

Response to Cherrié Moraga, A Small Nation to Remember: Performance & Xicana Indígena Resistance

A couple of years ago I came to HDS for a lecture and I chose the following passage by Cherrié Moraga as my epigraph.

The ceremony always begins for me in the same way...always the hungry woman. Always the place of disquiet moves the writing to become a kind of excavation, an earth-dig of the *spirit found through the body*. The impulse to write may begin in the dream, the déjà-vu, a few words, which once uttered through my own mouth or through the mouth of another, refuse to leave the body of the heart.

On that occasion I wondered—only half jokingly—about the differences between the corporeal earth-digs that Moraga invokes and those other excavations that Prof. Carrasco invites us to observe in his writings. Excavations into the past, toward unknown histories, traces of which mark their own flesh. Welcoming Moraga's invitation, I took as my explicit starting point corporeal sites depicted in the works of Moraga and other Latina writers. In those texts, bodies are complex nexus of socio-political forces and familiar ties, unsettled by unruly desires, stubborn materiality, and mysterious spirituality. So I asked then, what image of the spirit would be consonant with the flesh as these theorists describe it? What would be the qualities of this elusive spirit found through the body? I do not mean to imply we have a direct access either to body or to spirit; quite to the contrary, I am particularly interested in non-reductive ways to theorize the relationship between flesh and words.

I have since returned to this passage, perhaps repeating it as a kind of invocation to spirits of uncertain provenance. In addition to its invocation of the spirit, what the passage describes is the *emergence* of a text or statement from strange disturbances. I am intrigued by the choice of images. Spirit is indeed the *name* of such disturbances, in many religious traditions, including some Christian ones. Whether or not the source of the disturbance is personalized as the agency of a being, those who feel perturbed by people, beings, or events no longer present invoke the noun "spirit". Significantly, spirit is also invoked as help in reading and writing. Beyond these shared associations, I am interested in exploring the possible connections between Moraga's description of such disturbances and the passions that move one to certain forms of philosophical and theological work. What would it mean to imagine scholarship as a task arising from places of disquiet, tremors that move the theologian into writing? I am, of course, not suggesting that we attribute such disturbances to external or supernatural beings. Far from it! For such claims may mask the disquiet too quickly by invoking ontological certainties. Rather, I am interested in what relates theology and philosophy, as I see them, to literary practices, in approaches that do not eschew the role of the imagination in the most rigorous scholarly work.

I have previously explored the relationship between figures of spirits, memory, and the Holy Ghost, as a way of addressing the possibilities and limits of a relation to the past and the responsibilities bestowed by an encounter with its ghosts. Let me emphasize, that I treat haunting and ghosts not as an explanation of particular phenomena, but rather as figures that illuminates elements of relating to the past that are occluded by more cognitive metaphors. I was then thinking with novelists addressing modern political catastrophes. Moraga has wrestled with these questions in relation to pre-Colombian history and religion. She wrote in "Giving up the Ghost" about the discovery of the ruins of El Templo Mayor, not yet knowing about the discovery of the sculpture of Coyolxauhqui (pronounced: Coyolshauki), the dismembered moon goddess. Yet she used the feminine pronoun for the temple. (In Spanish, the temple would have a masculine pronoun.) Reflecting back on this, she wonders if Coyolxauhqui had already been speaking to her. Speaking in what sense, one may ask? The impressive weight of the discovered sculpture is evidently the source of concrete information. But Moraga's allusions to memory go beyond the acquisition of information. She describes it as a "shudder" felt on the surface of her skin. The sign of haunting, perhaps? This shudder may be a delusion, she grants that. Yet she is led on the trail of Coyolxauhqui all the same, to remember beyond her own biography, to engage the story of the dismemberment of a goddesses and in so doing re-imagine it anew. To create from a site of destruction.

Moraga's descriptions of her work place it between ancient mythos and never-quite-dead history, cultural critique and imaginative construction or recreation. I thus imagine engaging her work could enrich conversations about a theological approach that some of us call theopoetics. In its current form, theopoetics emerged from a series of conferences in the 1960s, organized by Stanley Hopper at Drew University, between theologians, philosophers, literary theorists and writers. (Norman O. Brown and Julián Marías were among them.) These conversations reached Harvard, through their influence in Amos Wilder's work. In its most developed theorizations, "theopoetics" does not refer simply to the use of poetic language in theological writing, nor to the common assertion that theology can only speak in metaphors to point toward that which ultimately exceeds language. At stake is a redefinition of the aims of theology. As David Miller describes it, theopoetics is "a reflection on *poiesis*, a formal thinking about the nature of the making of meaning, which subverts the *-ology*, the nature of the logic, of theology."¹ It moves from *logoi* to *poiesis*—but not in a straightforward way.

Poiesis of theopoiesis is hardly a clean process, much less a creation out of nothing. It entails handling fragments of past creations—images, terms, stories—some wondrous, others with sharp cutting edges. Or to use the imagery that Moraga prefers, one may be seeking and handling fragments of a violently dismembered goddess. Clearly, this mode of poiesis is no easy appeal to beauty or mere

¹ David L. Miller, "The Brokenness of Beauty and the 'Beauty' of Brokenness: Toward a Postmodern Theopoetics," in *Drew Tipple-Vosburgh Lecture* (Madison, NJ2009), 5.

decoration. Neither is it a flight from the horrors of the world and from our responsibility for the damage that theology itself has inflicted on the world. It doesn't cover over the implication of theologies past and present in many rituals of dismemberment. But it seeks to release the energies of images, stories, and metaphors. Thus I wonder if, in this mode, theopoetics might draw from and speak to what Moraga describes as her religion: "a language that finds awe in the face of beauty, art, the ongoing creativity of nature and its insistent survival, its flourishing in the face of death."²

² {Moraga, 2000 #985@211}.

“Poetry is no help if the unconscious poetics that accompanies it imagines poetizing to be an adornment, a prettification, an attempt to repair the fragments of the world by covering them over.”³

The statement, as I imagine it, does not aim at representing a pre-existing something—at least not a thing that can be made present. Yet, like a promise or a prayer, the statement *does* something. The writing is the excavation, the utterance is, as it where, the heart.

Not beautify the horrors, but perhaps question the assumption that oppression is always the end of creativity. Of course there are circumstances that produce irreparable damage or destruction. “a “beauty” whose strength and power is in the fact that it avoids covering over the brokenness, the multiplicity, the fractures and the fragments.”⁴

Many of you may be familiar with the debates around the appeals to ancient history in Chicana studies. Some scholars have challenged the accuracy of their depictions of past or questioned what seems to reflect a nostalgia for lost origins. Others have responded that much more is at stake than representational aims. I am not going to weigh in the historical debates—after all, theologians are too often accused of being lousy historians, and I don’t want to feed that reputation. But I do think that Moraga’s work may illuminate this issue. Moraga comments about an experience in _____ “it was not the peoples or their visible legacy but ‘the natural landscape in which those templos were placed’ and ‘the buried history’ contained within them that brought a shudder of recognition to the surface of [her] skin]” (*Hungry Woman* x). I would certainly worry if such allusions to landscapes or “buried history” were to be conceived as self-contained objects to be retrieved according to the models of a representational rationality, if we assumed that they could be made fully present to our consciousness. Etymologically, the term “recognition” suggests bringing back to cognition what had been there before. But why would this be perceived on the surface of the skin. Perhaps rather than cognition, the image or feeling invoked is that of haunting. I am evidently influenced by Jacques Derrida, who reading of Hamlet and Marx, used metaphors of haunting, ghosts and specters to explore the relationship between the scholar and his intellectual ancestors. It is Gayatri Spivak who would move that idea beyond Derrida’s patrilinear assumptions, and utter her own prayer to be haunted by the Other. Implicit in this

Check intro to polydoxy

Aspects of the imaginative process

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

- Reading as prayer to be haunted
 - “This pre-Colombian feeling is a political ‘right’ and a sacred practice, located in the soul rather than biography” (46).
- A critical movement
 - “Her invocations of Aztec and Mayan body practices also reject the historical violence of these ancient empires. She does not submit to any system of body management, keeping the bodies in her writing open to her imagination” (118).
- An imaginative movement
 - Performative rather than normative

“Moraga’s writing about childbirth is self-reflexively a ceremonial performance, but she creates something new rather than regenerating a tradition: ‘I shape these letters onto the page as tiny steps in a dance circling circling circling until I arrive at the heartbeat, a pulse, a place from which the writing stirs new life’ (128) I imagine the tiny steps trying to feel and respond to the almost imperceptible rhythms new life.

- - to “think the unthought” requires adopting “multiple different ideas at once”
 - as a performative practice.
- Poiesis—both making; theosis—becoming divine
- Not the poetry of theology, but something that goes to the heart of what it means to write theology, “a reflection on poiesis, a formal thinking about the nature the making of meaning, which subverts the -ology...of theology” (Miller).
- “recognizing the constructedness—the poetics—of theos does not mean constructing God ex nihilo. No poet, and no poetics, ever claims such an arrogant posture for itself.... We recognize that our constructions spin themselves out of a recycled chaos of images, stories and questions of the prior logoi of theos...”
- The poetic is not mere decoration. Neither is it a flight from the horrors of the world and from our responsibility for the damage that theology itself has inflicted on the world. A theopoetics is no substitute for the denunciation and rigorous argumentation against the destructive theologies. Theopoetic—as a supplement to other modes of philosophical and theological argumentation—aims at release the energies of images, stories, and metaphors.

“imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is...*becoming*.”⁵

Theopoetics

⁵ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 4.

Cosmos like a dark record that spins and sings
 in the dead of the night
 or romantic radio borne to us on the wind.
 Each thing sings.
 Things, not created by calculus
 but by poetry.
 By the Poet ("Creator"=POIÊTÊS)
 Creator of the POIEMA
 -Ernesto Cardenal, "Cantiga 2," *Cosmic Canticle*

I have been engaging Cherrié Moraga's work as a resource for doing theology. Examples. In the type of theological work that I do—attentive to philosophical presuppositions and cultural influences—just drawing from cultural sources is not a radical innovation; I will speak to the distinctiveness in a moment. However, where I find myself needing to explain the impact of Latina theory in theology in circles outside of theological studies. This is understandable, since the colonial history of the Americas was embedded in specific theological language and symbols. But the same is true for all fields of study. That is, conquest also produced its view of history, geography, ethnology, literature, natural sciences, philosophy—even the languages in which we challenge imperialism is indelibly marked by imperialism. There is no easy purity here. Thus, the task is to interrupt these discourses deconstructively—all of them—and to open spaces where other discourse can emerge. Surely, none of them will be pure and thus the need to engage critically our own productions as well.

Each one of us in this panel seeks to disrupt a different set of discourses—historical, anthropological, philosophical—even though we might at times draw from similar sources.

Examples from her work

Perhaps my use of the term theology is a catachresis—a deliberate misuse. We are not talking about God—if there is such a thing—but about cultural, artistic, experiential statements about something that some people call divine. But if what I just described is indeed a misuse of the term theology, perhaps all uses of the term are. For is this not all we have, a multiplicity of imaginative accounts of something else? Accounts that are always also cultural, political, sexual, economic, philosophical, artistic.

Miller, David L. "The Brokenness of Beauty and the 'Beauty' of Brokenness: Toward a Postmodern Theopoetics." In *Drew Tipple-Vosburgh Lexture*. Madison, NJ, 2009.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.