

Redeeming Acts: Religious Performance and *Indigenismo* in Cherríe Moraga's Feminist Revision of Chicano Activist Theater

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Abstract

Resumen

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In an essay entitled "Queer Aztlán: The Re-Formation of Chicano Tribe," Moraga cites an Anglo author who claims that the Chicano Nationalist Movement died in the seventies and has been reduced to a "handshake practiced by middle-aged men" (*The Last Generation* 148). The Chicana author mourns the continuing threats to the community: loss of language, marriage outside the community and other forms of assimilation, barrio violence, poisoning of the borderlands among other things. At the time of this writing, 1992, Moraga laments that the calls for the reunification of North American Indigenous peoples have not been extended to the Chicano nation and that "we have no organized national movement to respond to our losses" (148). However, the author explains that the movement didn't die in the seventies, rather, it was "deformed by the machismo and homophobia of that era and coopted by 'hispanicization'¹ of the eighties" (156).

Moraga levels her critique at the Movement for perpetuating a

machista view of women, based on centuries-old virgin-whore paradigm of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* and *Malintzin Tenepal*. Guadalupe represented the Mexican ideal of *la madre sufrida*, the long-suffering Indian mother, and

Malinche was *la chingada*, sexually stigmatized by her transgression of “sleeping with the enemy,” Hernán Cortes (157).

She explains how these figures silenced women in the movement and encouraged them to be sexually passive. Chicano/a gay males and lesbians were excluded or closeted. Moraga recalls how the vision of a ‘Queer *Aztlán*’ took shape for her during a conversation with poet Ricardo Bracho as “[a] Chicano homeland that could embrace *all* its people, including its *jotería*”ⁱⁱ (original emphasis, 147). Its exclusionary tactics aside, for its commitment to Chicanos, Moraga sees the Chicano Movement as redeemable and her work as an artist as contributing to the goal of restoring the integrity of the Chicano people, of recuperating that which has been lost through 500 years of conquest. “For me,” she says, “‘*El Movimiento*’ has never been a thing of the past, it has retreated into subterranean uncontaminated soils awaiting resurrection in a ‘queerer,’ more feminist generation” (148).

A central aspect of Moraga’s vision of a viable movement is *Indigenismo*, valuing the rights of Indigenous peoples and their traditional beliefs and ways of life. She explains that, even though many Chicanos lack accurate information about their tribal affiliations, most claim the heritage and would subscribe to the ideals of *Indigenismo*. Moraga’s work in general has interrogated the patriarchal capitalist family structure, exposed its homophobia and oppression of women and courageously made “*familia* from scratch”. As an alternative she discusses a “tribal” model, which

is a form of community-building that can accommodate socialism, feminism, and environmental protection. In an ideal world, tribal members are responsive and responsible to one another and the natural environment. Cooperation is rewarded over competition. Acts of violence against women and children do not occur in

secret and perpetrators are help accountable to the rest of the community.
'Familia' is not dependent upon male-dominance or heterosexual coupling.
Elders are respected and women's leadership is fostered, not feared. (166-7)

In this paper, I argue that Moraga's sequential plays, *Heroes and Saints* and *Watsonville: Some Place Not Here* are representations, ritual enactments if you will, of a regeneration of the Chicano Nationalist Movement informed by feminism and *Indigenismo*. Stemming from the politically engaged tradition of Luis Valdez's *Teatro Campesino*, that was initially linked to the United Farm Workers Union of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta and later with the Chicano Movement, these two works are based on historical labor uprisings. As such, the plays function as archives of the Chicano experience and imaginary that are performed as indigenous ritual acts of cultural remembrance, spiritual redemption and feminist reparation. The play of tensions between performance and faith, religion and activism, at the heart of these feminist dramas allows Moraga to articulate her vision of the role of spiritual belief and *Indigenismo* in regenerating a viable Chicano Nationalist movement.

While Moraga employs Liberation Theology as a model that "counters a culture of passivity," her vision of a decolonizing spirituality enacts a broader critique of religious practice and dogma, she says,

All aspects of religion and religious law that endanger women's lives, limit the full expression of our humanity (men and women) in terms of our sexuality, and that requires us to accept injustice in hopes of a just afterlife is not a spiritual practice, but a materialist oppressive practice that serves (in the case of the Catholic Church) Capitalist Patriarchy. (Oliver-Rotger)

Mingling the traditions of the religious autos performed by the Catholic Church in Mexico in the 1500's and indigenous ritual dance/dramas, Valdéz claimed that "Chicano theater is religion" (Valdez 354). In both works, Catholic and Indigenous religious images and practices are employed oppositionally against patriarchal capitalist structures. For instance, the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, invoking a religious and nationalistic fervor dating back to the arrival of the Spanish in Mexico, is powerfully and self-consciously employed in ways that empower women and highlight the icon's indigenous roots. Likewise, the religious practices of fasting and pilgrimage traditionally associated with Catholic belief and Chicano non-violent activism are recast.

Thus, Moraga awakens sleeping indigenous gods or ancestors in her ritual acts very differently than the way Luis Valdéz did in the early Chicano Movement, which uncritically reproduced misogynist ideologies and limiting roles for women. On the other hand, the remarkable diversity of characters is key in Moraga's plays, in particular the playwright's inclusion of a variety of queer Chicano folk and her placement of women at the forefront of the political activism. She takes women out of the traditional roles of mother, wife, girlfriend and other satellites of male players to which Valdéz relegated them.ⁱⁱⁱ

The first of Moraga's sequential plays, *Heroes and Saints*, takes place in an imaginary town, McLaughlin, couched in California's real San Joaquin Valley like an island in a sea of patch-worked agricultural plots. Moraga wrote this work in response to the strike and grape boycott of the United Farm Workers Union.^{iv} The event that motivated the playwright in particular was the brutal beating of Dolores Huerta during a press conference where she protested the use of pesticides in 1988 not long after César Chávez had completed his 36-day fast. The play opens with an unforgettable spectacle: children in *calavera* (skull) masks erect a

small cross in a grape field where the body of a child hangs silhouetted in the day's first light. Then the sun, moving above the horizon, bathes the child and the play's central character, Cerezita, in its glowing light. Cerezita is an adolescent Chicana born with a head but no body due to the pesticides her pregnant mother was exposed to while she worked the fields. She is able to move with the help of a motorized "raite," (ride) a table-like vehicle she controls with her chin. While her visual image is startling and miraculous, so is her humanity and the brilliance of her mind, she is the most intellectual, courageous and sensitive character in the play, a prophet. The juxtaposition of the crucified child and Cerezita will be repeated in the play's final spectacle.

Guy Debord theorized the spectacle in order to describe the way postmodern capitalist society "privileges appearance over reality, creating a socio-economic reality whose currency depends not upon objects, but upon fetishized, marketable images" (Schlossman, 48). David Schlossman, in his study of activist theatre and performance, notes that for some critics, Debord's claim leaves little room for intervention in the "all-encompassing system" (49). Schlossman sees contemporary societies as dynamic and performance as a principle "strategy for infiltration" (49), particularly "when frontal assault isn't possible" (64). Diana Taylor defines spectacle as "not an image but a series of social relations mediated by images," which "ties individuals into an economy of looks and looking" (13). Moraga uses the shocking spectacles to heighten the consciousness of her audience, her characters use them to oppose corporate power and draw attention to the crisis in their community.

The next scene we see is a reporter, Ana Perez, with her cameraman, in front of the house and the child crucifix covering the "ritualized protest," who mentions that the "Union of Campesinos" is being investigated for the "crime." She tries to speak with Dolores, Cerezita's mother, but is stopped by Amparo, an activist neighbor and the character based on Dolores

Huerta.^v Amparo explains that she doesn't want to talk to the reporter because Dolores sees reporting as a circus, "the way people look at someone's life as if it couldn't happen to them" (93). We find that Dolores lost her husband, Arturo, due to the publicity Cerezita received as a baby and now she does not let the girl be seen in public. Here the camera turns a life into spectacle, puts it on display, as in a museum or sideshow exhibit with a specific "economy of looks and looking" where viewer and viewed are kept in dichotomous relation to one another. Amparo tries to talk to the reporter about the growers' use of pesticides, but Perez steers her back to the issue of Cere and then to the boy on the cross. She cannot understand why someone would be so "cruel" as to "steal him from his deathbed" (94). The spectacle's intended meaning is lost on the reporter who cannot even read its religious semantics, the idea of a kind of sacrifice of innocents for others' sins. Instead Perez voices the reverence for the dead or the deeper need to hide death away prominent in the dominant culture. Amparo explains that the children are always dead already from the poison when they appear on the crosses, saying, "If you put the children in the ground, the world forgets about them. Who's gointu see them, buried in the dirt?" (94). Perez, acting as DeBord would predict, in accordance with the spectacular society's capitalist market mentality, sees the act as a "publicity stunt" and says she'll edit out Amparo's comments.

Here the slippage between the oppositional effect of the spectacle represents the distance between classes and cultures, between workers and growers. Instead of being understood as an indicator of the growers' crime, the spectacle is read as a criminal use of religious symbols and dead bodies. In her elegant study of this work, Cynthia Degnan examines the way characters vie for power through visibility and invisibility, and the ensuing struggle for possession and manipulation of the camera that reproduces images (and performance, I would add). (140)

Perez, as she wields the almighty camera and the power to edit people out, she is also responsible for mediating images or performances for her audience. She interprets Amparo's Spanish phrases into English, but is unable to interpret her overall message. The reporter's inability to read the spectacle's critique is ironic since her name and Spanish fluency imply a possible common heritage. On the other hand, in contemporary reality where most are accustomed to accepting surface meanings uncritically, it seems natural. Perez's report, as she checks her lipstick and talks with her unseen cameraman, is also shown as a rather hollow performance. At this point, she does nothing that could be called investigative reporting; she doesn't have any idea or real interest in what is going on in the community. On subsequent coverages, however, Perez becomes more informed and presents the situation from the perspective of the McLaughlin community. For instance, Perez records Amparo's entire speech and, when the police begin to beat the woman, attempts to intervene, yelling for them to stop.

Even if Perez could make the spectacle's subversive message comprehensible for the public, we suspect she would not be allowed to air it since there are more powerful interests than she and the majority of her viewers, the growers. These corporate owners of the fields are represented in helicopters and crop duster planes that hover over the fields. Their inaccessibility and invisibility invest them with seemingly absolute power, making their crimes invisible and therefore unpunishable. And they are armed. After Amparo's t.v. appearance, they shoot through her window. When she asks who did it, Cerezita is told, "Who knows? The guys in the helicopters. . . God" (96). Who can be blamed today, when corporations become invisible, hiding behind lawyers and accountants making settlements in order not to admit guilt or recognize wrongs?

The dynamics of this twentieth century spectacle reflect the role of performance in colonial objectives in the Americas and shows how these power relations are reproduced. Taylor Explains that colonization was facilitated by

two discursive moves that work to devalue native performance, even while the colonizers were deeply engaged in their own performative project of creating a “new” Spain from an (idealized) image of the “old”: (1) the dismissal of indigenous performance traditions as episteme, and (2) the dismissal of “content” (religious belief) as bad objects, idolatry. These discourses simultaneously contradict and sustain each other. The first posits that performances, as ephemeral, nonwritten phenomena, cannot serve to create or transmit knowledge. Thus, all traces of peoples without writing have disappeared. Only divine revelation, [...] can help observers [...] recount the past by fitting it into preexisting accounts (such as the biblical). The second discourse admits that performance does indeed transmit knowledge, but insofar as that knowledge is idolatrous and opaque, performance itself needs to be controlled or eliminated.

(33)

This oppressive system is contrasted by Moraga’s decolonizing dramas where the actors’ transformation is primary over the message to outsiders.

Cerezita also has much to say about the cause and far more eloquently than Amparo. But she knows that her body, as it is, is a powerful image and she begs her mother to let her go out saying, “If people could see me, ‘ama, things would change (113). While visual images may indeed carry more currency than words in spectacular society, those with the power affix meaning to them. The spectacle of Cere’s body ought to inspire enough public outrage to force

the growers to stop poisoning workers and clean up their community. Yet, because of the marginalization of her community from the dominant culture, those who would have power to influence action will not, without mediation, possess the motivation or the tools to comprehend the meaning of her affliction. A related phenomenon occurred in the reception of *Watsonville...* Moraga explains,

Corporate Amerika is not ready for a people of color theater that holds members of its audiences complicit in the oppression of its characters. Who would buy a ticket to see that? Audiences grow angry (although critics as their spokespeople may call it "criticism") when a work is not written for them, when they are not enlisted as a partner in the protagonists' struggle, when they may be asked to engage through self-examination rather than identification, when they must question their own centrality. [...] I turn to these words to discuss the politics of trying to write and produce theater in a country where the people you speak of, with, and for are a theatrical non-event or worse in "real life" are the object of derision and scape-goating. (Oliver-Rotger)

As the situation grows more and more desperate, the crucifixes multiply in the fields making them appear like cemeteries and the patrol helicopters become more frequent. When Cerezita's sister's baby dies from the poisoning, Dolores begins to lose her mind and even prays to the girl atop her *raite* thinking she is the Virgin of Guadalupe. This gives Cereza an idea, she had orchestrated the protest of the child-crosses and now the girl mounts her own spectacle. Directing her performance to her community, Cerezita is assured of the proper response: collective action. The children cut her hair and don her with a blue starred mantle like the Virgin of Guadalupe, her *raite* decorated like an altar. Upon seeing her daughter embodying the Virgin,

Dolores falls to her knees, letting the girl pass over the threshold to outside. Cereza interrupts Father Juan as he is giving mass to the people to speak her apocalyptic vision saying, “You are the miracle people because today, this day, that red memory will spill from inside you and flood this valley *con coraje*. And you will be free. Free to name this land Madre. *Madre Tierra. Madre Sagrada. Madre. . . Libertad*. The radiant red mother...rising” (148). The protest brings everyone together; even Ana Perez joins in the fight. As they enter the grape fields, gunfire is heard and the people burn them in an act of expiation. Jorge Huerta describes this final climax as a, “cleansing through fire, just as indigenous cultures practice ritual fires to cleanse their lives and signify a new beginning” (167). The image of the people’s blood covering the land invokes the Aztec notion that human sacrifice was necessary to establish equilibrium between nature, the gods and humankind. Cerezita uses the Virgin so familiar to her people to effectively unite them, but she is clearly invoking *Tonantzin*, the Aztec fertility goddess, Mother Earth, cleansed of poison and renewed through sacrifice.

According to Moraga, Cerezita’s character was inspired by the headless character in Valdéz’s first play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1964). Valdéz’s bodiless character is male (even though he no longer possesses genitals), and the oldest son of a poor Chicano family who seeks a body so he can “ride” again. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano explains gender roles in the play:

If the male subject was represented as a possible route out of poverty through activism in the Chicano Movement, woman was represented as responsible for it, through her sexuality. The daughter, like the mother, played the passive, self-sacrificing role embodying love/devotion, serving the head and the other males in the family throughout the play. At the end, she exchanged the role of *La Virgen/*

for that of *La Malinche*. She became pregnant by her boyfriend and gave birth to another bodiless head, perpetuating the cycle of misery and poverty. (136)

Clearly in dialogue with Valdéz's head character, Moraga sees Cerezita as a Chicana everywoman, since her body is so often denied or out of her control. It is for this reason that the young woman struggles to "wholly embody herself as female..." (Huerta 69). Moraga explores the sexuality of virtually each character and she does not deny Cerezita hers. There is an unmistakable sexual tension between Cere and Father Juan. Aside from discomfort Cere's deformity causes him, the man doesn't know how to deal with his impulses since, as a priest, he believes his body is not his own. After an awkward sexual encounter between them in which Juan fails to comprehend her sexual feeling, Cerezita tells him, "I didn't want your body. All I wanted was for you to make me feel like I had a body because, the fact is, I don't. I was denied one. But for a few minutes, a few minutes before you started *thinking*, I felt myself full of fine flesh filled to the bones in my toes..." (144). This sensuality, coupled with the power of her mind and vision, make Cerezita less a desexualized saint, as Dolores would have her, and more of a revolutionary hero, as Juan calls her in the sequel to this play, *Watsonville...* Well versed in both Christian and Mayan scripture, she prefers the Pre-Colombian texts, she understands the way Catholicism oppresses. Cerezita rejects the Virgin as the model of purity for women to imitate but never attain and commits a courageous transgression in donning the Virgin's mantle. She exploits the symbolic power of her "body," adding to it that of the Virgin of Guadalupe, not because she wants to become a saint, but she wants to save her people from their environment, which is toxic in every way.

Moraga has said that she believes that "revolutionary struggle must be generated and re-generated by spiritual faith,[...] *pura fe*" not the institution of the church (Oliver-Rotger).

Cerezita's performance and her martyrdom, wearing Guadalupe's mantle and invoking the indigenous goddess of the Earth, is a ritualistic recovery of an ancient and revolutionary past that regenerates itself in the Chicano ongoing struggle. We see her death not only in the name of a revolutionary cause, but also as an indigenous ritual sacrifice that cleanses nature and reawakens the Earth goddess regenerating her tribe. Cerezita returns in a sense in *Watsonville...* Her death is not in vain, as we see it lead others to liberation. She may not be able to embody herself physically, but she allows the past to be embodied in her, invoking all that Guadalupe signifies, centuries of collective struggle, made present in this acts inspires deep faith in the people and this is what will sustain and regenerate them.

The notion of a regenerating revolution is tied to Moraga's thematics of *Día de los Muertos* or the Day of the Dead, an indio-catholic celebration. Reflecting the complexity of the *Mechicano* heritage and spirituality, the celebration is incredibly pervasive in Chicano drama. Just as *Heroes and Saints* opened with children performing their macabre protest in skull masks, *Watsonville...* opens with Dolores wearing a skull mask dancing alone or with some invisible partner. In spite of her husband's ridicule, she prepares enchiladas to place on Cere's tomb; in recognizing the presence of death, she is performing a sacred and ancient ritual. Octavio Paz describes the Mexican concept of death in this way:

The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain or irony. (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*)

Día de los Muertos, often viewed as a syncretic celebration has been conflated through colonial violence with the Catholic All Saints' Day, a time when spirits of the dead return to the living. Thus, it should be understood principally as an Aztec tradition of recognizing the continuity of life and death. In fact, death is a central part of the creation myth: the Aztecs are created by the plumed serpent god of the wind, *Quetzalcóatl*, who pours his blood on the bones of the dead, reanimating them. Had he not stumbled and damaged the bones, we would all be immortal. (25 Carmichael and Sayer) Aztec gods required the sacrifice of human hearts to maintain nature in balance. Moraga invokes all these dimensions in her final scene.

Thus, *Día de los Muertos* and its generative creation myth signal the power of recuperating history. Chicano culture, like all cultures, depends on the preservation of history and a set of myths that unify its members. The Chicano Movement invested tremendous energy in this project for they saw it as essential to their survival. The artist's purpose is to reanimate the past in ways that allow it to nurture those living in the present. Moraga's plays also imply here that cultural history and myths must be lived, enacted, in order to ensure the future survival of a people, particularly if the codices can be burned. Furthermore, rituals must be not only performed, but reformed or recast for each generation. Moraga's dramatic work reforms the performances based on the Chicano Movement's "selective memory" on which Valdéz relied (Moraga, *The Last Generation*, 157). The *Día de los Muertos* celebration also involves performance: people wear costumes and masks, build elaborate and exorbitant altars to the deceased with their favorite dishes, objects, toys, alcohol as well as their photos or skeletons made of clay that represent them in all kinds of comedic scenes. The people wait for the dead in the cemetery with food, copal, candles, the Aztec flowers associated with the dead, *zempasutchil*. Whether individuals believe their beloved dead visit them or not, they come together as a

community and perform these rituals in recognition of who they are and the constant presence of death. They allow themselves to embody the past, let it live in them. These rituals, like the protest spectacles, like Moraga's drama, are collective acts of remembering that unite Chicanos, valorize their heritage and ensure their future.

Moraga remarks that Toni Morrison once described the past as infinite. The statement struck her, so at odds with the "American" notion that forgetting the past would allow one to invent any dreamed-of future. Moraga describes her work as an artist as culturally recuperative,

Because history in all its limitlessness determines the future. And unraveling history, the multitude of versions of the story, the story from multifarious perspectives, this is limitless. And how great is our task to remember if we are people of color artists, if we are artists without a written history, if we are artists exiled from our ancestral lands. Because our version of the story has never been told. Still. Finding the path to memory is my task as an artist. Writing for the "Ancestors" as playwright August Wilson has said. That's my job. To remember ancestral messages, to counter the U.S. culture of forgetfulness. (Oliver-Rotger)

The sequel to *Heroes and Saints*, *Watsonville: Some Place Not Here*, is a fictional drama based on three real events: the women's strikes against Green Giant cannery in Watsonville, California of 1985-87, the 7.1 earthquake of 1989 and the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe on the face of an oak tree in Pinto Lake County Park in 1992. Unlike *Heroes and Saints*, which uses spectacle and ritual sacrifice to effect change, this play relies less on the power of images, depicting religious practices such as fasting and pilgrimage that lead to personal transformation. I read the two plays as parts of a whole in that Cerezita's prophetic vision and her martyrdom in *Heroes and Saints* initiates a transformation in other characters that, in *Watsonville...*, sustains

them and their continued social and spiritual liberation. The play begins sometime after the climactic rebellion of *Heroes and Saints* and often refers to the events of the earlier play. We come to know what has happened to individuals after the riot. However, there is no reason to believe that the revolt led to any material change for the members of the community. Rather, their transformations are internal, intellectual and spiritual. Based on *Indigenismo*, on traditional values applied to contemporary needs, both plays link Catholic beliefs and practices to the Pre-Colombian past. Moraga's inclusive vision points to her interest in Chicanos forging global coalitions based on "tribal" values (see "Queer *Aztlán*..."165-7). Watsonville is a site where the playwright explains, "Indian memory is allowed place and finds articulation through the bodies of its own displaced residents: Mexican, *Xicano*, African-American, Vietnamese, Samoan. . . (vii)" Chicano performance of Indian memory becomes a decolonizing ritual, a catalyst for individual and communal social liberation.

Watsonville... begins with Dolores alone after all the members of her family have either died or left. She working in a cannery with Amparo and other Chicana women. A strike has begun over ever-worsening labor conditions. Juan has left the priesthood and joined an organization based on Liberation Theology. As in *Heroes and Saints*, the strike lingers on over months, draining the community's already limited resources. Once again, outside pressure in the form of a new law threatens to divide the Chicano community into those with legal working papers and those without. The law, "prohibits illegal immigrants and their children from obtaining employment, education, and all social services, including non-emergency health care" (*Watsonville*... 84).^{vi} The strike looks as if it might fall apart and a worker's son, beaten at a protest, falls into a coma. At this moment of crisis, Dolores has a vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe whose image later appears on an oak tree. The vision is a conflation of recent

Chicano and Pre-Hispanic imagery. Accompanied by chanting of Nahuatl, Aztec language, the Virgin appears to Dolores as a *campesina* woman dressed in white carrying an empty cradle. The Virgin also dons a crown of stars and words, which the illiterate woman can't understand. She then disappears into a multitude of women (69). The Church refuses to sanction the image and calls Dolores's vision a "personal revelation" that they interpret as a call for her to forgive her husband's cheating ways. For probably the first time, she does not accept the Church's version and interprets it instead as a call for her participation in the strike, which she had resisted since the protests depicted in the earlier play. Dolores's vision is a sign of her developing awareness, of the channeling of her religious faith into the cause of social liberation. In *Heroes and Saints*, she is the most religious and the most alienated from the community. Rather than bringing her closer to her community, her religious faith kept her from fully participating in the strike or letting her daughter do so. Now, like Juan who has shed his priest's frock, Dolores's faith is transferred from some other-worldly icon on an altar, to one anchored in her reality and to the Chicano revolutionary struggle. The vision inspires her to act; she begins a private hunger strike, claiming the Virgin wants a sacrifice. At this point the double valence of the word 'sacrifice' is brought into relief; indigenous ritual and Catholic penance are both evoked. After failing to convince Dolores to stop her fast, Amparo joins her and enlists other women so they can make it a public protest.

The church officials refuse to authenticate the images of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the sequoia trunk because there are multiple images. This claim, that there should only be one saintly image, echoes the early church's indictment of indigenous religion as pagan, principally due to its multiple gods as opposed to the "civilized" Catholic monotheism. Moraga uses the apparition to drive home her vision of a Chicano Movement that is more tolerant of the plurality of its

community. We see one aspect of this plurality in the tension between faith and performance played out among the workers. There are many views regarding the apparition; many place prayers, photos, and candles at its base, while others feel it is a distraction to their work. Some suggest that they use the Virgin's appearance to inspire the workers, but the reverent and those non-believers who respect it cannot accept this idea. The strike negotiations create further divisiveness: it seems as if the factory is ready to negotiate all the workers' demands, but there is one catch: the union has to give up the illegal workers. The company will not stand up against the new law. The strikers argue amongst themselves and cannot seem to resolve their differences, when Dolores suggests the idea of joining with the fieldworkers in a pilgrimage to the tree, affirming their solidarity in protest of the new law.

Aside from invoking the palimpsest-like symbolism of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the tree indicates a clear connection with and a valorization of the indigenous past. The initial historical appearance of the Virgin, where she told Juan Diego she wanted her church built, is thought to be Tepeyac, the ancient pilgrimage site of the Aztec Earth goddess, *Tonantzin*. In the play, Susana, a Chicana lesbian helping with the strike says of the tree:

Así que this acorn is the future, a future you and I will never see. In the same way...this old tree is our history. The very acorn that birthed this tree spilled off of some momma oak the Ohones were worshipping five hundred years ago. Do you have any idea what this place looked like when all it knew was *indios*? [...] Paradise, Lucha, true paradise. And not like some postcard from Santa Cruz. There were marshes, savannah, redwood forests for days. Elk, antelope, deer, coyotes. And every kind of sea bird imaginable. You put your faith in the workers *y bueno*, I do, too, *pero creo en algo más también*. I'm praying to this

old oak cuz it's the only thing that seems right to do right now. Call her *Tonantzín*, Guadalupe, call her whatever you want. This is as close to a God as its gets for me" (89)

The strikers agree to participate in the pilgrimage, some on their knees, others not, some with Guadalupe in their hearts, some *Tonantzín*, some the revolutionary spirit of their precursors. As they begin their journey growing in number, the strikers, of almost entirely indigenous descent, are performing the pilgrimage of their Pre-Colombian ancestors. When they reach the tree, Dolores, an illiterate woman unaccustomed to speaking, addresses the massive gathering. As she is speaking, the rumbling of an earthquake is heard. Her words, couched in a kind of religious devotion to the Virgin, convey a sophisticated and moving affirmation of Chicano reality and rightful place in the United States: "Plant yourself here," she says,

Like that holy tree, *tan fuerte, tan Viejo, tan sagrado, ustedes tienen raíces* that spread all the way to México. *Esta ley nueva no vale nada*. They think they can kill *la huelga* with this law *pero seguimos siendo huelguistas* whether we got a union or not. This land is the same land as México. *Todo es América unida*. *Ahora, mi raza, come with me, on your knees si pueden, para demostrar a la Virgen y a toda américa que somos gente de fe y fuerza"* (98).

The terrific earthquake decimates its epicenter, Watsonville, but the people gathered in the oak grove, some 10,000, are saved.

The dynamics of the spectacle are not central as they were in *Heroes and Saints*, rather the focus here is on ritual purification enacted in the fasts and the performative recovery of indigenous past in the pilgrimage. César Chávez emphasized penance, sacrifice and purification in fasting and pilgrimage for strikers. Rather than a form of pressure against growers, he said, "I

undertook this fast because my heart was filled with grief and pain for the sufferings of farm workers. The Fast was first for me and then for all of us in the Union. It was a Fast for non-violence and a call to sacrifice” (Valdéz 387). Of the Delano march he explained,

The penitential procession is also in the blood of the Mexican-American, and the Delano march will therefore be one of penance – public penance fore the sins of the strikers, their own personal sins as well as their yielding perhaps to feelings of hatred and revenge in the strike. They hope by the march to set themselves at peace with the Lord, so that the justice of their cause will be purified of all lesser motivation. (Valdéz 386)

Inner purification is also the focus at the end of Moraga’s play. No one from outside the community witnesses the Dolores’s speech or the strikers’ performance; outsiders hear about the miraculous event on the news. This move from spectacle to ritual performance signifies how revolutionary action can lead to inner transformation in the people. The action of the entire play takes place in the oak grove, which acts as a sacred space, a ‘liminal’ space^{vii}, if you will, that neither-here-nor-there indicated by the title, *Some Place Not Here*, where revolutionary transformation happens. The indigenous view of nature as sacred is enacted here; it is seen as a redeeming force rather than one to be kept at bay. Juan, who witnessed horrific atrocities in *Heroes and Saints* and turned his faith to the people for whom he fought, finds “God” in this experience. He says:

The voices in my head have never allowed me peace. You pitied that in me, I know, how I lived always in my head, separate. . . apart. But just days ago, I stood in the midst of a moving crowd and I could not be spotted apart from it. I

found God, *Señora*. God in the dissolution of self. God in the disappearance of me into a we so profound, the earth shook open to embrace us (101).

Here religious language is used to describe the revolutionary liberation of the individual alienated by the capitalist “culture of forgetting.” Like Dolores, Juan is miraculously spiritually united with his people in a new way; he is changed as a result of being a part of their collective act.

At the gathering marking the end of his fast, Chávez talked of the union as a family bound together by their common struggle and exalted sacrifice for others as the highest act of “manliness”. His final statement went like this: “*To be a man is to suffer for others. God help us to be men!*” (original emphasis, Valdéz 387). Moraga’s work as a whole speaks to all those left out of this call to action. While the playwright, no doubt, pays homage to the immensely heroic César Chávez,^{viii} the union leader is only one of the many martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their community in various ways that are honored in these dramatic works.

Watsonville: Some Place Not Here portrays not only the manifold contributions of women and homosexuals in the movement, but also their revelations and transformations that are a result of their communal action, their invocation of the indigenous past. For instance, in the case of Dolores, whose devotion to the Virgin becomes empowering and radical in a feminist sense, contrasting sharply with the way Guadalupe has often been used by the church and by politically conservative groups in oppressive ways. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, “*Guadalupe* has been used by the church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and *mexicanos* and Chicanos, [...] to make us docile and enduring” (31). On the other hand, Dolores recasts herself from the long-suffering-Indian-mother role she played in *Heroes and Saints*. Other female characters transform themselves as well. Lucha, a divorced woman and

mother, is awakened to true love through her lesbian relationship with Susan. Susan, for her part, finds herself welcomed back into the community from which her schooling had distanced her. In the play's final scene, she stands in the sacred grove and performs a ritual chant meant to take her back to her indigenous past:

I am going back before the burial
before they laid my town to rest
...into your arms, the arms of my teacher
that is not home, but the place of journeying,
transformation, *revolución*.
...I am going back
to live in those days in resurrection of the past
of the ancient
of the miraculous
I am going back to find my future. (105)

At this moment, Susan is magically one with Cerezita or some other indigenous ancestor or angel of death, for she stands illuminated at the foot of Dolores' bed. The woman calls to her and she responds, "I grew wings, 'Amá. Flew over the prison walls, and came to you. I heard you were dying."

In order to fill in the gaps of its "selective memory" and resuscitate the *Teatro Campesino* and the Chicano Movement itself in all its revolutionary potential, Moraga demonstrates how all Chicanos will have to participate in its tribal reformation. In *Watsonville...*, groups collaborate creatively inventing comedic *actos* and rap songs to entertain and motivate their ranks. *Heroes and Saints* and *Watsonville: Some Place Not Here* represent

the active participation of women, gay men and lesbians in the movement since its earliest days, and express Moraga's Indigenist vision of a more tolerant and inclusive Chicano movement, one that extends globally to form coalitions with other native cultures and that promotes living harmoniously with nature.

Notes

ⁱ A homogenizing term Moraga explains was "superimposed upon us by Reagan-era Bureacrats" that erases difference and indicates a desire for assimilation. This phenomenon is described in Moraga's "Art in América con Acento".

ⁱⁱ Chicano term for gay and lesbians, recovered here from its pejorative usage.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a detailed discussion of these see Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano and Yolanda González-Broyles's *El teatro campesino*.

^{iv} Though the workers couldn't prove it at the time, it has been established that pesticides were (and are) causing disease in their communities. Few people know that the boycott continues today (Huerta 67).

^v Moraga's characters' names, aside from being real Hispanic names, mean 'Pains' (Dolores) and 'Shelter' (Amparo) signaling two traditional qualities associated with women, mothers in particular and perhaps the playwright's feminist critique of the absence of female developed roles in Valdéz's work. In these, male characters often played generic or allegorical roles, such as the *campesino* or the company foreman. For women, *Tierra* (the Land or Earth) or the mother were common.

^{vi} This law is reminiscent of California's Proposition 187, which became a law through a vote on a 1994 ballot and was later found to be unconstitutional.

^{vii} Term coined by Victor Turner to explain the ambiguous space of communal ritual that can liberate individuals from everyday awareness and effect social change.

^{viii} *Heroes and Saints* is dedicated to Chávez's "memory and legacy".

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