

## The Memory of Land in Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints*

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In Chicano tradition empowerment is connected with the revitalizing power of memory. Chicano communities have been victims of systemic oppression that has provoked Chicana and Chicano poets, writers, and dramatists to confront discriminative structures, naturally directing these artists to revisit their roots in order to find strength in their cultural heritage. For many, the return to their cultural legacy has an important geographical dimension since the idea of Aztlán—the mythic origin place of the Aztec people, believed to be located in what is the southwest US today—has played an important role in Chicano cultural imagination. Chicana feminist authors, including Ana Castillo (1953-), Sandra Cisneros (1954-), and Cherríe Moraga (1952-) among others, reassess this tradition as in their writings the examination of the past becomes inextricably intertwined with an exploration of the Chicana body. Memory, however, also plays a crucial role in nature-oriented literature, especially when the work addresses the harmful effects of human intervention in the environment. Beyond having an explicit geographical aspect, in environmental literature, memory often appears as a transformational theme aiming for healthier surroundings.

In Moraga's play *Heroes and Saints* (1994), the corporeal and the geographical aspects of memory are of utmost importance. The play dramatizes how a land wrecked by agriculture's excessive use of pesticides transforms into a liberating place for its people, a community of Mexican Americans who suffer from economic oppression, racism, AIDS, as well as toxic poisoning, which predominantly affects the female reproductive system. Critical studies have extensively dealt with the theme of empowerment in Moraga's work with a focus on Chicana corporeality;<sup>1</sup> however, the extent to which structures of land and place shape what Moraga calls "flesh and blood experiences" (Anzaldúa and Moraga in *This Bridge* 23) have remained unexplored so far.

This study argues for the central role of the human body in a particular place. In accordance with Edward S. Casey's claim that "place itself is no fixed thing" (286), this study takes its central tenet the idea that in order to understand place, it is necessary to view it in relation to the body and acknowledge that like place, the body is "something organic and ever-changing" (331). The non-fixity of both place and body gives hope for a transformation to establish more just structures. In this essay I aim to explore

how *Heroes and Saints* reconceptualizes dominant structures that shape the body, acknowledging that if we are to perceive the body as part of a larger, dynamic whole, the examination of empowerment must attend to both the body and its surrounding place.

Critical discussions of geographical dimensions in Moraga's work so far have been limited to the analyses of spatiality. It has been recognized that Chicana authors' works demonstrate particular awareness of the power space has on the lives of their communities, laying emphasis mainly on how categories of race, gender, sexuality, and class contribute to the production of that space.<sup>2</sup> Given the explicit environmental aspect of the land in *Heroes and Saints*, I suggest that it is useful to move from the discussion of space to a more detailed discussion of place in Moraga's work. Yi-Fu Tuan differentiates between the two terms defining space as "more abstract than place" as he argues that "[w]hat begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value" (6), while he also maintains that the two terms are not mutually exclusive and require each other for definition. Tuan's understanding of place as more specific than space and as something particularly meaningful and knowable for the human is productive for the discussion of Moraga's notion of the land. In her prose and poetry collection *The Last Generation* (1993), which already anticipates the playwright's preoccupation with the state of the land in *Heroes and Saints*, Moraga asserts that land is "more than the rocks and trees, the animal and plant life. . . . For immigrant and native alike, land is also the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live. For women, lesbians and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies" (173). The body is depicted as the physical expression of the subtle and complex structures of place here: not only categories of race, gender, sex, and class define the body, but as Moraga points out with a warning gesture, the body is prone to diseases developing as a consequence of environmental contamination, since the particular conditions of the workplace, the dwelling, or polluted water all shape the human body. I understand Moraga's *land* in light of Tuan's stress on the specificity of place, and while using both terms, I acknowledge that the meaning of land also contains particular places, such as workplace and dwelling. Thus both land and place stress the actual qualities and circumstances of the body's immediate environment, and both should be regarded as the site of social, political, and sexual formation with an explicit environmental meaning.

Foregrounding the Valle family, *Heroes and Saints* negotiates individual attitudes to place and claims that in order to subvert oppressive structures and reimagine the land as home, it is necessary to form a strong sense of

collectivity—an endeavor in which the memory of what land used to be plays a crucial role. The story takes place in the fictional town of McLaughlin with most of the events unfolding in the house of the Valle family. Modeled after the actual McFarland in California's San Joaquin Valley, McLaughlin is a one-exit town surrounded by vast expanses of agricultural fields. Even though long rows of grape vineyards dominate this landscape with the promise to bear abundant fruit, the notion of a joyous image of fertile California is disrupted by "[t]he relentless fog and sudden dramatic sunbreaks in the Valley sky" (Moraga, *Heroes* 91). The Valles (whose name means "valley" in English) are a disintegrating family facing poverty, the threat of AIDS and toxic poisoning. The vineyard surrounding the Valles' home is the site of an odd protest: someone is crucifying dead bodies of children who died of cancer, thought to have developed as a consequence of toxic poisoning. The heroine of the play is Cerezita, the teenage daughter of the Valle family, who is one of the earliest and most tragic cases of McLaughlin's polluted environment. Moraga's inspiration for the character was a 1986 video documentary entitled *Wrath of Grapes* after a speech by César Chávez, the leader of the national boycott against California's grape growing industry, which presented interviews with farm workers on the excessive use of pesticides by grape grower corporations and the health problems that were associated with living and working in pesticide environments. As one of the most poignant cases of poisoning, the documentary showed a child born with no legs or arms, whose mother had been picking in pesticide-sprayed fields while pregnant. In *Heroes and Saints* Cerezita is not only limbless but bodiless: she is a head of a girl reaching adulthood, her mobility depending on a specially equipped wheelchair which she operates with her chin. Cerezita's bodiless existence is complemented by extraordinary characteristics as she is widely read, an eloquent speaker, and extremely sensitive to others' suffering. Moraga fuses elements of indigeneity and spirituality in Cerezita's character describing her to "[possess] such dignity and classical Indian beauty she can, at times, assume nearly religious proportions" (90). These unaccustomed qualities acquire special significance at the end of the play when, taking on the role of a spiritual leader and through practices of recollection, Cerezita ignites a strong sense of collectivity in the people of McLaughlin, who eventually recognize the need to stand up for their rights.

There is something perplexing about everyone in and around the Valle family, which is concomitant of the experience of being in a place marked by injustice. In the Valle family home, Cerezita's mother, Dolores, grapples with the fact that she gave birth to a baby who, as an eighteen-year-old, she "still got to feed and clean and wipe, que no tiene ni la capacidad to put a spoon of

food in her mouth” (129); while her other daughter Yolanda is nursing a dying baby. Not directly affected by toxic poisoning, men are in conflict with their place because of the cultural expectations that a small town’s confined community holds for manhood. Dolores’s son Mario is homosexual, which makes him leave McLaughlin. The priest Juan is ambivalent about his sexuality and claims to have become the “man of the cloth” because he aspired to have “the priest’s body asleep underneath that cloth” (115), but his vow of celibacy fails to tranquilize his sexual desires in the end. Most conspicuous, however, is the uncanny quality of the *pueblo*, the community of the town people, whose dead children keep reappearing as crucified bodies in the vineyard, creating poignant reminders of injustice.

These experiences, steeped in pain, disease, and death, are traumatizing but not devoid of hope in transformation. Moraga contends that revisiting memories is healing for both the individual and the community. The return to the past resonates with nostalgic longing, which is not exclusively a yearning for the past, but has an important spatial dimension. Moraga’s radical vision of the transformative power of memory is propounded by two powerful speakers in the play: Amparo, an outspoken activist and tireless organizer of protests, who evokes images of the Mexican homeland, and Cerezita, who rekindles memories of those lands that are significant for the Latino collective imagination. In both cases memory is intended to trigger emotional response in the listeners and to create an affective bond to the land of the past not as a sentimental longing or a paralyzing experience but with a potential of being transformative, for which Jennifer K. Ladino’s term *counter-nostalgia* is applicable (18). Participation in a shared sense of counter-nostalgia incites a spirit of collectivity, which, for Moraga, is deeply rooted in the Latino people’s indigenous heritage, a tradition that deems land sacred.

The playwright’s function as a healer revives an important Chicano belief that places hope in the communal healing power of art, recalling both the ancient custom of the *curanderas* and the more recent story of El Teatro Campesino. The playwright’s sense of responsibility for the community shapes *Heroes and Saints* much in the sense El Teatro Campesino, the “Farmworker’s Theater” took action for raising Chicano farmworkers’ awareness of labor rights. Founded by Luis Valdéz during the California grape strike in 1965, El Teatro Campesino was an ensemble made up of people who were not necessarily trained actors since many joined the group leaving behind their dreary jobs on the fields. The performances, held alongside the fields, intended to strengthen the workers’ perseverance in continuing the strike despite the fact that their livelihood was at stake. *Heroes and Saints* makes several allusions to El Teatro Campesino. The name of César Chávez, the

legendary activist of the 1960s boycott, is mentioned in the Valle household a number of times in relation to the media's reporting of his 36-day fast, which he held to draw public attention to the effects of farmworkers' pesticide poisoning in 1988. The central motif of the play, Cerezita's existence as a bodiless head is a tribute to an earlier Chicano play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa* (1999) by Valdéz. Most importantly, however, it is Moraga's instruction for the cast of characters that gets to the heart of the early Teatro Campesino's revolutionary commitment by recommending that the pueblo should ideally be "made up of an ensemble of people from the local Latino community" (Moraga, *Heroes* 90). Like the politically engaged El Teatro Campesino did by enacting the struggle between the impoverished farmworkers and the giant agroc Corporations, and by inviting people to take part in the performance, *Heroes and Saints* creates a platform for those who suffer oppression to recognize that they have the right to speak out against injustice.

Moraga wrote *Heroes and Saints* also with a responsibility toward the legacy of El Teatro Campesino, since, already as a published poet, essayist, editor, and activist, she was keenly aware of the limitations of the Chicano criticism of the time.<sup>3</sup> The goal of the play is transformative in the sense Randy J. Ontiveros defines El Teatro Campesino's performances, which were directed to "attack a model of restrictive citizenship" and "to enact in its place an inclusive model of performative citizenship in which belonging is based not on entrenched hierarchies of race and class or race and money, but rather on the communities that emerge from shared labor and shared living" (141). *Heroes and Saints*, however, succeeds in formulating a genuinely innovative understanding of performative citizenship by foregrounding those aspects of El Teatro Campesino that have been ignored by its earlier scholars: examining women's experiences of pesticide poisoning, the playwright reminds audiences of the marginal role of women in the ensemble; and like El Teatro Campesino originates in a Mexican cultural antecedent, Moraga points to Mexican Americans' cultural heritage which is at stake and in danger of oblivion.

Bringing into focus the female body, made explicit by an emphasis on women's experience of toxic poisoning in the play, *Heroes and Saints* unmistakably reverberates with Moraga's "theory in the flesh," and has prompted critics, such as Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, to analyze corporeality as a product of power relations in the play. With Gloria Anzaldúa in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983), Moraga writes that "[a] theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew upon, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity" (23). The explicit political significance attributed to the female body

in this formulation sheds light on the playwright's aim when introducing a bodiless woman as the main character. Yarbrow-Bejarano writes that foregrounding Cerezita's bodiless existence, *Heroes and Saints* presents a radical contestation of the ideal Chicana body since "Moraga makes it impossible to read this woman onstage as 'the thing itself,' as the female body whose sexualization is both 'natural' and transparent" (74), thus negating the female body as the object of the male sexual desire. Although she lacks a physical body, Cerezita is not devoid of thoughts and desires and has "an intense need to act on both sexual and political levels." As such, her character formulates a complex subjectivity and political agency in the play (74).

Studies that read the play in light of the Chicano environmental movement or from an ecofeminist perspective, similarly to Yarbrow-Bejarano, take the body as their primary object of analysis. Whereas María Alicia C. Garza views the body and its destruction as the "crucial locus for Moraga's commentary on environmental racism" (28), Arden Elizabeth Thomas draws an analogy between the representation of the body and the environmental damage in the play focusing on the metaphoric images of motherhood and the mythical figure of Mother Earth. So far, however, little attention has been paid to the effects of the land on the body. Instead of dismissing place as inert background, as Garza's notion of the valley as a "post-natural deathscape" (27) suggests, I explore the potentials that the land and the particular places in *Heroes and Saints* offer for the renegotiation of power structures that impose confining limits for the body. My aim is to contextualize *Heroes and Saints* in terms of a shift taking place in drama with the significance or relevance for geography, which criticism starts to discuss at the same time when Moraga writes her first plays. In 1995 Una Chaudhuri called for the necessary discussion of "a new platiality" in theater, defined as "a recognition of the signifying power and political potential of specific places" (5). For Chaudhuri, in the drama of immigration and multiculturalism, a strong sense of platiality is directed to challenge the figure of America, which is traditionally imagined as the place of unlimited progress and homogeneity. Chaudhuri theorized the figure of America as an essentially utopic notion, the trope for "ultimate placelessness, a guarantee of the absolute unmeaning of place" (5). As the growing concern about space and place in twentieth-century theoretical thought confronts the preconceived notion of place as empty void, Chaudhuri claims, so has modern drama reimagined place. For Chaudhuri, the most successful challenge to the traditional trope of America is posed by the multivoiced demand of immigration and multiculturalism, which questions the validity of the idea of placelessness by specifically pointing to the need of finding one's place.

Drawing attention to the need to recognize the meaningful condition of place and its political power, *Heroes and Saints* provides an exciting venue for a confrontation with the dominant figure of America, promising to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions about place and identity. The pueblo needs to realize that their valley has much to say about the oppression inflicted on them, and this recognition is prompted by the immediacy of the environmental malaise and its direct influence on the life of the community. The land of San Joaquin Valley epitomizes the injustice committed against the pueblo and vice versa, the pueblo's decision to take or not to take action will have far-reaching consequences for the state of the land. The play makes this clear by juxtaposing the figure of the suffering land with the figure of prosperous America: the pretense of fertile Californian lands promising welfare and prosperity cannot be maintained once the pueblo speaks out against injustice and calls for the place to be reimagined. The play, however, intends to accomplish a lot more than simply to blame an environmental disaster and the sociopolitical disadvantage of an ethnic group on the untrustworthiness of the master narrative. What the playwright examines in *Heroes and Saints* is how it is possible to live in a place of injustice without being demolished by oppressive forces, how empowerment is possible under such circumstances, and how oppressive structures might transform into a liberating place where one can feel at home and live with dignity.

The description of the valley opening *Heroes and Saints* indicates the dramatic extent to which the land has been violated by human intervention. McLaughlin is situated on two sides of Highway 99 that cuts the land into two halves. From the bridge leading over the highway and connecting the two McLaughlins, the viewer has a deeply unsettling glimpse of the land from a bird's eye view. The old part of the town gives a peaceful picture of a Californian agricultural town, as it consists of a few stores, a bank, a post office, and a church, while new McLaughlin on the other side of the highway is made up of uniform houses, each having "its obligatory crew-cut lawn and one-step porch," and is surrounded by an "endless sea of agricultural fields, which, like the houses, have been perfectly arranged into neatly juxtaposed rectangles" (Moraga, *Heroes* 91). The repetitive and symmetrical structures associated with new McLaughlin serve as visual tropes to comment on over-cultivation as violation of nature and the abuse of the land. The geometrical shapes of vine and pecan tree fields have little to do with the idea of nature as a serene place and a source of comfort here, nor do they correspond to an agrarian lifestyle of a bygone era. Instead, the overriding uniformity of the landscape implies the violence of machinery and chemistry, which have been

introduced into agriculture to the detriment of the natural world, and foreshadows the pathological condition of the land.

The text establishes a difference that is of crucial importance for the exploration of the community's awareness of and the individual characters' attitudes to the land in the play, namely, that the present pathological condition is a deviation from the natural and healthy state of the land. Stressing the farmworker's intimate relationship with the land, Moraga writes that "[t]he people that worked the dirt do not call what was once the land their enemy" but "[t]hey remember what land used to be and await its second coming" (91). The people whose subsistence has depended on the cultivation of the land since ancient times firmly believe in the resilience of the land. Even though now they have to face their land being violated by machinery and chemicals that ruins their once healthy environment, they can still recall the land in its natural state. The memory of the land is not merely a matter of past, a dim recollection of what their land used to be, but it is a complex vision that endorses people's longing for the revitalization of the land. The characters' experiences of alienation from their respective places is carefully embedded in the rich history of agricultural communities' hope in the power of the land. By pointing to this ancient relationship between people and the land, the text indicates a chance for the alienated individuals to reimagine their relationship with their respective places and the land of the valley.

The house of the Valle family signifies the family's social and environmental oppression as well as the confrontation between two contradictory attitudes: a growing resistance against oppression, and a tendency to internalize oppressive structures. The Valle's house is one of the uniform houses built in new McLaughlin sponsored by a federally subsidized housing program. Years after they moved in, the people of McLaughlin are beginning to realize that their cheaply acquired residences were built over a dump site for pesticides, as Amparo tells Dolores: "they bury all their poison under our houses. . . . They throw some dirt over a dump, put some casas de carton on top of it y dicen que it's the 'American Dream'" (102-103). Contrary to Amparo's fury, Dolores asserts: "[i]t's the only house I got" (102), and idealizes her house as a protective home that guarantees the preservation of traditional family values. This idealized notion of home, however, prevents her from seeing the systemic oppression the community suffers. The slow crumbling away of her house parallels her family's disintegration. Dolores's pain over her personal misfortunes intensifies: she has been abandoned by her husband, has a daughter who is bodiless, a son, Mario, whose sexual orientation departs from the community's cultural expectations, and a granddaughter who is dying. Cleaving to the idea of family home more and



more defiantly, Dolores becomes over-protective of Cerezita. To conceal her from prying eyes, the mother hides her daughter behind curtains placing the controlling device of the wheelchair out of her reach. By confining her movement to the house and disregarding Cerezita's wish to meet people, to attend Amparo's protests and to speak out against injustice, Dolores confronts her daughter's wish to act on a political level and replicates oppressive structures within the house.

The house and the idea of the family home is also confining for Mario, who knows he would act against his bodily desires if he stayed at home. Adhering to the cultural expectations of a small community, it is Dolores who commands her son to stay even suggesting he should keep up a life of pretense: "[n]ecesitas familia, hijo. What do you do fuera your matrimonio is your own bisnis . . . Eres hombre" (124). Defying his mother's will to live with a wife in McLaughlin, Mario escapes from home. He associates liberation with the highway on which people travel to the city, remembering how much he used to sit in the fields as a teenager, watching the cars going by and thinking about the driver "having somewhere to go" but knowing that "[h]e was always a gringo" (114). Mario is aware that he will not be like a "gringo" on account of his brown skin, neither will he have the social status of a white man, yet he does not see how deceptive the promise of the highway is. The wish to have "somewhere to go" urges him to go into the city, where he can identify as a homosexual. Although the city gives him a sense of the desired freedom initially, it is not a liberating place as he eventually finds out with bitterness that "[t]he city's no different" because "[r]aza's dying everywhere" (141). The recognition that he needs to fight injustice in the place where he belongs comes too late for Mario as, upon his return to McLaughlin, he is already suffering from the symptoms of HIV, which he contracted in the city.

The vineyard becomes the key site of resistance in the play since it is the place where the visibility of the victims of toxic poisoning is brought to the forefront. Dolores's withdrawal into an imagined private and protective sphere parallels her denial to display suffering. At the same time her stance markedly contrasts with a form of activism that exposes suffering, drawing even media attention to McLaughlin: whenever a child dies of cancer, its lifeless body is crucified in the vineyard. Those who support the crucifixions believe that, as Cerezita says, "[n]obody's dying should be invisible" (139). I agree with Linda Margarita Greenberg's argument that the play works with a special pedagogy which, for readers, audience and the Chicano community on stage alike, intends to make a seemingly gruesome act acceptable as a form of expression of social resistance and encourages sympathizing with the crucifixions (165-171).<sup>4</sup> Exposure makes death meaningful because it has

transformative potential for the pueblo as the crucified bodies in the vineyard are not only poignant reminders of the consequence of toxic poisoning but also urge the pueblo toward self-reflection. The first scene of the play is a tableau-like image of a crucifixion which presents a group of children wearing *calavera* masks as they erect a cross with the dead body of a child in the vineyard at dawn and leave. The tension accumulated behind this dense visual imagery reaches its climax with Cerezita's appearance: "CEREZITA enters in shadow. She is transfixed by the image of the crucifixion. The sun suddenly explodes out of the horizon, bathing both the child and CEREZITA. CEREZITA is awesome and striking in the light. The crucified child glows, Christlike" (Moraga, *Heroes* 92). The dead child and Cerezita's bodiless existence function as powerful reminders that injustice leaves indelible marks on the body. The presence of these bodies in the vineyard, the place which itself suffers the abuse of machinery and pesticide poisoning creates a meaningful *mise-en-scène* where suffering does not happen in vain but acquires special significance with exposure. Later in the play, looking at the endless rows of vines from her window, Cerezita describes the place when there is no one in the vineyard with these words: "[t]he trunk of each of the plants is a little gnarled body of Christ writhing in agony. . . . A chain gang of Mexican Christs" (134). The device of visual repetition, associated with the abuse of the land by machinery and pesticides already at the beginning of the play, creates a perturbing notion of the vineyard since the repetitive pattern reminds Cerezita of dying bodies. The cruelty of this type of suffering rests in its uniformity and invisibility for Cerezita. Since machinery has replaced manual labor, the cultivation of the vineyard does not need workers anymore. Looking out of her window at the empty vineyard, Cerezita looks at a site of agony, pain and death; but whenever an actual crucifixion of a human body takes place in it, suffering becomes visible and the vineyard transforms into the pueblo's place of resistance.

As a tribute to Dolores Huerta, the eminent Chicana activist, Amparo is portrayed as an implacable activist and a woman who is keenly aware of the troubled relationship the people of McLaughlin have with the land. Seeing Dolores affirming injustice with passivity and internalizing oppression in her house, Amparo assiduously tries to convince Dolores to confront the source of her suffering and to stand up for her rights. Amparo is aware of the deep roots of the problems the community has, which make her remark in her gloomy moments even that "[she] be on the bus back to Coahuila" had she not got her green card (117). Despite being entitled to live in the country and having a house of her own, Amparo is painfully aware that having a place to live does not entail a life with dignity, as the neighborhood, where houses need to be plastered to prevent them from falling apart and where children are

dying of cancer, certainly does not offer such a life. Her activism is fueled by her firm belief in the transformative power of the community's collective history as Mexican Americans.

Amparo's speech held for the community in front of the McLaughlin elementary school is intended to make them realize that environment is a shared responsibility. Convinced that contaminated tap water from the public water system is one of the chief causes of high cancer rate among children, Amparo organizes a protest as a response to the school board's refusal to provide drinking water for the pupils. Her speech demonstrates a firm conviction that the people of McLaughlin need to recognize the troubled nature of their relationship with the place where they live, and a hope that this recognition will come along by an examination of the material conditions of their environment:

AMPARO (*tentatively*): Our homes are no longer our homes. They have become prisons. When the water that pours from the sink and gets [sic] to be boiled three times before it can pass your children's lips, what good is the faucet, the indoor plumbing, the toilet that flushes pink with disease?

(110-111)

These Mexican Americans, the parents of the pupils of the McLaughlin elementary school, came to the San Joaquin Valley from a land of severe poverty, where their houses lacked basic amenities. Whereas the land of the valley provides them with the convenience of running water in their houses, Amparo insists that the promise of a better life has deceived them, since the water is poisoning their children. For renegotiating its relationship with the land of the valley, Amparo asks the community to revisit the memory of their distant homeland: "[w]e are better off when our padres hang some blankets from a tree and we slept under the protection [sic] de las estrellas, because our roofs don't protect us. At least then, even if you had to dig a hole in the ground to do your business [sic] and wipe yourself with newspaper, you could still look *hasta los cielos* and see God. But where is God now, amigos?" (111). When she revives the memory of their Mexican homeland, Amparo depicts a contrasting image of a land where they did not have houses with plumbing, faucets, and toilets. The low living standards, however, presupposed a closer relationship with the natural world, where the presence of God is felt. In the valley, however, God is absent.

This association of the natural world with the spiritual features in what Christina Holmes describes as a unique Chicana intersubjectivity. Holmes argues that the problem of subjectivity in Chicana literature differs from

dominant discourses in its stress on collective interdependence as it emphasizes the self as relational and contends that we humans understand ourselves through our relations to both human and non-human others “including the natural and built environments through which we move and to which we develop attachments” (10).<sup>5</sup> Amparo insists that the community’s self-examination must attend to the body’s relation to the material attributes of its surrounding environment. When she asks that “[q]ué significa que the three things in life—el aire, el agua, y la tierra—que we always had enough of, even in our pueblitos en México, ya no tenemos?” (111), she touches on the improbability of a prosperous and harmonious relationship between the people of McLaughlin and their environment. As the air, the water, and the soil have been contaminated and the community cannot rely on them, the sense of intersubjectivity is seriously hindered. In contrast, the memory of the far-away homeland, where the people could “still look hasta los cielos and see God” (111) evokes the notion of a trustworthy relationship between the people and the land.

The success of Amparo’s rhetoric depends on memory not only in terms of reviving the image of the homeland but also in terms of activating a nostalgic longing for a place where the people had a close and natural bond with the land. This is not regressive or paralyzing longing, but an invitation to open up a dialogue about the environmental and social issues at hand. This type of return to the past collides with Susan Stewart’s definition of nostalgia, according to which nostalgia is a regressive force, a dangerous illusion which is based on the distortion or complete absence of a historical reality, and is essentially ideological:

Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience. Rather, it remains behind and before that experience. Nostalgia, like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. (23)

Stewart’s definition of nostalgia as a temporal concept reduces its meaning exclusively to a longing for the past. However, an examination of nostalgia in Chicano literature, which is a literature addressing the experience of displacement, needs to attend to its geographical aspect, since longing is directed not only at the past but also at a certain place. The longing for the homeland in Chicano literature is intrinsically linked with the idea of Aztlán, the mythic origin place of the Chicanos’ ancestors, which has represented the

idea of historical loss and recuperation for many Chicanos. Critical discussions have examined how Moraga comments on the tradition of Aztlán and nostalgic longing in her writing. Mary Pat Brady argues that Moraga writes an “anticartography,” which, unlike earlier treatments of Aztlán in Chicano literature, makes a step into the realm of the individual and the private, where memory and body, when negotiated through collective experience, play crucial roles (134). In a similar vein, Catherine Wiley’s reading of *Giving Up the Ghost* (1986), an earlier play by Moraga, extends the traditional conception of nostalgia, by understanding it as the means by which Moraga formulates new ethnic and sexual politics in her play. For Wiley, Moraga’s sense of nostalgia “proves to be a desire that can be incorporated into an individual’s life as a source of strength rather than regret: what is lost, both personally and collectively, can be remembered without being mourned” (112). In like manner, the return to the homeland in *Heroes and Saints* is not an inauthentic and passive sadness but a driving force in the play. The affective tie to the homeland triggers the pueblo’s resistance to the oppressive sociopolitical structures, therefore, it has a transformative potential.

Theorizing outside of Chicano cultural imagination and drama, Ladino makes a similar claim about the possible role of nostalgia in environmentally focused fiction. In *Reclaiming Nostalgia: Longing for Nature in American Literature*, Ladino insists that nostalgia has been defined too narrowly as ideological. She claims that the assumption that nostalgia is an oversimplified narrative of complex realities has been misleading as it has obscured the rich theoretical potential of the concept. Ladino proposes to redirect attention to the geographic dimension of nostalgia, stressing that this change of focus is “especially important when questions of environmental and social justice are at stake” (14). The shift in focus, which permits us to view place as the object of nostalgic longing, has the potential to challenge dominant narratives about environment and society as it acknowledges a desire for a land defined by more just environmental and social structures. Ladino terms this type of longing “counter-nostalgia,” which, she claims, has a strong potential to challenge marginalizing structures and to offer new conceptualizations of place in environmentally focused literature (18). When Amparo speaks about Mexico, she evokes an affective tie to the land as much on the grounds of a shared cultural background as on the grounds of a natural human desire to live in a pure and healthy environment. This desire stands in sharp contrast with the present pathological condition of the valley, and it highlights the disastrous consequences of human intervention in the natural world. It also succeeds in subverting the narrative of growing prosperity of corporate America’s agricultural sector and questions the validity of the image of the

fertile Californian landscape. This affective tie to the Mexican homeland works as counter-nostalgia: by evoking the memory of an uncontaminated land, it entails a plausibility for the present.

The other powerful speaker is Cerezita, whose address to the people reflects a greater vision of life and her firm belief in the transformative power of faith. Her only occasion to speak to the community is the funeral procession of her niece, Evalina. On her own request, the children who have carried out the crucifixions earlier, cut her hair, drape her in a veil and decorate her wheelchair as an altar to prepare Cerezita for the procession where she appears as the Virgin of Guadalupe. Cerezita's transformation into a Christian religious figure—whose Mexican and Chicano cultural significance stems from the figure of the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin—establishes a reference to the Chicano environmental movement. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, the figure of the Virgin is the symbol of resistance since “*Guadalupe* took upon herself the psychological and physical devastation of the conquered and oppressed *indio*” and also the symbol of hope for Chicanos as she “sustains and ensures [their] survival” (30). The Chicano farmworkers’ 1960s boycott reinforces the aspect of the indigenous Mother Earth Goddess in the figure of the Virgin. At the beginning of the 1990s, prior to the first production of the play, the figure of the Virgin as a symbol of resistance acquires particular significance for Mexican Americans as many of them believe that the Virgin appeared to one of the leaders of the 1980s strike in Watsonville.

Cerezita's transformation into the Virgin, with a particularly strong meaning as a symbol of resistance, also specifies the spiritual content of the figure. Faith for Moraga is, as Jorge Huerta writes, “a true reverence for human life,” which transcends the confining limits of institutional religion and questions a Catholicism that disfavors people on the grounds of gender, social standing, or sexual orientation (119). This spirituality, reflected in Cerezita's act of transformation, has an urgency for activism and inclusivity. More than a “strategic self-construction,” the means by which she can get past Dolores and gain the long-desired access to the public sphere as Yarbrow-Bejarano understands it (76), the act of transformation endorses a response to a repressive notion of religion represented by Dolores in the play. Dolores finds support for her passivity toward injustice in religion. Her faith is submissive and she resolves to quiet suffering speaking about her misfortunes as the will of God, and she even calls her bodiless daughter a *santita*. The emotional despair catalyzed by the death of her grandchild leads Dolores to a mental state in which she truly believes Cerezita's transformation to be a miracle. Even though Cerezita tells Juan that she has “no use for God” when they

meet for the first time (101), she is not refusing faith, but she is acting against her mother's repressive religion that confines her into the house.

Cerezita's monologue testifies to a firm intention to join her listeners together in a spiritual communion. Expressing a desire to formulate a collectivity that is deeply rooted in an indigenous heritage, where the human joins the non-human, bodies merge with lands, it presents a Chicana vision of intersubjectivity:

Put your hand inside my wound. Inside the valley of my wound, there is a people. A miracle people. In this pueblito where the valley people live, the river runs red with blood; but they are not afraid because they are used to the color red. It is the same color as the river that runs through their veins, the same color as the sun setting into the sierras, the same color of the pool of liquid they were born into. They remember this in order to understand why their fields, like the rags of the wounded, have soaked up the color and still bear no fruit. No lovely red fruit that el pueblo could point to and say yes, for this we bleed, for this our eyes go red with rage and sadness. They tell themselves red is as necessary as bread. They tell themselves this in a land where bread is a tortilla without maize, where the frijol cannot be cultivated. (*Pause.*) But we, we live in a land of plenty. The fruits that pass through your fingers are too many to count luscious red in their strawberry wonder, the deep purple of the grape inviting, the tomatoes perfectly shaped and translucent. And yet, you suffer at the same hands. (148)

When Cerezita starts her speech with the call "[p]ut your hand inside my wound," she internalizes the community's suffering in the painful reality of her bodiless existence. As the Virgin figure merges with the Mother Earth-Tonantzin figure, Cerezita's bodiless existence is substituted for a mythical-religious realm, formulating a collective in whom bodies and lands are inseparable since the "river [that] runs red with blood" through the landscape is the same "river that runs through [the bodies'] veins." Blood is the vital liquid of life that causes pain when it spills out from the body and which gives the first touch to the new-born body, and it also transcends material reality to become the sacred spirit of nature present in the "luscious red" of the strawberry, "the deep purple of the grape" and the "perfectly shaped and translucent" tomatoes. The environmental damage therefore causes suffering not only to individual bodies and individual elements of the land, but it also violates the collective spirit.

The land of the valley is formulated as an archetypal land which incorporates many other places in itself, thus defying the traditional Western concept of a geographical territory with clearly demarcated boundaries. First

of all, it is the “pueblito where the valley people live,” which is cut across by the river of blood, reminding the audience of the initial image of the valley landscape violated by the highway. This valley land, elevated to mythical proportions, incorporates in itself various other geographical territories. The archetypal land is a place for formulating a transnational Latino community, as the monologue goes on: “[y]ou are Guatemala, El Salvador. You are the Kuna y Tarahumara. You are the miracle people too, for like them the same blood runs through your veins. The same memory of a time when your deaths were cause for reverence and celebration, not shock and mourning” (148). All the names of the places Cerezita mentions reverberate with histories of suffering. Salvador refers to the recent past, the incident of the murder of six Jesuit priests who were outspoken critics of the ruling party, which the Valles hear on the radio. Its juxtaposition with Guatemala, Kuna, and Tarahumara evokes also a more distant past: the painful histories of the indigenous populations’ colonial oppression. Cerezita insists that by no means should this shared history be regarded as a memory of passive suffering. Kuna in Panama and Tarahumara in Mexico are places that also refer to the heroic endeavor of their peoples who, despite the pressure of the authorities, have defended and still practice their traditional lifestyle and maintain a harmonious relationship with the land. Asking the pueblo to remember places that share a history of oppression and places that have successfully articulated resistance, Cerezita’s monologue incites a spirit of counter-nostalgia in her listeners. By connecting to the memory of a transnational Latino suffering, the victims of toxic poisoning in McLaughlin transform into the “miracle people,” a community who, having been traumatized by meaningless losses, now becomes a community who understands death as heroic sacrifice.

In a unique Chicana sense, the processes of the liberation of the body and the liberation of the land must be interdependent, as both Cerezita’s final words and the last episode of the play indicate. Cerezita closes her monologue by declaring: “[y]ou are the miracle people because today, this day, that red memory will spill out 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). These words epitomize what Laura E. Pérez calls the Chicana artist’s *curandera* or healer work. The Chicana artist, Pérez claims, goes beyond dominant politics that marginalize people on the grounds of social standing, gender, and sex, to formulate a spiritual world view with an empowering potential, one that is inclusive, and directed “to some essential sense of personal wholeness, communal interdependence, purpose, and meaningfulness in the social, global, and cosmic web(s)” (42). The Chicana artist’s work is essentially



utopian as it embodies the *curandera*'s hope in that the healing process will have a successful resolution, which is significant for the individual and beneficial for the community. *Heroes and Saints* also envisions a world where the liberation and the healing of the wounds—both of the land and of the body—is attainable. Once the community cannot be weakened by loss because, recognizing the sacrifice of their heroes, they have gained empowerment, the people are free to name the land “Madre Tierra” again as they are entitled to reestablish a healthy and harmonious relationship with the land.

The final moments of the play depict the beginning of the environmental revitalization of the land and the pueblo's self-definition as a politically active agent upon assuming social protest as collective responsibility. The corporate farmers' threat that they would shoot anyone who enters the vineyard cannot thwart Cerezita's intention, who, in the end, also receives Dolores's blessing to carry out Evalina's crucifixion. Accompanied by Juan, as she enters the vineyard to erect the cross with the deceased body, gunfire is heard. Although the play does not make clear whether the gunfire hits them (at the moment of entering the vineyard the stage direction writes that they proceed offstage), following Mario's exclamation to “[b]urn the field!” the whole community rushes to the vineyard shouting “¡Asesinos! ¡Asesinos!” (149). *Heroes and Saints* ends with “the crackling of fire [and] a sharp red-orange glow [that] spreads over the vineyard and the Valle home” (149). The radical act of burning the field is a revitalizing act for the land which inaugurates its long-awaited transformation. The fire that destroys the vines, the symbol of the pueblo's suffering, ultimately transforms the land into a place where a powerful political agency is formulated. Once the community assumes collective responsibility for its environment, it becomes the agent of the environmental recovery of the land.

The idea of local communities' participation in the production of *Heroes and Saints* highlights Moraga's urgency to transform passive and restrictive citizenship into a performative agency in the manner El Teatro Campesino educated farmworkers about their rights. In fact, Moraga invites all of us—readers, spectators, trained actors, as well as the Mexican American communities who join the company for one or a few performances—to experience and carefully consider our bodies' attitudes to places, either fictional places with a frustrating notion of reality or places of memory, reminding us of the necessity of being attentive to the intimate feelings one might experience when entering these places. As a healer, Moraga promises that the journey into those lands will not be futile but highly rewarding as it will reveal crucial insights about our present.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a book-length study on Moraga's writing of the body see Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano's *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherríe Moraga* (2001); for drama, see Tiffany Ana López's "Performing Aztlán: the Female Body as Cultural Critique in the Teatro of Cherríe Moraga" (2001), or the more recent "Shadow of a Man: a Chicana/Latina Drama as Embodied Feminist Practice" (2015) by Elizabeth Jacobs.

<sup>2</sup> In *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002), Mary Pat Brady argues that Chicana authors formulate a unique "spatial theoretics," which offers not only alternative to the dominant (and marginalizing) spatial structures, but which understands space both as produced and productive (6-7).

<sup>3</sup> In her book *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (1994), Yolanda Broyles-González claims that criticism, writing the story of El Teatro Campesino in the two decades that had followed its foundation in 1965, subordinated the company's collective achievement to Luis Valdéz's career, and it was dominated by classism, male- and Eurocentrism (xiv). Broyles-González argues that instead of drawing parallels with the Russian agitprop, the Italian commedia dell'arte, and Brecht's theater, scholars should focus on the ensemble's immediate theatrical antecedent, the working-class Mexican oral performance tradition, with whom El Teatro Campesino shares a strong sense of community and a heightened awareness of the central functions of body and memory in performances (3).

<sup>4</sup> Greenberg's sense of pedagogy is reminiscent of the educative purpose of early El Teatro Campesino. She argues that the act of crucifixion invites two possible readings: one that views dead bodies as an unintelligible or even irrational threat posed by the Mexican American farmworkers to American society, and one that understands death as productive of social change, and the play teaches "to re-read the dead as corporate murder rather than private loss, as act of sacrifice rather than victimhood, and finally as transformation rather than passive necrocitizenship" (165).

<sup>5</sup> Holmes argues that the specific conditions of the Borderland impact upon Chicana authors' writing, who succeed in reconceptualizing problematic representations of the land. Her theory of intersubjectivity diverges from theories on Chicana spatiality as it develops from Chicana studies but places strong emphasis on integrating it with ecofeminist philosophy and new materialist feminism (9-10).

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