

“Iconoclasm of identity: Shaping the mainstream through
‘Phantom Patria’ in the works of Svich , Rivera, Fornes and Moraga”

Mikhail Bakhtin credits the Russian scholar Vyacheslav Ivanov with the first proper “groping towards this basic structural feature of Dostoevsky’s artistic world”¹. By this Bakhtin is referring to Ivanov’s idea of ‘affirming someone else’s “I”’ as a central characteristic concerning the relative freedom of Dostoevsky’s characters that Bakhtin was later to build his work on. In his notion of ‘dialogism’ within a novel and between voices heard and unheard in it, Bakhtin goes further than Ivanov’s ‘affirmation’, which can be seen as a type of religious and cathartic sympathy forcing a character (and the reader) to aspire to a single, pre-determined end or identity.

Making fictive voices within a novel more open-ended and thus more democratic - meaning being freed from the objectification of the author - Bakhtin doesn’t completely forgo a kind of objectification of the character: namely that by the reader. However, this serves another purpose. Bakhtin now makes meaning in the novel more jointly subservient between reader, text and author, but he has changed the setting by making the reader more responsible or politicised the reader. This means at least two things. First, this does allow for multiple interpretations from the novel, something that, as new voices arise, will reflect in the society(ies) that read it. In this sense the thoughts of Bakhtin’s will have a liberating effect forcing a negotiation of positions in a society as represented (in types of) fiction.

Secondly, as in a sense, the creativity of the reader or audience is turned on, they are simultaneously made aware of their creating or participating: of their authority of voice. How this relates to Bakhtin and his link between literature, language and democratic negotiation is important (as seen with later critics from Julia Kristeva to, more recently, the critic and playwright Caridad Svich) as this removes the idea of the static or neutral reader.

In her article ‘Drama and the Dialogic Imagination’, Helene Keyssar critiques Bakhtin’s oddly dismissive attitude towards drama. Bringing Bakhtin into the realm of feminist drama and performance, she writes: “The continuous recreation of meaning, what Bakhtin calls the heteroglossia

of communication, is the basic condition and phenomenon of theatre”². Keyssar then continues on to reveal the polyphonous possibilities of drama, starting from Greek tragedy to contemporary ‘avant-garde’ theatre like that of Maria Irene Fornes’s; dropping a hint as to the growing importance of multiple interpretation of voices, in the dialogue of contemporary society.

The intention of this essay, likewise, is not to provide any kind of in-depth ‘Bakhtinian’ interpretations of the subject matter, but only to discover links between such types of thinking and a specific theory, mentality or state, of cultural exchange: the concept of a ‘Phantom Patria’ by Caridad Svich. The aim, also, is to explore how the playwrights in the title of the essay have negotiated issues around the notion of ‘Phantom/Patrias’; in ways that are manifest through the aesthetics and style of the writers in the general ideological worlds or specified ethnic, cultural, sexual or political contexts that engage the characters, playwrights and audience.

Caridad Svich re-coins the term ‘Patria’, usually a place of origin, a motherland, in her essay “Home, desire, memory: There are no borders here” - she describes it as “the repository of memory”³. Although this term and the context (Svich’s cultural and ethnic ‘heritage’) which it is placed in has an instantly geographical ring to it, it is an extremely ambiguous term. It is not, along with similar questions of ‘longing’, directly obvious what memory wraps in itself. Adding the attribute ‘phantom’ is equally ambiguous. Adding it naturally helps in the geographical-cultural sense, but to read deeper into these terms, one can see ‘Phantom Patria’ as a tool of critiquing the notion of ‘patria’, a ‘meta-patria’ from a theorist who doesn’t see questions of culture and identity as something one can ‘dissect’ clearly.

It can’t necessarily be said that memory is a discriminantly mental issue, it could well include the body. It is not sure what is longed for. Including the body into the theoretical framework allows for ‘oblique’ tangents in theory – ideas not ironed out by systems – to enter into the dialogue and inform points of view. It is likely that, untouched upon by Bakhtin, issues around his term ‘Tchuzhoi’ (other, different) – which had to do with different epochs, voices (in literary texts and society) and economic class – could now be appropriated by contemporary questions of ‘the Other’. It is interesting to see possibilities of ‘Phantom/Patrias’, for an audience, involving issues of gender, issues around gender, sexual/political, ethnic orientations, a topic I shall return to later.

All of these playwrights seem to be approaching questions surrounding ‘Otherness’ within one’s identity, from different angles and apparently for different reasons. However, one peculiarity arises from the searching of these individual writers: whatever this Otherness concerns, presuming they admit to it, they will not show – at least not directly. They are all ‘Hispanic’ or

'Latino', or labelled so, and so this should undoubtedly be a common feature - however it is not obvious that this theme of Latinidad should be the most important - named - reason for that appearance of types of 'Phantom/Patria' in their plays.

Some of their plays - with Fornes especially - are conspicuous in lack of Latino ethnic markers: some use these markers for different political ends but at least the dynamics of topics discussed are there; gender, sexuality, morality (though no clear answers), dynamics in sexual and race-relations. Perhaps, more accurately, it would be appropriate to speak of the possibility of interpreting elements of 'Phantom/Patrias' within the plays - rather than to forcibly claim that these playwrights all intended to deal with 'multiple voices'. This is especially interesting with Maria Irene Fornes and her legacy; a writer, who as a director wants to exert strict authorial control over her text, but who as a writer strives to liberate text from its own limitations of exposition, sexual politics etc.

These writers come from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Argentina, Spain, the east coast and the west coast - to presume a clear, Disney-ed homogeneity in the experiences and work of these people, other than arising from the influence of Fornes on her pupils, is indicative of 'our' (western 1st world) culture and the way the western world sees itself as 'unified' and, as strongly seen with Rivera, Moraga and Svich, almost without a proper (understanding) of history.

Caridad Svich utilises different styles of imagery and writing as she develops her ideas and lets the situations of her plays unfold. This merging of different aesthetics and sensibilities is not a difficult space for her, although, bringing confusion along with joy and knowledge it is not the simplest of solutions. She writes: "These phantom images of countries that are in my blood-memory have created in me an anoramiento, a longing, for places I hardly even know, and have made me feel as if I am also in exile. Out of this paradoxical state, I write, re-imagining the United States from within".⁴

Svich's identity reflects not only her North American, Latina but also European roots. Reading her texts one sees how an all-pervasive idea of influences affects a 'make-up' of her identity: everything she's lived, everything she's experienced or read - is part of her. She speaks 'from situations', from cross-roads, from a point, where you can see the dimensions of a unique and particular existence. She writes elsewhere⁵ about the importance of being present and staying active. Of taking action.

The theme of active/passive and how it relates to identity is something passed on from Fornes (from Chekhov) to Svich. The idea of not becoming, the notion of the dynamics of life, the possibility of saying something significant as a human and changing something importantly." Any

Place but Here” and “Alchemy of Desire” may be very differently constructed plays of hers , but the same questions of mental space that the characters inhabit arise in both. This, in a sense, is a question of border-crossing. Her characters are in motion , searching but not exactly lost.

In “Any Place but here , beginning with character names and their social status, jobs – are all reflective of latino markers of ethnicity. The sexual tensions and politics are unsaid but close to the typified ‘Latino’ gender positions. Only, the whole play is draped in a transgressive white or that is, neutral, as it were, identity. The male characters, as often in the plays of Fornes, are not simply bad, they are unaware of who and what they are (as, I might add, are the women, though in a less privileged position): characters like Tommy in “Any Place” , miss their ticket to redemption, In a psychological sense, passivity and acceptance of a typified position in life equals death.

There is the possibility, reading ‘the materials’ of the play, thus to interpret different stress-points in the play, depending on how you are going to justify different characters (and their cultural contexts) . In another example, as critique of a self-promoting homogenous image of the United States, Chucky, on his way to decomposition, sits in front of the television. He is looking, rather being programmed, without watching – as Lydia arrives to ‘challenge’ the box, he has no intelligent opinions to offer her – in fact, he can’t see the point of entering into a personal conversation with her.

By the time, in scene six, Chucky has had a movement towards ‘clarity’, as he imagines it – her character is past waiting for him – although at the end, Lydia and Veronica don’t have a master plan, they have changed. They have become aware of themselves; geographically and mentally.

Negotiating ones Latino identity within the mainstream, without a clear map of the future, is also a strong theme of Jose Rivera. In his plays “The House of Ramon Iglesia” and “Marisol”, Rivera portrays two situations, or two stages of a similar situation, where a protagonist of ‘hybrid’ identity has to negotiate and come to terms with his or her situation in life. In Rivera’s work, the theme of ‘Phantom/Patria’ is multiplied, as the main protagonists are clearly defined as already specifically of dual cultures, with in busy city landscapes. The theme of family, or rather loss of family, and familiarity, is developed in quite a different manner than traditionally opted.

“Marisol” ends, ambiguously, with a sinisterly positive promise of iconoclastic, revolutionary light.” Oh God,” Marisol says, “what light, what possibilities. What hope”.⁶ To these lines could well be added question marks and read again: “What light?”. In a sense, to link Rivera’s plays to the theme discussed – that of negotiating ‘Phantom/Patria’ – one could say that his plays here offer a kind of

existential deconstruction of what comes before 'the big change', the change that may or not come, at the end of "Marisol" and "Ramon Iglesia".

It could on the other hand work as a mirror at the end of a tunnel, reflecting the changes that occurred during the play. Then this, as the previous reading would offer an interpretation close to Svich's idea of flux of reality – the idea that waiting for a clearly defined, bordered, change is futile: Change is ever constant. Comparing "Alchemy" with "Marisol", or "Any Place but Here" with "The House of Ramon Iglesia", one also gets characters that have strongly 'crossed over' previous definitions of their being. Here we get strong and partly ambiguous female characters (in "Marisol" and "Alchemy"), stereotypical sexual relations suspended ("Any Place") and assimilated and emasculated male characters ("The House of Ramon Iglesia").

Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez discusses the location of 'home' and compares characters of different plays with 'hybrid' latino-anglo identities in his article "There's no Place like Home"⁷. At the end of the article, re-phrasing the theorist bell hooks, he presents a view of Latino theatre in the States as a forum for "positioning multiple discursive locations" about identity and home.⁸ Although he does not directly state so, one gets the sense from the end, that although Latino theatre offered multiple standing or viewing points, there was a progression towards an identity in its theatre – or identities.

This is something that could be in conflict with Bakhtin's or Svich's ideas on culture, history, on identity and importantly, on public speaking – ways of addressing. The sense, that because Milagros in "Botanica" is able to re-claim her Hispanic identity, this – "in the post-modern world" – could act as a milestone, and thus be ready for labelling; something, possibly, to contrast with the ends in "Marisol" and "Ramon Iglesia", where "the protagonists wander, homeless".⁹

Additionally, although all these plays concern a 'meeting', a border experience, reading the Milagros – character in this way, one is closer to an interpretation of 'the Other' in the sense of the aforementioned Ivanov. 'Millie' confronts her 'real' self in a cathartic-like, cleansing experience (of tradition, reality, duty) and reverts to the 'type' of what she ought to be - instead of catering to a range of 'Phantom' images, by negating the meaning or by not describing specifiedly.

As Dolores Prida's "Botanica" offers a resolution in the end and the Rivera plays don't it is well possible that there is a reason for these different functional endings – they could be texts meant to do different things, work for different audiences or in different ways.

Maria Irene Fornes avoids being labelled in limiting terms. Oftentimes when read, these plays - plays that contain significant wrongdoings – aim to de-stabilise the act of naming/blaming, as

audiences often directly do. Blame, often placed on a centred point, a character usually, by the audience is not seen as an act of making and placing meaning upon something else. By removing this instance of dramatic tension and release, Fornes reveals the intimate humanity she has for the system that surrounds dramatic storytelling. It involves fictional people, with vague characteristics on one level and on another, very specific definitions of character. These characters could be us. It involves actors, an audience – experiencing. It involves living a situation, coping.

Her plays are regularly commented on as not being specifically Latino enough, though curiously, should she establish a ‘certain’ Latino identity she’d have a more success, as she would immediately be appropriated as a product of some certain ideology. But, it seems, here is where the political influence of Fornes’s work comes into its own. And here is where Fornes’s strong connection to a notion of ‘Phanton/Patria’ comes into the picture.

By fluctuating between traditions, cultures and the identities familiar to her and by using each of their ‘currencies’ involved, she contributes to a “Hispanic historical tradition in which the artist and the intellectual are privileged as spokesperson or critic”, as Lissette Camacho and Phyllis Zarkin have pointed out while discussing the most Latino-specific play “The Conduct of Life”¹⁰. The notion of Fornes, in her economic and at times abstract style, not being somehow engaged in the discourse of Latino identity seems now misguided.

Furthermore, showing a (non-specific) political or critical agenda in Fornes’s work, Camacho and Zarkin continue: “by placing torture within a domestic setting, Fornes is able to draw upon her North American audience’s familiarity with issues of violence in the home and military regimes abroad”.¹¹ True to her literary influence of Chekhov and reflective of post-structuralist ideas concentrating on what is absent or not said, the politics of her works (or at least within her works) in negating and often depicting limitations, constrictive situations.

By writing in a well-thought out, clear but far from obvious (as far as meaning is concerned) style, she also turns on its head the assumptions regarding “what a Latina/lesbian/woman can write about”. By entering, as in Svich’s “Any Place but Here”, which Fornes has directed, the realm of ‘neutral whiteness’ - a presumed transparent identity in which a ‘majority’ sees itself as the norm, and thus names minorities as ‘Other’ – Fornes topples over expectations of authority or authorial, ‘genuine’ voice.

But it isn’t mere political manipulation, as through this method, she reflects identity of hers, in which the Latina sensibility plays with the North American sensibility. Through her own aesthetic –and aesthetic is important as with Fornes form is a key to substance – she approaches the

'Phantom/Patrias' of Svich. She subscribes to the lack of specificity of extraneous details, to reach and stretch to new dimensions, to keep a dynamic flow in art, in life. In a sense, we've come back to Bakhtin and to his comments on the influence of the new genre, the (C19th Russian) novel on the old genres, drama being one of them. He writes:" The new genre makes the old ones, so to speak, more conscious".¹²

No doubt, Fornes's background in painting and the avant-garde movement of the day, has contributed to the essence of place, of 'situating' and to the de-stabilisation of identities, in the plays, often being denied plot in conclusion or proper narrative context. In a sense, instead of moving artificially forward, her plays insist on being a more contemplative masque, in which the seats of power change as in musical chairs.

The problems that direct political theatre brings along with it, specifically the demands by the Chicano community, the gay and lesbian community and the feminists, forms an important side of Cherrie Moraga's work. The most overtly candid of playwright of the set above, she too needs to negotiate the position she has between the power of representation and the (identity of) the powers that want her to represent. The search for womanhood and specifically of a lesbian sensibility within her Chicana identity, is one of her most central themes: "We are not allowed bodies. We are not allowed to be anything but virgin or whore – who is the lesbian in that?"¹³

Moraga's female characters are also clearly the most vividly sexual of the latina characters discussed. Both legitimising a Latin 'spirit' of kind, of a very different, sexual woman and playing on the exploited image of the 'bombshell', she places into dialogue with our cultural material an ambiguous nature, one in motion, of the latina lesbian – which, according to her, is somewhat of a paradox.

For Moraga, the 'Phantom/Patrias' disappear as elements of a type of dialogic evolution. She is chiselling away at the marble, to find a very specific identity. "I call myself a Chicana writer, not a Mexican-American writer, not a Hispanic writer, not a half-breed writer. To be a Chicana is not merely to name one's racial/cultural identity, but also to name a politic, a politic that refuses assimilation into the US mainstream".¹⁴

Regarding the types of audience Moraga is targeting – chicana especially – and thinking of the inclusion of 'mythic' elements in her plays such as "Heroes and Saints", as well as the political rhetoric in interviews, one sees a battle of cultural materials and signifying at large. The characters Cerezita as well as characters devoid of contact with such mythic sources, such as Ana Perez, offer alternatives in (the) progression of Latinas.

Ana Perez, the newsreporter of "Heroes and Saints", one presumably anglicised latina, comes over to the fictional town of McLaughlin to interview the little people, Los Rancheros. She has completely assimilated the 'make-up and hair' gringa identity (a biased view, of course), and has no connection with those, who more than likely are meant to be her people.

To have an interface with her community is of prime importance to Moraga in re-claiming an identity that was never there but the foundations of which were long ago appropriated: 'mother, virgin, whore'. Following in the steps of Luis Valdez, though standing independent, Cherrie Moraga is reclaiming an identity lost (specific Chicana identity) and an identity not yet found (lesbian Chicana identity) to take part in a world of voices that shine in their unique light.

In one way or many other, Svich, Rivera, Fornes and Moraga have approached the issues of 'Phantom/Patria', assimilation, home, identity, gender and reality. They would have their own opinions on a quotation like Guillermo Gomez-Pena's: "The Border is all we share"¹⁵, some demanding a specified, unique position, some emphasising the experience of fluidity of experience and identity.

Similarly, what and how (much) we know and who we offer this knowledge to, has developed multiple answers as the play-texts of Fornes and her disciples slide from anonymous and cool-toned stories to passionate, ethnic-specific latino histories using mainstream influences to reverberate its culture's numbers in the 'real' world.

But the issues surrounding the audience's reception of such efforts is interesting. It is so, in the light of imagined, foreign, phantom, 'Patrias': questions of gender, identity, issues around sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual politics, ethnicity and representation of culture. Questions of politics, religion, truth - that one doesn't belong to, or here, feels s/he only partially belongs to. What is the baggage one brings to an aesthetic experience/situation; how does one establish unity with a certain representation, does one (want to) believe what s/he sees or want to comment on it?

Do we have 'an Identity'? Could it be, we have an 'identity make-up'¹⁶, like our genetic make-up, which we construct mentally and socially? We learn things from our family situations, our habitus, from the stage, screen. Can we, then, change different features within it, deconstruct parts of it. Wouldn't it be a significant, though some would say naïve, change if we could learn to deconstruct our desire towards life.

So, then, going to a play by a Chicana lesbian playwright, could a white, heterosexual girl consciously suspend the elements 'heterosexual, white' from her mental make-up, and follow a lesbian narrative without the baggage that a 'straight' ideology might have? Could then a white straight man

go to the same performance and suspend (as in 'belief') his polarisation¹⁷ or desire and also fetishisation towards a lesbian woman, as a male ? Could they then have learned this 'deconstruction' from versions of it reflected in dialogue by Fornes and Svich?

Notes

¹ Pg. 10 Mikhail Bakhtin : "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics" ed. C. Emerson (1984 MUP)

² pg. 110 Helene Keyssar (ed.) 'Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: The Heidi Chronicles and Fefu and her friends' in "Feminist Theatre and Theory"

³ pg.3 Caridad Svich : "Home, Desire, Memory: There are no Borders here (A Latina playwright comes of age in America)" (1994: a talk at the University of Cincinnati)

⁴ Ibid., pg.3

⁵ C.Svich : "RATs nest : How to work within an Institution and still be a rat, or, how to stay dirty in a 'Clean ' house" (1999: speech at RAT conference)

⁶ pg.68 Jose Rivera: "Marisol" in "Marisol and other plays" (1997 N.Y.: Theatre Communications Group)

⁷ Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez : 'There's no Place like Home' in " Jose,can you see?" (1999: University of Wisconsin Press)

⁸ Ibid., pg.197

⁹ Ibid., pg. 196

¹⁰ pg. 147 Maria Delgado and Caridad Svich (eds.) in "'Conducting a life': Reflections on the Theatre of Maria Irene Fornes" (1999: Lyme; Smith &Kraus)

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 147

¹² pg.271 :"'Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics", however on how how Bakhtin continues – on the naivete of these old genres and boundaries – I doubt Fornes would agree.

¹³ Interview in The San Francisco Sentinel Nov. 8,1990 by Katia Noyes : "The Dream World of Cherrie Moraga"

¹⁴ pg. 32 Cherrie Moraga : 'Art in America con acento' in "Negotiating Performance" (1994 Duke University Press ; eds. D.Taylor and J.Villegas)

¹⁵ pg. 20 Guillermo Gomez-Pena 'The Multicultural Paradigm' in "Negotiating Performance"

¹⁶ The following is extended from an earlier idea of mine, as a critique of Laura Mulvey's notion of 'male gaze' as defining 'male' as a fixed, unevolving identity – something that narrows the use of her theory.

¹⁷ I use 'polarisation' , as many of these discourses are – presently – based on binary group(ing)s: fe/male, white/Other, straight/gay, left/right .