

# Queer Interactions with Death: Irigaray's Intersubjectivity in Cherrie Moragas' 'Catholic Memory'

**Stephanie Hart**

Keep thinking, *it's the daughters*. It's the daughters who remain loyal to the mother, although this loyalty is not always reciprocated. To be free means on some level to release that painful devotion when it begins to punish us. Stop the chain of events. La procesion de mujeres, sufriendo. Dolores my grandmother, Dolores her daughter, Dolores her daughter's daughter. Free the daughter to love her own daughter. It is the daughters who are my audience.<sup>1</sup>

"'Catholic Memory'" The Dying Road to a Nation, a Prayer para un Pueblo<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

Cherrie Moraga's work presents her social and political battle to incorporate three primary and competing foundational aspects of her identity, gender and sexuality, her race, and her religion, into a cohesive subjectivity. The competing nature of these themes within Moraga's construction of self comes to a crux in the final chapter of *Loving in the War Years* entitled 'The Dying Road to a Nation, a Prayer para un Pueblo', where the incommensurability of these systems of identity are exemplified

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<sup>1</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), foreword to the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

<sup>2</sup> Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Paso Por Sus Labios*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Cambridge: South End Press, 2000), p.195. 'Catholic Memory' is a bi-lingual poem that receives no translation in the text. All footnoted translations of the poem itself will be my own translations provided only in order to better understand the content of the poem rather than the structure. The opening line to the chapter reads 'The Dying Road to a Nation, a Prayer for the People'.

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through the poem 'Catholic Memory'.<sup>3</sup> 'Catholic Memory' is the opening poem to the final chapter added to the original 1983 publication of prose and poetry, in 2000.<sup>4</sup> Much of the contemporary scholarship on Moraga grounds itself in her identity politics focussing on a conflicted racial and sexual identity without giving credence to the role of, and place for, religion within these processes.<sup>5</sup> Moraga, herself pinpoints religion as the backbone of the culture in which she was raised, a powerful and invasive force against which she cannot disentwine.<sup>6</sup>

In this final chapter, she reflects on the power that Mexican National myth, Catholicism and, later, Buddhism have had in influencing her patterns of thought and behaviour in both public and private domains. Building on existing scholarship, which reads Moraga through her self-identified roles as a Xicana, feminist, and lesbian, I aim to unravel the role her particular religious experience has played on her subjectivity; and thus on a collective subjectivity she has worked on creating through both her political and artistic works alike.<sup>7</sup> Irigaray's theories of intersubjectivity and genealogy offer a remarkable framework through which to investigate the unique, self-reflexive writing of Moraga.<sup>8</sup> I will argue here that through her religious identification and interactions with the concept of death,

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<sup>3</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 195-213.

<sup>4</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>5</sup> Brenda Watts, 'Aztlán as a Palimpsest: From Chicano Nationalism Toward Transnational Feminism in Anzaldúa's Borderlands', *Latino Studies*, vol. 2 (2004), pp. 304-321; Patricia Ybarra, 'The Revolution Fails Here: Cherrie Moraga's The Hungry Woman as a Mexican Medea', *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2008), pp. 63-88; Debra Black, 'Unsettling Identities: Transitive Subjectivity in Cherrie Moraga's Loving in the War Years', *Auto/biographical Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (1997), pp. 71-89; Leslie Bow, 'Hole to Whole: Feminine Subversion and Subversion of the Feminine in Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*', *Dispositio*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1991), pp. 1-12.

<sup>6</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 109-116.

<sup>7</sup> As preferred by Moraga, I will use here the spelling of Xicana with an X rather than 'Ch' using the indigenous spelling rather than English adaptation. Similarly, the ordering of terms Xicana, feminist and lesbian is pertinent to Moraga's self-identification as lesbian is a part of her identity through which she has understood herself and fought for from a young age, where as her Xicana heritage was largely denied to her throughout her life and it is something she feels she must actively fight for. Cherrie Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings, 2000-2010* (USA: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York: Routledge, 1993); Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

Moraga is attempting to create what Irigaray calls for in her work. She is trying to tear away from the neutered sexual identity in which her gender, race, religion and sexuality places her.<sup>9</sup> Through her writing, she attempts to establish a symbolic bridge by way of a collective narrative in which women oppressed through race, religion and sexuality can exist in dialogue with, rather than in opposition to, one another. This article will track the progression of this pursuit using ‘Catholic Memory’ as the axis upon which Moraga’s world-view shifts.

Irigaray’s theory of intersubjectivity identifies the gendered experience of most women as being asexual or neutered through the denial of sexual difference from the male being, of being understood as not-male rather than as female.<sup>10</sup> Emerging from this denial of sexual difference is the establishment of women being recognised as abstracted, non-masculine, and thus non-existent entities.<sup>11</sup> Irigaray argues that in order to rectify this neutered subjectivity within a patriarchal discourse; women must reclaim and enforce recognition of sexual difference that demands a valid subject position from both within the feminist movement and from society at large.<sup>12</sup>

Yet to be able to demand such a position, women must contend with the lack of language and symbol from which to understand and express themselves. It is this barrier with which Moraga contends with in her writing, constructing a language and symbolic order from wherein subjectivity can be constructed. However, Moraga’s lack of subjectivity does not simply come from her existence as a woman, she has been denied her personhood through her existence as a queer woman of colour, divested of a cultural heritage within a patriarchal white America. Irigaray’s theory offers this reading a framework through which to explore Moraga’s work, yet is largely remiss of cultural and racial difference. As recognised by Ien Ang, the subjective knowledge of what it means to be an individual person of colour is as inaccessible to the white person as the subjective knowledge of what it is to be a woman is to a man.<sup>13</sup> In order to make a space for this

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<sup>9</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> Monica Mookherjee, ‘Equality in Multiplicity - Reassessing Irigaray’s Multicultural Feminism’, *Feminist Theory*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2005), p. 299; Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, pp. 11-17.

<sup>12</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Ien Ang, ‘Comment on Felski’s “The Doxa of Difference”’: The Uses of Incommensurability’, *Signs*, vol. 23, no.1 (1997), p. 60; Ien Ang, ‘Doing Cultural Studies as

difference within an Irigarayan discourse, I intend to incorporate Ang's work on incommensurability alongside the theoretical analysis of the queer *mestiza* of Gloria Anzaldúa into my methodological approach.<sup>14</sup>

### **A Bridge Between Past and Future**

To comprehend the intricate expression of emotion displayed in 'Catholic Memory', it is pertinent to view it in its broader context within *Loving in the War Years* and thus within Moraga's autobiographical experiences of her faith. Raised in California in a mixed race family, with a Mexican mother and a white American father, Moraga was socially conditioned to equate the Catholic Church with her mother's Mexican culture. Conversely, the denial of this passionate and consuming faith became associated with her father and the academic 'White' world.<sup>15</sup> This experience established a powerful binary understanding of religion and race inside the mind of the young Moraga as these themes became disassociated from the academia, masculinity, and rationality typified by her father. A struggle with situating this binary understanding of culture thus comes to dominate the developing world-view of the young poet. *Loving in the War Years* follows Moraga's negotiation of her own subjectivity and the quest for precisely where each facet of her identity can be expressed. The beginnings of a cohesive social narrative on which to base her resistance and politic are put in place throughout this collection.

Irigaray considers the bridging of past and future narrative of female history essential in the construction of 'Love of Self', a concept key to her theory of sexual difference, wherein she recognises love as an entity between two rather than a coming together in one.<sup>16</sup> If women are denied access to a cultural past or a social lineage, this love of themselves or Other

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the Crossroads: Local/Global Negotiations', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol 13, no. 1 (1998); Ien Ang, 'I'm a Feminist But . . . "Other" Women and Postcolonial Feminism', in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. ed. Regina Lewis and Sara Mills (Routledge, 2003) pp.190-206.

<sup>14</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> 'I left the church in tears, knowing how for so many years I had closed my heart to the passionate pull of such faith that promised no end to the pain. I grew white. Fought to free myself from my cultures claim on me.' Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*. p. ix.

<sup>16</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 66-69.

becomes impossible.<sup>17</sup> The establishment of this bridge thus needs to take place outside of the pervading boundaries of time and space as constructed and understood by men.<sup>18</sup> Moraga's work evidences her endeavour to create this bridge through a combination of the recitation of her experience consciously validated by the second-wave feminist tenant '*the personal is political*', and an incorporation of this experience into the national Mexican myth of identity.<sup>19</sup> As Sandra Soto recognises, "her biography is never meant to be so 'auto' that it is not collective."<sup>20</sup> By recognising within her own experience the experience of other minority groups, she tells a story which can be adopted and understood through the eyes of many, thereby laying the foundations for a shared history upon which can be built a collective identity.

I do not speak simply here of an abstract theory of connectivity and the building of subjectivity as brought forth by a White, middle class woman. Whilst this bridge is essential to Irigaray's construction of a continuum upon which sexual difference, and thus feminine subjectivity, can reside, it is also a concept used by Moraga herself in a book co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*.<sup>21</sup> In a foreword to the second edition, published the same year as the first edition of *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga states "If the image of the bridge can bind us together, I think it does so most powerfully in the words of Donna Kate Rushin, where she insists: 'Stretch . . . or die.'"<sup>22</sup> This bridge thus comes to represent the possibility of creating a space through which an inclusive experience of feminism can exist, wherein difference is recognised, understood and incorporated, rather than assimilated or white-washed into a grand narrative of feminism. This bridge thus comes to allow women - as black, as brown,

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<sup>17</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 69.

<sup>18</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 69.

<sup>19</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. ix (emphasis in original). The most prominent myths of national feminine identity within Mexico are that of La Malinche and La Llorona, both of whom Moraga incorporate into her cumulative history, and who I will explore in greater detail shortly.

<sup>20</sup> Sandra K. Soto, 'Cherrie Moraga's Going Brown "Reading Like a Queer"', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2005), pp. 37-63, 242.

<sup>21</sup> Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> Moraga in Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 'Foreword to the 2nd Edition'.

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as poor and as queer - a space in which we can recognise our own oppression through the oppressions' specificity, rather than its commonality.<sup>23</sup>

Irigaray's recognition of the theoretical unavailability of this bridge for women can be seen to limit Moraga's progress in each direction she strives. The 1983 *Loving in the War Years* maintains underlying themes of revolution, of hope, and most importantly of a passionate quest for identity and acceptance.<sup>24</sup> A strong Xicana lesbian voice speaks of desire; for women, for family and for heritage. It is a voice paired with that of shame; for the values taught by her family, of the exclusivity of not just the Church and patriarchy but of lesbian and feminist communities as well. Most potently however, she speaks of a shame felt due to this desire for a sexuality and heritage she has been denied, a discursive shame felt twice upon recognition that it should not have existed in the first place.<sup>25</sup> The inability to speak of desire without the shadow-voice of shame is recognised to stem from Catholic and cultural teachings by Moraga in 'Catholic Memory' as she states:

cuz someone tell you not to pensar en el pezón  
y pues ya ves  
you already got the pinche picture en tu mente<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 44-45. Anzaldúa mirrors this use of the bridge in regards to queer politics when it comes to drawing initial and inclusive links between the oppressed of different cultural backgrounds. She states, 'Being supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other- the Blacks with Jew with Indians with Asians with whites with extra-terrestrials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another. Colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; have always been at the forefront of all liberation struggles in this country; have suffered more injustices and have survived them despite all odds.' See Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> See for example Moraga, 'Like Family Loving on the Run' in *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 12-38.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p.49, beginning 'To assess the damage is a dangerous act. I think of how, even as a feminist lesbian, I have so wanted to ignore my own homophobia, my own hatred of myself for being queer. I have not wanted to admit that my deepest personal sense of myself has not quite 'caught up' with my 'woman-identified' politics.'

<sup>26</sup> Translates as: 'cuz someone tell you not to think of a nipple and as you see you already got the goddamned picture in your mind'. Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 195.

These lessons provided her with verbal condemnation of female desire, and reinforced it with condemnation of the female *homosexual* desire. Alongside this the negation of a language from which to express her own desire as she grew once more reinforced the voice of shame.<sup>27</sup> This passive voice of shame, whilst reprimanding itself, is undercut throughout the 1983 publication with the active voice of the warrior, a voice witnessed most powerfully in the poem after which the publication is entitled. 'Loving in the War Years' is an allegory of the everyday struggles of war and resistance as the act of Xicana lesbian love in patriarchal society through core themes of desperation, danger and inconsistency.<sup>28</sup>

The poem speaks passionately and prophetically of an unknowable better future, presenting the belief that this war she is fighting is only a temporary state of affairs. Patricia Ybarra recognises this passion in much of Moraga's early works as a kind of naïve belief that the era was truly one of progress and change, a landscape in which the courage of the feminine was all it took to prevail.<sup>29</sup> Ybarra flags the stifling of the Xicana feminist movement by the Xicano nationalist discourse as the end point to this naïve worldview. Whilst I disagree with Ybarra's use of the term 'naivety' I do believe she marks a significant point in the changing consciousness of Moraga, and it is this change that is expressed most pointedly in the final chapter of *Loving in the War Years*.<sup>30</sup>

### **Overcoming Self-Denial in Reconstructed Memory**

Placed at the junction between old writing and new, 'Catholic Memory' expresses the centrality of this shift in attitudes within Moraga's work and the effect this has on her overall world-view. Rather than a politically

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<sup>27</sup> See Irigaray's argument against Lacan in Patrick Fuery, *Theories of Desire* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1995), p. 90. '... women's desire cannot be known or spoken until it has a language with which to speak'.

<sup>28</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 23-24.

<sup>29</sup> Ybarra, 'The Revolution Fails Here', p.81.

<sup>30</sup> The nationalism of the Chicano movement is used to legitimate a political identity among Mexican and Mestizo nationals that transcended the boundaries of religion, location, economic status and class but failed to take in to account gender difference. It is a movement tainted by its denial of female experience and perpetuation of traditional gender roles placing the woman and wife and mother. See Watts, 'Aztlán as Palimpsest', pp. 306-307.

inspired 'street fighter-esque' stance, 'Catholic Memory' is introspective, focusing on a memory upon which much of the shame exhibited earlier on in the text rests.<sup>31</sup> Approaching this poem through the framework of the creative process theorised by Liane Gabora sheds a unique and important light on the role that it plays in connecting Moraga's past and present, highlighting the significant impact that these early experiences had on shaping her social, political and religious identities.<sup>32</sup>

Gabora's theory of creative process, the 'honing theory', emphasises the importance not of the amount of knowledge or experience a person has, but rather the way in which these experiences are connected and related to one another.<sup>33</sup> It is these connections, she argues, that form the basis of our worldview; the way one is able to form relations and links between knowledge and experience which determines the uniqueness of their worldview and thus the creative extent of their work.<sup>34</sup> The role interim experiences have on memory and recollection is an additional primary tenet of honing theory.<sup>35</sup> Gabora argues that no memory can ever be re-experienced as the event initially happened; rather, the memory item is reassembled in light of all experiences that have taken place between the original memory and the time of recollection. It is then one's current condition that most informs the presentation and unconscious appropriation of any memory.<sup>36</sup> Honing theory then has profound implication for both the overt and latent meaning of 'Catholic Memory', within which a world-view is presented to the reader; a world-view which has been gradually shaped and changed by a lifetime's worth of experiences. This memory allows her

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<sup>31</sup> A biographic description of *Loving in the War Years* describes the change in Moraga's voice in the edited addition as that of a 'Zen warrior' contrasting this description with that of the 'guerrilla street fighter' witnessed in the original publication. See 'Books', *Cherrie Moraga*, at [www.cherriemoraga.com](http://www.cherriemoraga.com). Accessed 11/04/2013.

<sup>32</sup> Liane Gabora, 'The Beer Can Theory of Creativity', in *Creative Evolutionary Systems*, ed. P. Bentley and D. Corne (2000), at <http://cogprints.org/3413/1/beercan.htm>. Accessed 15/04/2013; Liane Gabora, 'Creative Thought as a nonDarwinian Evolutionary Process', *Journal of Creative Behaviour*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2005), pp. 262-283; Liane Gabora, 'Holistic Creativity', *Psychology Today* (2010) at <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mindblogging/201008/holistic-creativity>. Accessed 15/4/13.

<sup>33</sup> Gabora, 'The Beer Can Theory of Creativity'.

<sup>34</sup> Gabora, 'The Beer Can Theory of Creativity'.

<sup>35</sup> Gabora, 'The Beer Can Theory of Creativity', pp. 270-271.

<sup>36</sup> Gabora, 'The Beer Can Theory of Creativity', pp. 270-271.

to re-examine the Mexican Catholic roots of her queer guilt through the experiences of her adult life.

The memory approached in ‘Catholic Memory’ is not a single, stand-alone experience but rather a collective assembly of experiences repeated during Moraga’s pre-pubescent years; that of being continually lectured by the missionary sisters at her Catholic girls school. Moraga fuses descriptions of her memories with adult contemplations that skilfully and self-consciously become reflections of what she thought, what she learnt, and where it fits with her current worldview. This merging of her time-space throughout the poem points toward the heavy influence of a Catholic education on her patterns of thought and memory, both past and present. It identifies many of the roots of the shame expressed throughout *Loving in the War Years* as imparted on her from an early age; a shame most deeply embedded in the realm of thought, rather than action; a circumstance of Catholic practice which Moraga identifies as the “catch 22, que te chinga, every time.”<sup>37</sup>

Impure thought is as equally sinful as impure action. The focus of the poem emphasises the impact of these lessons on her formative self, condemned for the impurity of her mind and for the thoughts initiated by the nuns’ descriptions of them. Much like the discursive shame apparent in Moraga’s previous work – through which her feminist persona chastises the part of her which constantly grapples with the shame taught to her by her religion and family in regards to her sexuality – so too is this condemnation reflexive. Not only condemned in ‘Catholic Memory’ is a pre-pubescent Moraga by the nuns’ lesson, but also the lessons themselves. Thus the Church and religious tradition are conversely condemned by an adult Moraga. Therefore, despite years of renouncing the Catholic Church, she has returned full circle to face the entity under which she first became aware of the denial of her own subjectivity, of her gender and her sexuality, which would later lead to the denial of her race and culture.

What I never quite understood until this writing is that to be without a sex—to be bodiless—as I sought to be to escape the burgeoning sexuality of my adolescence, my confused early days of active heterosexuality, and later my panicked lesbianism, means also to be without a race. I never attributed my removal from physicality to have anything to do with race, only sex, only desire for women. And yet, as I

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<sup>37</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p.195. ‘Catholic Memory’ line 7 translates as ‘catch 22, fuck you, every time’.

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grew up sexually, it was my race, along with my sex, that was being denied me at every turn.<sup>38</sup>

Moraga recognises her active neutering of her own sexuality during her teenage years, and an active denial of her racial and cultural identity as well. By removing herself from her body in order to place herself within an acceptable social framework, she was denied two of the most potent factors of her personal subjectivity.

### **The Denial of Feminine Subjectivity in National Myth and Religion: La Malinche and the Catholic Church**

As the icon of womanhood in Mexico, and part of the foundational myth of Mexican identity, discourse surrounding La Malinche plays a vital role in the establishment of cultural attitudes toward women, most commonly indigenous and Mestiza women.<sup>39</sup> She stands as a figure of feminine betrayal and abandonment, propagating a passive, pliant, dominated discourse regarding indigenous femininity.<sup>40</sup> Malinche is commonly referred to as *La Chingada* (“the fucked one”). Her image reinforces the binary concepts of femininity and masculinity, and the indigenous and the coloniser in Mexican and Mestizo discourse. The figure of Malinche symbolically links the feminine to the indigenous, strengthening the understanding of both as weak, and dominated thus further emphasising Irigaray’s concept of intersubjectivity.<sup>41</sup>

The woman is denigrated to the lowest stages of the hierarchy and denied the agency with which to conceive of herself as anything more. Numerous readings of Malinche have taken place, with excessive liberty being taken in regards to her own personal agency, yet the historical figure of Malinche leaves no trace of her own voice, and thus no evidence on

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<sup>38</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 116.

<sup>39</sup> La Malinche, also known as Malintzin, Malinalli, or Dona Marina, was Hernan Cortes’s translator, intercultural interpreter, and mother to his child, and has been symbolically assigned the role of scorned and abject mother of the Mexican people. See Analisa Taylor, ‘Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia: Gendered Visions of Indigeneity in Mexico’, *New Feminist Theories of Visual Culture*, vol. 31, no. 3 (2006), p. 818. She is recognised, in popular discourse, as having a vital role in the Cortes’ conquest of Mexico and the Aztec people, despite the nature of this role being largely contested. Alongside this, she bore Cortes’ child, recognised as the first Mexican, of Indian and Spanish blood. See Jan Stradling, *Bad Girls and Wicked Women* (London: Murdoch Books, 2008), pp. 48-59.

<sup>40</sup> Taylor, ‘Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia’, p. 818.

<sup>41</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, pp. 44-45.

which to base these readings.<sup>42</sup> Rather than designing a feminist or queer reading of the figure of La Malinche, Moraga instead recognises and labels the existing myths as male myths, perpetuating the institutionalisation of female degradation.<sup>43</sup> The development of a national myth that closely mirrors that of Eve in regards to the debasement of women through betrayal and carnal, sexual urges, thus acts to enforce the Catholic gender roles in the colonised society.<sup>44</sup> The understanding of the Xicana, of the indigenous feminine as *la chingada*, is an understanding that has been manipulated and by a “white God-father”,<sup>45</sup> in a manner Moraga likens to that of the implantation of dreams in ‘Catholic Memory’:

just whitedoctors putting sadistic dreams  
of paganbabies&christianconquest  
inside your cabeza-head<sup>46</sup>

Expressed by Moraga here is the double bind in which the Mexican (Catholic) woman finds herself. Adopted into her cultural heritage are ideals implanted by a colonising nation. God pervades every aspect of the Xicana’s identity through the merging of Catholic symbolism with the historical, indigenous figure of La Malinche. Taking from Spinoza’s definition of God, Irigaray explores the nature of the existence of God, of

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<sup>42</sup> Mookjee, ‘Equality in Multiplicity’, p. 308; Norma Alarcón, ‘Traddutora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism’ in *Perspectives of Las Americas: A Reader in Culture, History, & Representation*, ed. by Matthew C. Gutmann, Félix V. Rodríguez, Lynn Stephen and Patricia Zavella (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2003). In this article Alarcon examines some of the different ways the figure of La Malinche has been used to serve different rhetorical purposes. She concludes with an examination of the way in which Moraga has accepted the standing myths of La Malinche as male myths whose purpose is to exercise social control over women (p. 43). Whilst Alarcon makes potentially problematic use of Moraga’s lesbian identity, recognising it as a political tool and choice, she nevertheless provides a detailed account of the previous uses of the historical and mythical figure of La Malinche. See also, Mark Rifkin, ‘Landscapes of Desire: Melancholy, Memory, and Fantasy in Deborah Miranda’s *The Zen of La Llorona*’ in *The Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writings in the Era of Self-Determination* (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) pp. 93-152.

<sup>43</sup> See Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 103-105.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Zavella, “‘Playing with Fire’: The Gendered Construction of Chicana/Mexicana Sexuality”, in *Perspectives of Las Americas: A Reader in Culture, History, & Representation*. ed. Matthew C. Gutmann, Felix V. Rodriguez, Lynn Stephen and Patricia Zavella (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 229; Alarcón, ‘Traddutora, Traditora’, p. 34; Taylor, ‘Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia’, p. 818.

<sup>45</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 111.

<sup>46</sup> Moraga, ‘Catholic Memory’, in *Loving in the War Years*, p. 196, lines 24-26.

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man and of woman.<sup>47</sup> She employs the metaphor of the envelope to further the investigation into conceptual existence, articulating the idea that “that which provides its own space-time necessarily exists”.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, God exists *necessarily* as he provides his own envelope by turning his essence outward, constructing the space in which he exists through his very existence.<sup>49</sup>

Following, the male exists more necessarily than the female as it is from her that he gets his envelope (in the womb and in his role as lover) thus placing woman as the envelope itself, as the potential for existence rather than existence itself.<sup>50</sup> The woman thus constitutes an ‘*available place*’ necessary for the existence of man without truly existing herself.<sup>51</sup> Moraga’s description of a ‘white God-father’ embodies this reading, as it highlights the privileged and empowered position of the white male in Mexican history, dictating the identity of the indigenous female.

The combination then of shame, imparted by the church through the denigration of desire, and nationalist Mexican myth equating femininity with a passive resignation to male colonial rule, stand as two major obstacles to the Xicana lesbian on a quest to construct a female subjectivity that both stands independent to, and yet remains inclusive of, these religious and cultural traditions. The feminine identity actively created through these religious and nationalist myths is disintegrated into nothingness, to what Analisa Taylor recognises to be the “cruel incarnation of the feminine condition;” the loss of name and identity suffered by women through a passivity that opens them to the outside world.<sup>52</sup>

What Taylor here calls ‘nothingness’ I believe to be conducive to Irigaray’s theories of the neutered feminine; the envelope, and both thus merge within ‘Catholic Memory’ to emphasise Moragas’ struggle with embodying a new, gendered subjectivity. In this poem the terms ‘death’ and ‘God’ become interchangeable; they come to represent and symbolise what can be understood to be the neutered, non-space wherein Irigaray describes

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<sup>47</sup> ‘By cause of itself, I understand that, whose essence involves existence; or that, whose nature cannot be conceived unless existing.’ Spinoza, 1952 as quoted in Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 83.

<sup>48</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 83, emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 84.

<sup>50</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>51</sup> Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 84.

<sup>52</sup> Taylor, ‘Malinche and Matriarchal Utopia’, p. 828.

the female subjectivity to reside.<sup>53</sup> A space that ‘is not’, due to its existing only in binary opposition to the male. In ‘Catholic Memory’ this identity is not passively imparted on her through gradual socialisation, but instead through the active power of the Irigaray’s patriarchal order, through Catholicism and national myth. Moraga expresses an understanding of self, forced upon her through the denial of any alternate existence by God, by death and by man.

The active enforcement of a neutered subject position is compounded through the intersection of conflicting cultural codes and expectations, creating a constant state of ‘Othering’ with which Moraga must contend. The incommensurable differences between white, middle class feminist and queer theory stand as an impassable barrier in the creation of a community in which Moraga can exist as Xicana, queer, female. Ang’s discussion of incommensurability paired with Irigaray’s notion of intersubjectivity allows a particular insight into Moraga’s experiences working within a white feminist culture as a woman of colour. Her lack of subjectivity as theorised by Irigaray stands as only a singular aspect of the denial of identity within Moraga’s struggle; manifesting in a denial of cultural difference in both feminist and queer communities.<sup>54</sup>

As Ang recognises “The otherness of ‘other’ women, once they come into self-representation, works to disrupt the unity of ‘women’ as the foundation for feminism.”<sup>55</sup> Ang here points to what I argue to be a primary turning point in worldview and political approach in the work of Moraga. Through involvement in feminist and queer theory emergent from predominantly white culture, Moraga was situated within a discourse that essentialised her subjectivity, allowing her a voice to exist as woman, but denying that of her Xicana self. The fourth line of ‘Catholic Memory’ exhibits this constant Othering through the juxtaposition of Spanish and English when describing the physical locality of her school: “*pero en el otro lado de los tracks*”.<sup>56</sup> The English words thus come to recognise her immediate location, while the Spanish text refers much more to a state of

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<sup>53</sup> In the prose beginning directly after the poems finish Moraga states ‘I call God by the name of death because nothing other than death wields such unyielding power in my life.’ See Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> Ang, ‘I’m a Feminist But...’, p. 196.

<sup>56</sup> This translates as ‘but on the other side of the tracks’. See Moraga, ‘Catholic Memory’ in *Loving in the War Years*, p. 196, line 4.

existence. This description, placed early on in the text, acts to situate her perspective both as a prepubescent girl and as an adult writer. She grew up Other, White in a Xicano family, Xicana in a White society, queer and female in both.

### **Re-imagining Death and Salvation**

As situated within *Loving in the War Years*, ‘Catholic Memory’ thus comes to represent a turning point in Moraga’s approach to her battle with establishing a subjectivity within her familial history, without foregoing any part of her own identity. As previously mentioned, the persona put forth in the first publication of the book epitomises that of the guerrilla warrior, the street fighter. She presents herself, her world-view and her battles passionately and without restraint, full of the belief that her fighting will come to an end; that revolution and change were upon her. Her additions to this volume in 2000 make clear that the most change occurs within her worldview, through the ways in which she understands and connects different aspects of her persona, becoming instead a Zen warrior, confronting death and changing her world from within. The reflective nature of ‘Catholic Memory’ exemplifies this transition as Moraga leads us through experiences that took place more than forty years prior.

Drawing from Buddhist philosophical teachings, to which she has turned in order to provide space in which to understand her existence outside the strictures of Catholicism, she delves into the question of thought. Lines fifteen to twenty of the poem equate Buddhism with her experience of school, more “*thinking on what NOT to think*”.<sup>57</sup> Irrespective of whether these restrictions concern particular ‘impure’ thoughts or thought itself, Moraga finds herself persistently led back to the theme of death.

*‘bout buddhism and emptying the mind de toda la meirda which I never  
been good at  
only good at dying*<sup>58</sup>

The death she speaks of then comes to reflect that of her own subjectivity, of what she understood to be her essence and existence. The contempt held for the Catholic Church and colonialism within this poem is palpably evident, the demonstration of which is used here to flag the results of

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<sup>57</sup> Moraga, ‘Catholic Memory’ in *Loving in the War Years*, p. 195, line 15.

<sup>58</sup> Moraga, ‘Catholic Memory’ in *Loving in the War Years*, p. 195, lines 19-20.

dictating what it is a person (and particularly a woman) should not think. In the act of removing this choice from a prepubescent girl, any potential for subjectivity is removed and a binary is established between what dwells within her and what resides without. This motif of dying is repeated at the close of the poem, placing upon it absolute emphasis, recognising it as the axis of the poems' coming to be.

I knew and kept waiting  
for some Jesus to save me from the word  
the only word: death<sup>59</sup>

The recognition of salvation in the past tense in these closing lines suggests the futility of such hope; she waits here for a promised figure to save her not only from death but from the god that denies her her gender, sexuality and race. The importance of this past tense should not be overlooked, for the implication here is that she once did, but has now stopped waiting.<sup>60</sup> No longer does she wait for a masculinised saviour figure to rescue her from the God whom she fears and hates. Rather than fighting against the force of God/Death/Man she acknowledges the power that the conceptualisation of Him has had in influencing the progression of her worldview and self-identity.

However, even her concept of identity is complex and interconnected as she attempts to construct an all-inclusive conglomeration of two functions recognised as competing by van Alphen.<sup>61</sup> Incorporated into Moraga's narrated identity are the standard markers of both individual and collective identity. It is through these markers of race, age, gender and sexuality that she has learnt to understand herself, an understanding which exists at the fore of her cultural history as it exists in context with her complex personal narrative of relational experiences.

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<sup>59</sup> Moraga, 'Catholic Memory' in *Loving in the War Years*, p. 196, lines 39-41.

<sup>60</sup> The change here can be seen backed up in the body of *Loving in the War Years* where she recognises initial doubt at the promise of salvation; where ever it may come from. 'With no visible Third World feminist movement in sight, it seemed to me to be a Chicana lesbian put me far beyond the hope of salvation'. See Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 116.

<sup>61</sup> 'We continuously demand... 'identity', understood in terms of gender, age, nationality, profession etcetera. As if we are all working at customs, and hardly allowing for flexible self-understandings, complex narratives or relational experiences.' See Floor van Alphen, 'Identities: never the same again?', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Science*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2012), p. 301.

### **Re-constructing Cultural Identity in Genealogy**

Emergent from this connection with collective identity is a new strategy with which to reclaim a subjectivity that fully incorporates gender, sexuality and race. Moraga returns opened armed to her cultural heritage, incorporating national myths and rituals into a cohesive narrative through which her soul, her essence, can be restored to her body. This is seen to reflect the rituals that take place in treating *Susto*, an illness recognised in Mexico as the removal of the soul from the body following a traumatic or shocking experience.<sup>62</sup> Moraga's reference to this is pertinent to our analysis of her quest to establish recognition of difference in multiple cultural settings.<sup>63</sup> As an illness that affects a disproportionate number of women due to greater intracultural stress, *Susto* can be understood as a culturally acceptable reaction to the processes, pressures and identity politics that people (particularly women) are subjected to in Mexican society.<sup>64</sup> Rubel *et. al.* posit that the traumatic or shocking experience that incites *Susto* is always preceded by an incident or series of incidents in which a person is not fulfilling their social and cultural obligations.<sup>65</sup> The stratified gender roles of Mexican society, reinforced by Catholicism and La Malinche, denote that for women this is to be the ability to bare and raise children and for men the ability to provide for them.<sup>66</sup>

Reading Moraga's experience of God through the culturally specific phenomenon of *Susto* informs a particular development of her thinking; that an embodiment of one's culture may indeed be a way to confront the inequalities and biases perpetuated by it. As Moraga comes to delve further into a cultural history denied to her due to the colour of her skin she finds points of identification that are incorporated into her body of

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<sup>62</sup> Susan C. Weller, Roberta D. Baer, Javier Garcia de Alba Garcia, and Ana L. Salcedo Rocha, 'Susto and Nervios: Expressions for Stress and Depression', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, vol. 32, no. 3 (2008), p. 407.

<sup>63</sup> Moraga refers to *Susto* directly following 'Catholic Memory' in the form of a subheading to the chapters' first section of prose. Whilst she makes no further mention of the term throughout the book, an exploration of it sheds a new light on her understandings of both god and death. Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. 196.

<sup>64</sup> O'Neill and Selby (1968) reported on *Susto* among the Zapotecs, indemnifying a greater number of women affected by the illness, concluding that this was due to a greater experience of intracultural stress. Weller et al., 'Susto and Nervios', p. 409.

<sup>65</sup> Arthur J. Rubel, Carl W. O'Neill and Rolando Collado-Ardón, *Susto, A Folk Illness* (Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 1984) p.119.

<sup>66</sup> Rubel et al., *Susto*, pp. 47, 113.

work.<sup>67</sup> Yet more potent in her re-enculturation is the birth of her son, who is more closely tied to her Mestizo heritage than she is, through her conscious choice of a Mexican donor.<sup>68</sup> Embodying her heritage through the conception of a Mexican child thus grants Moraga access into a cultural history she has fought for her entire life, whilst simultaneously positioning her as the mother-figure this culture so demands. Despite the non-conventionality of her coming to embody the mother-figure, Moraga ultimately fulfils her expected role as a woman of Mexican Catholic heritage.

Irigaray posits that it is through maternal or sexed genealogy that women will be able to overcome the Judeo-Christian mythology in which women take the form of Eve (or Malinche), and lack an ideal ego-figure with which to identify.<sup>69</sup> It is here that Moraga's political tract aligns itself with Irigaray's theory of genealogy and maternal responsibility, yet it is not the maternal genealogy that holds utmost importance. Taking into account Moraga's early work, the embodiment and incorporation of Irigaray's maternal can be seen to dominate much of her thinking. It is in following the bloodline of her mother that Moraga comes to reincorporate her cultural history into her life:

My mother's daughter who at ten years old knew she was queer. Queer to believe that God cared so much about me, he intended to see me burn in hell; that unlike other children, I was not to get by with a clean slate. I was born into this world with complications. I had been chosen, marked to prove my salvation. *Todavía soy bien católica* – filled with guilt, passion and incense and the inherent Mexican faith that there is meaning to nuestro sufrimiento en el mundo.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The primary points of identification are the figures of La Malinche and La Llorona, both of whom are images of Mexican and Mestizo womanhood telling stories to which she can relate. Moraga also delves into the myth of Aztlán, a mythical homeland for indigenous Mexican people bearing a close resemblance to the myth of Atlantis. Conceptions of Aztlán situate it in the United States South West, offering the Chicana/o population the promise of a homeland. Moraga eventually deviates from this myth however, as it is bounded to a powerful Mexican homophobia. See Cherrie Moraga, 'Queer Aztlán; The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe', in *Queer Formations and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Carlin and Di Grazie (2004); Watts, 'Aztlán as a Palimpsest'; Soto, 'Cherrie Moraga's Going Brown', p. 265; Bow, 'Hole to Whole', p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, pp. 210-212.

<sup>69</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, p. 73.

<sup>70</sup> Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, p. ix. See also 'If I were to build my womanhood on this self-evident truth, it is the love of the Chicana, the love of myself as a Chicana I had to

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In coming to face death, and face God, this maternal genealogy failed to provide Moraga with an all-encompassing subjectivity that did not deny primary aspects of her identity. She still cannot construct an equation in which her sexuality is accounted for, nor can she partake in dialogue with the masculine half of her culture.

The *mestizo* and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.<sup>71</sup>

These ideas of soul and blood are what tether Moraga to life as she perpetually confronts death, recognising the process of it and her agency within, rather than against this process. She thus comes to identify herself as her own saviour, as the saviour for the next generation, turning as much attention to the development of young Xicano boys as she does to the girls; asserting the need for a changed world-view of both men and women in order to establish foundations for the continuation of her culture within the homogenising culture of the United States. Anzaldúa points to the intensity in which men's expected gender roles are forced upon them, much as they are women.<sup>72</sup> She identifies the Xicano male's inability to break free from expectations of a culturally specific masculinity, acting only to reinforce the oppression of women.<sup>73</sup>

I wish to pause here to flag the importance of this move to function with her cultural and religious framework. Not only does she work to establish a progressive genealogy, she also engages with a particular machinery, which many feminists are incapable of doing. Rather than presenting the smug secularism Judith Butler identifies as typical of the movement, she instead engages "critically and insistently... open[ing] a sustained conflict on the place and meaning of religious authority".<sup>74</sup> Her implemented teachings through her hybridised religious and political stance in regards to her students and family thus come to be the pinnacle of her

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embrace, no white man. Maybe this ultimately was the cutting difference between my brother and me. To be a woman fully necessitated my claiming the race of my mother', p. 86.

<sup>71</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 107.

<sup>72</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, pp. 105-107.

<sup>73</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>74</sup> Judith Butler, 'Afterword', in *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.289.

political work. As Irigaray calls for a new socialisation process employed by mothers toward both boys and girls in order to establish two unique and gendered subjectivities, so too does Moraga turn later to the teaching of young males.<sup>75</sup> She exemplifies the importance of Irigaray's focus on genealogy, on the relationship and influence the mother has on moulding the identity and thus subjectivity of future generations. Maintaining the importance of the female line throughout her work, Moraga turns at the end toward her son; to her nephews and her male students. This move toward the male subjectivity points toward her attempts to establish an order that will allow the continuation of her work after her life, recognising that death exists both internally and externally, and will not cease to hold the same power over her as it did when she was nine.

### **Conclusion**

The change I address here is a significant move toward a general acceptance of death, God and patriarchal rule, between 1983 and 2000, but is in no way a comprehensive look at the evolution of Moraga's attitudes toward these themes. Future studies into her most recent publication *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*<sup>76</sup> will enable a far greater understanding of this progression and its subsequent impact on political movements. Yet what 'Catholic Memory' marks, within the scope presented here, is a critical development in the political, social and personal worldview of Cherrie Moraga. As a prolific activist writer, the work of Moraga has a significant impact on the progression of the political movements of queer and feminist women of colour, and thus queer and feminist movements as a whole.

The impact of religion in both her personal history and her collective cultural history holds profound weight in her understanding of self and attempted developments of subjectivity. Both her patriarchal Catholic education and the subsequent disseminations of the iconic figure La Malinche have stood, and continue to stand, as impassable obstacles in Moraga's pursuit. They are obstacles which instigate significant changes in her relationships toward these institutional beliefs, proceeding to alter her perceptions of life, death, and the possibilities of cultural progression. It is reactions to this change that will instigate ripples in the political

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<sup>75</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>76</sup> Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness*.

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movements following the work of Moraga, as her focus on genealogy and cultural longevity through familial lines increases. The embodiment of the Zen warrior, of her Mexican Catholic heritage, and of the patriarchal line, thus allow Moraga to establish an enduring base upon which feminine subjectivities can continue to be worked at, despite the constant and continual degradation from patriarchal, Catholic powers.