Ramay, but also Moya for Chicana literature in general), as well as within the context of queer performativity (Foster), and of myth-making (Martin-Baron, Straile-Costa). All these readings tended to lend the play an agenda in terms of identitarian claims. However, the transnational dimension of Chicano literatures, as evidenced by Marissa López, can be adapted to a reading of the play as surpassing claims to a united nation under the banner of Aztlán, or to a recovered visibility for non-heteronormative members. I am adopting an approach to Chicano/a literatures which foregrounds not identitarian claims to singularity, but the contemporary fluidities of gender and ethnicity. As I argue, Moraga rewrites one of the archetypal tragedies to outline the importance of transgression as an element of social (dis)order; yet, this tragic transgression of rules functions at all levels, warranting no return to order whatsoever, be it feminist, ethnically inclusive, cosmopolitan, queer or subaltern.

This article is aligned with the considerations of cross-cultural drama practices, as described by Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo as they argue that the lens of “cross-cultural” literature not only departs from Eurocentric nationalism, but also considers culture abstractedly from any political borders. In a major paper on cross-cultural practice, published in 2002, Gilbert and Lo describe a necessary attention to be paid to “a process of encounter and negotiation between different cultural sensibilities” (31). Their intervention rests on the instability of combinations and implies a transcending of binary oppositions. My own analysis contends that Moraga’s *Medea* can be read not as “redressing the canon”, to borrow the phrase from Alisa Solomon’s title, but as multiplying zones of confusion which interrogate the borders and contours of any identity. In other words, Moraga’s stage is not one where visibility is clarified and the former, or future, social orders restored; instead, the spectators are asked to participate in a “process of distillation strip[ping] the readable signs of culture from the source text” (Gilbert and Lo 47).

A Chicana Medea: Referential (Con)Fusions

On a number of counts, *The Hungry Woman* does away with classical rules; first and foremost, Aristotle’s injunction of time and space unity is left far behind. In Moraga’s play,

Medea is a midwife and Chicana activist who has been banned by her husband Jasón, ruler of the kingdom of Aztlán; she is sent to the psychiatric ward of a penitentiary. The action on stage alternates between two spaces which also correspond to two time periods: the court, during the hearing in which Medea is banned, where the audience learns about her demise and the decision taken by Jasón to choose a new wife; and the prison in Phoenix, Arizona, where Medea is busy delivering babies, and reduced to being brought food and exchanging trivial cues with her wardens. Yet, because his new wife is barren, Jasón demands Chac-Mool,² their son, for himself. Medea kills her son, who was detained in exile with her, in order to prevent such a kidnapping. Medea, the infanticide, the figure of monstrous femininity borrowed from Greek antiquity, is deconstructed through transnational combinations of the here and there, as well as of the now and then. The audience navigates between Aztlán and Arizona, between a time for murder and a time for disgrace. Overlapping of time and space is taken further, as the name of Medea explicitly introduces Ancient Greece, where the infanticidal myth appeared, re-interpreted as a dystopia set in a future, the chaotic and fractious USA. In itself, this device corresponds to a common feature of dystopias, where descriptions of the future are grafted onto reminiscences of known past facts. This has been categorised as “concrete dystopia”, which Maria Varsam summarises as “bringing together the past and present, creating thus a continuum in time whereby historical reality is dystopian” (208).

I am not contesting the fact that in *The Hungry Woman*, Medea voices the resistance to patriarchy expressed by the monstrous female infanticide which Medea embodies, here as in former plays (by Seneca, for instance). It is also manifest that the play constructs the Chicano/a identity as embracing both Central and Northern America – caught on the borders between various fragmented versions of a country which are the United States and its Mexican border in a dystopian future.³ Yet, the clarity of the agenda is oftentimes blurred. Both the text and the performance emphasise a hybridity in linguistic and visual references: the European backdrop is combined with numerous insertions drawn from the Aztec culture. For instance, Medea describes the infanticide through allusions to the myth of La Llorona⁴: “Allí viene La Llorona. / Rivers rising. / Cold-blooded babies at her breast” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 63); “All the babies, they [...]’ve turned into the liquid of the river” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 86). The play posits forms of transnationalism which are quite foreign to any political message: it is partial, fragmented and impossibly united within the confines of a single stage.

Here Moraga’s writing is aligned with earlier experimentations by Chicana and Chicano writers to reactivate forms of rituals which have been lost and can therefore

² Chac-Mool is a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican deity.

³ The original production was directed by the playwright herself, Cherríe Moraga, and Adelina Anthony at The Pigott Theater, Stanford University, in May 2005, after years of staged readings and partial stagings. The set and costume concepts were created by Celia Herrera Rodríguez. (Moraga, “Theatre”)

⁴ La Llorona is a mythical spirit whose ghostly presence has haunted waterways ever since she has drowned her own children, according to the legend.

never be retrieved as operating collective performances, only re-imagined. In the opening pages to his 2000 overview of "Chicano Drama", Jorge Huerta writes:

The problem, when inventing a mythos, is that you are compressing time. Myths are created through generations of story-telling and cultural logic which gives those stories mythic significance, not through plays or murals on barrio walls. And yet, that is what the Chicana and Chicano writers and artists, composers and poets began to do in the 1960s: create or re-create a Chicano mythos based on Mexican and pre-Columbian heroes and myths. But, apparently lacking historical knowledge of the narratives, some of these artists would conflate images from distinct cultures and time periods. (18)

This can be seen for instance in the recycling of the name of Jason and Medea's son: Chac-Mool, which designates a deity in pre-Columbian America. In a way, Moraga's cross-cultural experimentation is not a choice but a necessity, given the losses of cultural cohesion in the turmoil of colonialism, imperialism, racism and gendered violence.

As part of its straddling of the fence between ancient creeds and contemporary positionalities, the play combines a feminist point of view with the staging of a figure which has long fed Euro-American stereotypes on female hysteria and irrationality. In *The Hungry Woman*, Moraga rewrites the myth of Medea through a gendered approach but cannot erase the connotations around female monstrosity which the figure of Medea brings in its wake – although her infanticide has been included in feminist agendas (see van Zyl Smit). The title plays with the cliché of the hungry/angry woman and introduces an ambiguity which is maintained throughout the text between figurative and literal meaning. The story is known: Medea kills her own children to spite her husband Jasón after he has shunned her and taken another, younger lover. The action has long been seen as a narrative of female madness or hysteria, of villainy and monstrosity, although Euripides also represents the ambiguities of female alienation. Medea is a woman dominated by passion and possibly even unchanneled lust (if a director chooses to emphasise that part of the mythical figure in their production of Seneca's play, for instance). Unsurprisingly, Medea has in turn become in various rewritings a feminist heroine threatening patriarchy, a woman of intelligence and power whose ability to wreak physical violence is robbed from stereotyped virility. In Moraga's play, Medea tells her former husband Jasón: "I'm a big girl, Jasón. I can take care of myself" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 52). Her idiom is that of a streetwise and thick-skinned woman who can stand up for herself. The disjunction between the expected solemnity of the encounter, and the extremely contemporary idiolect of Medea, reveal a strategy of defamiliarisation which keep the "model" myth at a distance but also play with its accumulated layers of intact cultural misogyny.

The expectations of a broad-minded, liberal audience are further betrayed in an encounter between Medea and her son. In a mirrored vortex of destabilised markers, Medea and her son Chac-Mool accuse each other of betrayal, but the verb "turn" can also be heard as carnivalesque topsy-turviness: "CHAC-MOOL. Why you turning on me, Mom? / MEDEA. I think that's the question I have to ask you." (Moraga, *The Hungry*

Woman 84) The following cue concludes in ways that are metatheatrical: "What am I supposed to do? Who am I supposed to be, Mom? There's nobody to be" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 84). These sentences sound like the interrogation of any actor looking for a figment of reality, for an exit from the conventions of artifice presiding over the genre of tragedy. The empty place created for the actor to embody any position furthers the reflections carried out in a collection of essays, *Loving in the War Years* (first published 1983), where Moraga writes how "[t]he ancient myth reminds Mexican women that, culturally speaking, there is no mother-woman to manifest who is defined by us outside of patriarchy. We have never had the power to do the defining" (*Loving in the War Years* 147). *The Hungry Woman* proceeds to such "re-defining" through a dramaturgy of combinations and transnational collusions and ultimately, of confusions.

While the play combines Greek myth and Mexican-American dystopia, Moraga also identifies with Indigenous cultures of Central America. In this respect, the artist's positionality brings to the fore notions of authenticity and of ensuing legitimacy as a writer which could interrupt the cross-cultural reading I am carrying out.⁵ In the play, the presence of pre-Columbian traditions, figures as both a temptation (of excavating silenced stories) and a risk (of claims to purity). Like *Heart of the Earth*, another play by Moraga which was written in the same months and published simultaneously in 2001, *The Hungry Woman* borrows from Mexican and Aztec mythology. That other play "writes back"⁶ to the European canon while scribbling in the margins of American master narratives of conquest. One sees how Cherríe Moraga finds herself caught in an identitarian conundrum, and I suggest that it is through formal hybridity that she avoids the pitfalls of nostalgic folklore, or of retrospective cultural authenticity.⁷ She has made a name for herself through gestures of generic blurring (by writing work at the intersection of essays, memoirs, plays, poetry), as well as with a proclamation of the legitimacy of Spanglish, but also by claiming kinship with Chicana writers.⁸ Moraga's play is caught in tensions between attempts at ritualizing the Chicana presence in the USA, and the loss of traditional creeds; but also, between a project of writing about female agency in a context of feminist activism, while keeping in mind the stereotypes which still surround female characters on stage. From the Euro-American patriarchal perspective, Medea is

⁵ This has been particularly visible in the case of Indigenous writers, who have written against the grain of the hybridity that Indian, Nigerian, or perhaps most notably Caribbean authors have claimed. See Pérez for the historicity of the emergence of a Chicana voice and authorship.

⁶ The phrase itself has been used as the title to their 1989 monograph by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin and become a commonplace concept in postcolonial studies. They were inspired actually, and say so in their introduction, by an article published by Salman Rushdie in *The Times* (July 3rd, 1982) and entitled "The Empire Strikes back with a Vengeance."

⁷ In its generic hybridity, Moraga's oeuvre can be compared with that of such Native American authors as Joy Harjo or Louise Erdrich.

⁸ She has co-authored the volume *This Bridge Called my Back* (1981) with Gloria Anzaldúa, gathering critical pieces, essays, visual art, testimonies, interviews, all penned by a group of authors whose in-between positionality has expressed itself in innovative literary ways but who have also foregrounded their ethnic belonging.

an anomaly in her behaviour and characterisation; Moraga's rewriting of the plot takes her transgression further, so that the previous order is not restored. Her resistance to *nomos*, or the rule, becomes a matrix for other forms of rebellion. The following section shows how such resonances find a privileged expression in the (de)construction of the dramatic character, as a way to reflect upon anomalous positionalities in general.

Experimenting with Characterisation: Anomalous Typecasting

One of the places where literary experimentation has nested itself in the past decades is characterisation – especially so in drama. While Western theatre has historically relied on types and stereotypes, postmodern authors have markedly exaggerated such expectations and theatrical conventions in order to deconstruct pre-conceived notions of identities. This is visible from the play's subtitle onwards: *A Mexican Medea* sounds like an impossibility, a dramaturgical aporia, or at least as an interrogation of potential circulations of mythologies against a transnational backdrop. This section analyses how experimenting with form does not hinder a signposted interpretation, precisely because the genre of drama allows the author to push characterisation to such absurd limits that this functions as a dismantling of stereotypes.⁹ In their analysis of cross-cultural drama, Gilbert and Lo isolate the actors' bodies as loci where the instability of the signifier is evidenced – as they represent both that of the actor on stage, and of the character in the plot, play and performance (47). Gilbert and Lo focus on the role of gender, which a decontextualizing operation efficiently reveals to be “historically constructed rather than determined solely by biology” (47). My argument in this section is that the queerness of the play rests on its collapsing of any stable spatio-temporal framework (as seen in the previous section), but also on subsequent defamiliarisations of pre-constructed identities. The play *The Hungry Woman, A Mexican Medea* affirms the specificities of Native American ontologies by reading a Greek myth through Aztec mythologies, starting with that of the Coatlicue. The unfolding of the plot pushes all references to their limits; identities are collapsed into others, played by the same actor or actress. This is first and foremost achieved by the sharing of roles as indicated in the stage directions. The list of characters indicates that Cihuatateo East “also plays MEDEA's aging Puerto Rican caretaker in the psychiatric hospital”, that Cihuatateo North “also plays PRISON GUARD, TATTOO ARTIST and BORDER GUARD”, that Cihuatateo South “also plays MEDEA's husband and CHAC-MOOL's father” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 8). The performance co-directed by Moraga¹⁰ made the bold choice of combining the sleekness of Greek dresses with clothing reminiscent of the postures of Aztec statues. Both influences could be seen to complement, but also to cancel, each other, and finally to gesture towards the artificiality of dramatic characterisation. This ambivalence can be seen in a passage

⁹ In an interview with *BOMB*, Moraga mentions the major influence which the French so-called “Theatre of the Absurd” had on her, after a class she had attended during her college years (Anthony 60).

¹⁰ With Adelina Anthony at the Pigott Theater, Stanford University, Palo Alto, in May 2005.

where Chac-Mool rejects the guilt, and tragic *amartia*, on the occasion of his mother's injunction to respect his and her blood:

MEDEA: (*Grabbing him by the shoulders*) You're my land, hijo. Don't you see that? You're my land!

CHAC-MOOL: How is that any different from my father?

MEDEA: Chinga'o! Because I am the Indian, not him! And I am your mother!

CHAC-MOOL: That's not my fault!

(*She freezes*) (*Moraga, The Hungry Woman 85*)

While the specificities of Medea, the mother, are merged with those of the father ("how is that any different"), Chac-Mool both denies the identitarian claims of Medea ("the Indian", "your mother") and his own role in the play as the tragic figure needing to perform vengeance and to pursue a cycle of violence ("not my fault"). Medea's physical "freezing" suggests an interruption in the expectations of the spectator, a potential failure of the tragic pattern.

If Moraga keeps the motif of matricide from Euripides' play, this stability turns out to be an illusory typecasting. As already suggested, the "Mexican Medea" is called such because of the references to La Llorona, a myth still vivid in Central America and Medea's counterpart of sorts. Moraga's Medea is also Coatlicue¹¹, a goddess whose face was replaced by two snakes after she was decapitated by her four hundred children – because, and this is a plot specificity in Moraga's play, Medea is killed in return by the ghost of her son, Chac-Mool, at the end of the play. These Native American associations both build a character and further confuse its recognition by the spectator, and even by the other characters on stage. The recognitions (or "anagnoreses", in technically theatrical terms), which are a conventional moment of performance on stage, are blurred in a collapse of boundaries fully identified by theorists of postmodern performance (Schechner 116ff.) but specifically directed at the disintegration of exclusionary representations. Moraga addresses the constructedness of all myths – that of Medea, a "hysterical" and "bad" mother, and that of the Coatlicue, which has been equated by Western thought with human sacrifices and the "horrors" of Mesoamerica (see Contreras) and whose myth is told again in the prelude of act II. This is how we can read the centrality in the play of Quetzalcoatl, a serpent figure whose symbolic meaning is elusive or contradictory, but whose interpretation has to include transformation: "[j]ust as the serpent crawls out of its skin, so are all earthly things and beings subject to

¹¹ The stage directions to the Prelude read: "*The lights slowly rise on the altar to Coatlicue, the Aztec Goddess of Creation and Destruction. She is an awesome decapitated stone figure. She wears a serpent skirt and a huge necklace of dismembered hands and hearts, with a human skull at its center.*" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 9)

transformation" (92); this is how Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez writes about the uses of Quetzalcoatl by the experimental *Teatro Campesino* founded in 1965 in Delano, California and which has been influential for many Chicano writers, Moraga included.¹²

The Hungry Woman orchestrates an accumulation of emphatic representations and descriptions of women, and this very accumulation sends the spectator into a vortex of validations and invalidations of binaries (male/female; heteronormative/non-heteronormative; same/other; known/unknown). This is seen in the location of the play, a borderland where "queer folk were unilaterally sent into exile" after "hierarchies were established between male and female" (6); it is also visible in the opening figure of Coatlicue, appearing at the opening of the performance, contrasting with the titular Medea and true to her Aztec representation, "an awesome decapitated stone figure [wearing] a serpent skirt and a huge necklace of dismembered hands and hearts, with a human skull at its center" (9). This is a hybrid and cross-cultural combination of two myths but also a re-orientation of the reading made of the Coatlicue myth which is aligned with that of Anzaldúa: "unlike the rhetoric of Chicano nationalism, Anzaldúa's brand of new-age feminist nationalism privileges Coatlicue over her son, the Aztec war-god Huitzilopochtli" (Quintana 136). Transnational reconfigurations and superimpositions provoke formal distortions of the tragic modality which, as a result, loses its directionality. The return to order guaranteed both by myth (that of Euripides' and Seneca's *Medea*, where Medea leaves Corinth and returns to her originally programmatic ethnic otherness), and by tragedies (whose structure imposes reparation at the end), is postponed endlessly. This deconstruction of characterisation hacks at essentialism. The play suggests that identities are fluid, that roles are by definition artificial. An extension of these perceptions is the conception of power emerging from the performance. Theatre historian Thomas Postlewait has shown how Elizabethan playwrights have used the theatre to expose the "inherent theatricality" of power, reduced to a performance of itself: a world of rituals and of artifice (Postlewait 100-16). Similarly, Moraga interrogates the domination of power structures which hold onto ritual and institutional role-playing. The tragic transgression associated with Medea is pushed beyond its traditional limits by the playwright here. The very stage becomes a site of land claims and ritualistic retribution.

Queering Spatialities: Dystopian Stages, Tragic Exclusions, Ritualistic Retributions

This section examines how the stage is used by Moraga as a replacement for Indigenous stolen land, and as a site for the materialisation of the reappearance of both geography and of Autochthonous positionalities. M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade

¹² A collaborative and politically committed movement, the *Teatro Campesino* emerged during the Chicano civil rights and farmworker movements of the 1960s; it corresponded to a commitment to drama as social and cultural emancipation.

Mohanty (2010) have shown how the notion of the transnational can lay the emphasis on issues of space in relation with power relations (38-42). They crucially connect this first link between space and power with gender, among other factors: “to think the transnational in relation to the inherited uneven geographies of place and space would require holding in tension questions of power, gender, race, and space” (41). In other words, they argue that the spatial turn must be connected with the tools of decolonial theory in order to trace the resistance exerted by marginal positionalities in spaces constructed as dominant (see also Sandoval and De Souza Santos). Indeed, in Moraga’s play, Phoenix is called “Tamoachán” by the outcast women, meaning “we seek our home” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 24), belonging is articulated with marginality and claims to space, rather than to dwelling in a circumscribed territory.

Moraga’s play takes place in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world in which ethnicities have carved out pieces of the American land in order to entrench themselves in isolated nations, after what is recorded as an “ethnic civil war” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 6). The “playwright’s note and setting” reads: “They reside in what remains of Phoenix, Arizona, located in a kind of metaphysical border region between Gringolandia (U.S.A.) and Aztlán (Mechicano country). Phoenix is now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 6). This is immediately problematic as drama was born in Greece as a form of communal art, designed as a representation of the nation for the nation, of the community for the community (see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet). This was certainly the case when Euripides and later Seneca wrote their own versions of *Medea*: “Like that of Athens, Roman drama was constituent of a political, social and religious context” (Boyle in Seneca xvii). One can easily argue of course that in this combination of globalisation and fragmentation the audience will recognise the world we live in currently – Phoenix is here a signifier for a rebirth, however failed, but also the name of a city on the actual map of the United States. Still, the drama fails to associate all actors and the audience around a collective circle; the cross-cultural space in which Moraga works and thinks is also that of a circle irretrievably broken by colonialism and the partial loss of pre-Columbian rituals and languages.

The spatial configuration is indeed set under the sign of exclusion as the stage is constituted by what *Medea* calls a “ghetto” from which non-heteronormative individuals have been expelled. This is explicitly referenced numerous times: “And we made a kind of gipsy ghetto for ourselves” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 24); “MEDEA: You can’t beat Jasón, Luna. Isn’t this queer ghetto proof of that?” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 48) and “MEDEA: I want what’s best for my son. He’ll be forgotten here in this ghetto.” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 53) In so doing, the playwright extends, and politicises, the reach of the exclusion generically endured by the tragic protagonist. Indeed, the tragic pattern relies on the exclusion of the figure who has committed *amartia*, or *hubris*, and who must leave the stage either through death (as Agamemnon), or departure (as Oedipus). When Chac-Mool exclaims, “I gotta get outta here” (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 74), he

literalises the oppression of the tragic pattern, where the anomalous characters are destined to expulsion and exclusion. In a similar literalisation of figurative meaning, he associates his tragic fate to action ("I can't do this no more, Mom") and to social codes and conventions ("it's not normal") (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 74).

Although Chac-Mool partakes in it, the tragic pattern is heavily gendered and tends to exclude women and queer-identifying characters – starting with Medea but also Luna, her lover. As patriarchy has been confirmed by the power of Jasón, women have been relegated to the kitchens and non-heteronormative subjects have been sent to a limbo on the borders, including a psychiatric ward. This includes Medea herself, and Luna, who live together on the border between the United States and Aztlán, a toponym borrowed from Aztec mythology and corresponding to Mexico (see Arrizón). As a result, the entire performance takes place in a space of exclusion, as if the tragedy had already taken place even before the beginning of this very performance.¹³ Moraga probes what it means to adopt tragedy, i.e., the codes of a genre where order is restored after the expulsion, or sacrifice, of the anomalous subjectivity when one is deemed an anomalous subjectivity, a queer Chicana in this particular instance. The play's setting is most often a psychiatric hospital and a prison. This marginal materiality indicates the belatedness against which the action is set: it is too late for freedom or even constrained choices; everything has already happened, and the stage often turns into a mental space of remembering. This situation abolishes the here and now which ought to define and ground drama, in favour of a poetic performance of anamnesis, or remembering, and lamenting impossible changes.

Therefore, in spatial terms as well as in terms of characterisation, a line of transmission and a form of continuity in human experiences end in *The Hungry Woman* – as the main protagonist proclaims herself, "I am the last one to make this crossing, the border has closed behind me" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 46), associating both space and existence, and their common finality. If Moraga "signals the intersections of sexual practices and desires with other kinds of desire, such as investments in political and social transformation and emancipation" (Sugg 139), she also jettisons conceptions of drama as transformative. This has to do with her position both as a transnational subaltern, and Indigenous woman. For Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, the central issue with postcoloniality is that the discipline is grounded in anti-essentialism, while Autochthonous populations have based their claims to sovereignty on native identity but also claims to property, an issue addressed by Medea as she describes "a country that robs land from its daughters to give it to its sons unless of course they turn out to be jotos" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 75), using the Spanish word of abuse for 'gay men'. This, however, has partly been called into question by scholarship around Chicana/o expression, as for instance in the following quote: "whereas for some writers from the 1960s ethnicity figured as an end unto itself in

¹³ This recalls Toni Morrison's play entitled *Desdemona* (2012), where the Shakespearean characters (Othello, Desdemona, Emilia, Barbary (the nurse)), as well as others, are dwelling in a post-mortem world after the general massacre taking place at the end of *Othello*. It has been mentioned at the beginning of the article.

literary production, contemporary writers examine this same ethnicity with regard to its evolving qualities. No longer conceptualized as static and essentialist in nature, ethnicity is appreciated for its inherent diversity and in particular for its hybridity" (Lomelí, Márquez and Herrera-Sobek 286). In the next section, I examine the connection between Spanglish and corporeality, as emerging from indigeneity and constituting a space where avant-garde dramatical choices are made in order to challenge the role and response of audiences. After characterisation and setting, language is the third element where Medea's tragic transgression finds an extension but also a form of confusion corresponding to the impossibility of formulating clear messages in times of transnational, transcultural, diasporic mobilities and ensuing culture wars.

Audience Response: Eroticism and Collective Knowledge

The use of Spanglish¹⁴ is one of the crucial experimental elements in *The Hungry Woman*. Spanglish – Moraga shared it with Anzaldúa, with whom she collaborated on a number of literary and/or militant projects, proved to be pioneers. There is intense code-switching in the dialogues of *The Hungry Woman*. In this regard, the experimental becomes cross-cultural and transitional, and opens the possibility of translingual drama. The shift to Spanish has a wide range of connotations, from separating masculine and feminine orders and powers to ritualistic moments, where a creolised form of English and Spanish are channelled towards prayers, invocations, incantations: moments when language becomes performative and does what it says. The alternation sometimes marks agreement, in a contiguity which translates to continuity: "LUNA: He can hurt us, Medea. / MEDEA: Yo sé." (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 49). Here, Jasón's threatening presence is formulated in English, the tongue of hegemony, while the intimate knowledge of a vulnerable woman is expressed in Spanish.

Such a recurrent combination of the two languages doubles back on my previous analysis both of the in-betweenness of space, and of the deconstructed character. Here, another protean face to the main protagonist can be added, that of the Malinche, who is a character in another play by Cherríe Moraga, entitled *Mathematics of Love* (premiered at the Brava Theater Center, San Francisco in 2017, directed by Cherríe Moraga, and unpublished to this day) and the starting point of a number of reflections in the essay collection *Loving in the War Years*. The translator and interpreter to Hernan Cortes, whose son she bore, the Malinche is an apparently ambivalent figure: she is involved with the intellectual activity of translation, and with sexual submission to the conqueror (see Todorov). She is the very embodiment of cross-culturalism. This figure, and the re-writings it inspired, raise a number of issues in relation to the audience, who will have to belong to the same linguistic universe as Chicanos, in order to be able to

¹⁴ For instance: "Aztlán, how you betrayed me! Y acá me encuentro in this wasteland where yerbas grow bitter for lack of water, my face pressed to the glass of my own revolution like some huerfana abandonada." (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 15)

participate fully in the performance. The anti-realistic stance and largely ritualistic dimension of the performance suggest that Moraga is trying to create an active role for the audience to play. Indeed, in an interview with the co-director of the original performance, Adelina Anthony, she expresses her hopes for this dramaturgical experience to pave the way for "a future strategy of survival":

indigeneity, as limited and faulty as my process is in this regard, is on one level an oppositional position to the nation state of the United States, and on the other level, reclamation of what our people traditionally subscribe to and live by, in terms of values. And when you're talking about that, it's not nostalgic or retroactive, but instead it's trying to see what shapes and forms from the past work for a future strategy of survival and flourishing (Anthony 63)

The choice of theatre appears then as a cultural form which brings the community together and paves the way for a reflection on what the future could be; it is a democratic and collective practice which is a far cry from historical reconstitutions. It is tentative, but collective.

The collective knowledge which emerges from a performance of *The Hungry Woman* will be centred on the resistance offered by the body, and mostly by the vitality of the physical desire of the various characters. I finally contend in this section that looking at past figures is a way for Moraga to retrieve forms of representational eroticism in order to claim one's own intellectual explorations. This is illuminated by Audre Lorde's reflection on the "uses of the erotic":

As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move towards and through them.

The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (Lorde 9)

Lorde's reflections were known to Moraga, who collaborated with her on a few occasions, starting with the co-foundation of a publishing house, "Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press," in 1983 (Barbara Smith was the third co-founder). It is blatant from watching but also reading *The Hungry Woman* that the plot hinges on the physicality of acting. This corporeality is exposed and exhibited with the dancing, the costumes, the lighting. It is also present in the open descriptions of sexual intercourse voiced forth by Luna and Medea: "I don't even tell you what I can testify to in every sheet you drench with your desire. [...] My hands vanishing inside you" (Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 48). A sculptor, Luna becomes an alternative matrix whose creations include Medea herself, transformed under her hands.

This corporeality, which finds its way into the performance, touches upon the specificities of experimentation in drama: an absolute reduction to pure form is made

impossible by the materiality of the stage, by the concrete presence of bodies. Yet, these bodies can also acquire an intense artificiality. To return to the question pertaining to where the experimental is situated, I would argue that it can begin with a performance, by definition something that escapes intention and grapples with the materiality of art as well as its randomness and asperity. This is confirmed in the Americas by the versatility of performative arts from the 1960s to this day, in English-, Portuguese- and Spanish-speaking areas.¹⁵ The material existence of actors on the stage deconstructs discourse, just as the monologue by Luna is pre-empting Jasón's own account of what happened. The text's emphasis on waste, dissolution, discarding ("rot in this wasteland", Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 69) suggests that the various narratives are not only stitched back together, but also flaunted in all of their inadequacies, in all of their pastness, in all of their marginality.

Through engaging with the specific forms of experimenting in the play, we can see how the genres of drama and performance beg questions in terms of diasporic and cross-cultural studies. Literary texts have the ability to work on and through the bodies of readers.¹⁶ On stage, such thoroughness finds a distinct resonance. I have tried to show how experimental Chicana and African American female writers have both claimed a sense of cultural distinctiveness and experiment with various formal strategies towards bridging cultural distance. The experiential gap between "authentic" Autochthonous mythologies and the legacies of centuries of migrations and foreign domination produces formal innovations that both go backwards, and forwards ("The near future of a fictional past, dreamed only in the Chicana imagination" Moraga, *The Hungry Woman* 10). In conjuring performative songs and dances, and foregrounding a sacred chorus, the playwright relies on the essence of theatricality, which is to be pure existence, graspable only as a process and experience. Paying attention to the existence and experience of others is what literature and the arts do, thereby bringing awareness to otherness through distortions of ordinary language, and through the exhibition of bodies which are elsewhere excluded, expelled and invisibilised.

¹⁵ One can mention for instance The Living Theatre, Robert Wilson, Augusto Boal or more recently, Usted Está Aquí in Buenos Aires.

¹⁶ Tyler Bradway (2017) has connected the "affective agency" of formal innovation to a specifically queer tradition in literature suggesting this agency reveals "literary form's capacity to work on and through the bodies of readers, immanently restructuring our felt relations to the aesthetic object" (viii). I would like to thank Hannah Van Hove and Tessel Veneboer for the suggestion of such a relevant, final reference.

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