

QUEERING THE CHICANA FAMILIA IN CHERRÍE MORAGA'S *WAITING IN THE WINGS*

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ABSTRACT

Between the social imposition of childlessness upon lesbians and the cult of maternity enforced against Latinas, Cherríe Moraga asserts that the notions of motherhood and family are not given by nature, but are social constructs derived from patriarchal traditions that dominate Mexican-American communities. *Waiting in the Wings* narrates how Moraga has managed to reconcile her homosexual identity and her Mexican ancestry by means of her project of queer motherhood to conceive a *familia* of her own making. Blending emotional pain on account of her son's precarious health before/during/after his birth together with her political intention to legitimize the sexual diversity existing among Chicanas, Moraga's life-writing illustrates how she embraces certain elements of her proud *Mexicanismo*, which are presumably impediments to becoming a lesbian mother: the transmission of physical and cultural bloodlines from mother to child, including family values and roles. Paradoxically, Moraga's homosexual maternity enhances the preservation of her Mexican origins, while strengthening a sisterhood among Chicanas

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and other women. Moreover, Moraga devises a new female spirituality of her own, whereby the cult of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Catholic rites harmonize with her queer motherhood to offer her solace and hope for her child's ultimate survival.

Keywords: Cherríe Moraga, lesbianism, motherhood, queer, family

RESUMEN

Entre la prohibición social de no procrear contra las mujeres lesbianas y el forzoso culto a la maternidad en culturas hispanas, Cherríe Moraga defiende que los conceptos de familia y de ser madre no son naturales, sino que están sometidos a leyes patriarcales en las comunidades chicanas de Estados Unidos. En *Waiting in the Wings* Moraga reconcilia su *Yo* homosexual con el *Nosotros* de sus ancestros mexicanos gracias a su proyecto de maternidad *queer* para gestar una familia propia. Conjugando sufrimiento ante la precaria salud de su hijo antes, durante y después de su nacimiento con su reivindicación política sobre la diversidad sexual existente entre las mujeres chicanas, la obra de Moraga abraza determinados elementos de su orgullo mexicanista que son, a priori, impedimentos para convertirse en madre lesbiana: la transmisión de roles y valores familiares, o de una genética física y cultural de madre a hijo. Paradójicamente, la maternidad *queer* de Moraga preservará sus raíces mexicanas, amamantará su vida espiritual gracias a la Virgen de Guadalupe y a ritos católicos, así como reforzará su hermandad con otras mujeres, chicanas o no—todos ellos bálsamos que le aportarán consuelo y esperanza en la lucha de su hijo por sobrevivir.

Palabras claves: Cherríe Moraga, lesbianismo, maternidad, *queer*, familia

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1. INTRODUCTION

By virtue of the traditional conflation of motherhood and heterosexuality, the patriarchal law of childlessness has governed the life of closeted and openly lesbian women throughout the 20th century. In western countries, this reproductive prohibition based upon non-normative sexual orientation has not been solely determined by biological rules. Instead, all-pervasive sexual and social

mores, religious beliefs and scientific discourses have dictated that becoming a homosexual mother is a violation of natural family models —unconceivable, sinful or, ultimately, abnormal— even into the 21st century. In fact, Diana Taylor holds that the question of who gets to be a mother and the struggles awaiting lesbians choosing non-traditional maternal paths, reflect that motherhood is, by definition, a political decision (1997). In turn, for married heterosexual women not becoming a mother has not been a personal choice until recent times. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir was a pioneer in diagnosing the nausea of being a mother beyond any physiological symptom of illness during pregnancy. Since then, women's intelligentsia, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, have also nurtured a thorny debate around the binary opposition between the so-called maternal feminism, which celebrates women's choices to become mothers, and the anti-motherhood factions against Freud's prison of anatomy —thus, maternity— as women's only viable destiny in life. Heather Maroney argues that movements for gender equality walk “a tightrope strung between offensive and defensive poles” (1985: 44). Such movements must validate what a woman does as a parent, while contesting the patriarchal glorification of her social role as a mother “at the expense of the occupant” (1985: 44). Many lesbian scholars have joined the anti-motherhood factions within feminism, not to (re)produce a heterosexual world, but to stress that the inevitable destiny of maternity enslaves the female population. For instance, Jeffner Allen urges all women not to see conception as an escape from patriarchy because the female body is not a resource to be used by men to produce men and the world of men, so women must be self-sufficient and protect themselves from “male invasion” (1996: 43).

Within this controversial sociopolitical climate towards the late 20th century, becoming a mother is even a more difficult choice for lesbian Chicanas under a triple yoke: firstly, the pressure from Mexican-American families over Latinas to become nothing else but self-sacrificing wives and mothers, although always under the compulsory paradigm of Catholic, heterosexual, and wedded parenthood; secondly, the stigmatization of homosexual women inside and outside Chicana/o communities, equally sentenced to the death of an empty uterus; and thirdly, the social prejudices against

Latinas as poor, illiterate immigrants in the United States who traditionally produce a large number of offspring.

By amalgamating her persona and her private self in her works, Cherríe Moraga (1952-) defends the diversity of identities within one single woman —herself: a middle-class American, a Chicana author, scholar and professor, a feminist activist, and a butch lesbian. In sharing her most intimate experiences, Moraga, in fact, has created a public voice for Chicana lesbian identity politics, making demands for entitlement as citizens in multiple social arenas of heretofore historical exclusion and marginalization, like U.S. mainstream society, Chicano nationalism, white middle-class feminism, and the gay/lesbian movement (Yarbro-Bejarano 2001). Despite Moraga's upper-class status as a prestigious Chicana intellectual, she never forgets her working-class origins or her understanding of the stigma of poverty suffered by Mexican-Americans, notably Chicanas, who traditionally depend upon male breadwinners and are themselves often condemned to domestic roles. Cherríe Moraga's professional career demonstrates that she can smoothly move within a territory of shifting sands between traditionalism and radicalism, between her highly-esteemed Mexican ancestry and her U.S. pride, between her active campaigning for the rights of women or homosexuals and her reverence for ancient Hispanic customs and culture.

As a lesbian Chicana theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa explores the complex territory of in-betweenness for homosexual Latinas, who struggle to build their sexual and bicultural identity, and to overcome gender, homophobic, and racist prejudices in America. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa highlights that Mexican and Indigenous communities traditionally have “no tolerance for deviance” (2007: 40), and that they condemn personal ambition, selfishness and those who disrespect family and social hierarchies (2007), notably to include gays and rebellious women. However, despite her sexual orientation and ambitious individual choices, Cherríe Moraga identifies herself as a U.S.-born woman of color— a Chicana. Irrespective of having a caring Anglo father and her poor Spanish language skills, she obliterates her whiteness and celebrates her *Mexicanismo* in her public appearances and works, which is

ultimately enhanced when she decides to expect a child and create her own family: “Mexican is the only way we know how to make familia” (Moraga 1997: 121). Indeed, becoming a mother further problematizes —yet also enriches— her already-diversified identity as a lesbian Chicana writer living in San Francisco.

Monique Wittig states that lesbians do not “associate, make love, live with women, for ‘woman’ has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought” (1992: 32); thus, “lesbians are not women” (1992: 32). In *Waiting in the Wings*, Cherríe Moraga describes her own resentment about the fact that, for decades, she has been driven to disavow her own female sex because of her homosexuality. Moreover, she confesses that she had been indoctrinated by the predominant heterosexual ideology, which rigidly established that lesbianism and motherhood were exclusive categories: “We were women-lovers, a kind of third sex, and most definitely not men. Having babies was something ‘real’ women did—not butches” (Moraga 1997: 20). Nevertheless, the heartbreaking separation from the young boy she coparented for some years with his lesbian mother awakened Moraga’s presumably non-existent maternal instincts. This life episode led her to reconsider the option of biological maternity at the age of forty, and thus, to build a *familia* of her own making. This essay elucidates how Moraga’s choice of queer motherhood, and her subsequent act of writing *Waiting in the Wings* (1997), reconcile the *I* of her lesbian sexuality and the *We* from her Chicana/o community. This article also explores how Moraga embraces some elements from her Hispanic lineage, such as the importance of family, sisterhood, genetics, and religion when she undertakes the queer project of becoming a lesbian Chicana mother in California during the 1990s. In particular, Moraga celebrates her spiritual life rooted in the veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a powerful female icon in Mexican culture and the nurturer of hope among (female) sufferers, while also revising the supposedly intrinsically evil nature of other traditional mythical mother figures from Mexico’s patriarchal folklore.

2. **MEXICANISMO WITHIN QUEER MOTHERHOOD**

Waiting in the Wings recollects the painful and traumatic, yet inspiring journey of Cherríe Moraga towards the final destination

of queer motherhood. Enfolded within a prologue and an epilogue, its trinitarian structure consists of: “City of Angels”, where the author narrates the maternal stages from sexual conception through a high-risk pregnancy, resulting in the premature birth of her son at the twenty-eighth week of gestation; “Waiting in the Wings” about the first months of life and the struggles to survive for her sick baby Rafael Angel in a neonatal intensive care unit; and “Dream of a Desert” as the snapshots of Moraga’s mothering practices at home and the eventual recovery of her child’s health. The chronology of her diary accentuates its objectivity and linearity by recounting the different stages to gradually build her queer *familia*. In contrast, the meandering flow between her matrilineal tongue, Spanish, and the linguistic rules of her American fatherland, English, enhances the subjectivity reflected in her autobiographical account, or according to Anzaldúa’s term, her “mestiza consciousness” (2007: 99). Nevertheless, this language shifting is not an obstacle but instead represents an advantage for the narrative circularity in *Waiting in the Wings* because the nucleus of this memoir is Moraga’s building of her new identity as a lesbian Chicana mother.

The notion of queer refers not only to non-normative gender and sexual identities but, according to William Turner, queerness also means that those categories universalized by language and philosophical tradition can be contested when one fails to fit into such categories (2000). Thus, becoming a lesbian parent would be doubly queer because it implies the reevaluation of two traditionally heterosexual categories: woman and mother. Margaret Gibson contends that conventional motherhood can be queered when its expected sexual, gendered, relational, political and symbolic components are theoretically or empirically defied (2014). Accordingly, Moraga discredits the traditional heteropatriarchal family from Mexican-American communities when she decides to become pregnant despite being an older and unmarried lesbian woman. Although financially independent, she births one single child, rejecting the expected paradigm of large Mexican families; that is, a young, married mother with many babies confined at home. However, queering the physical act of becoming pregnant requires a more radical challenge. In the same line of thought, Karin Sardadvar and

Katharina Miko argue that queer motherhood questions sexual intercourse as the basis of conception, sexual relationships as the essential condition for being a couple, the heterosexual couple as the normative standard, or the equation of family and household, among others (2014). All these basic tenets of queer motherhood are, in fact, endorsed by Cherríe Moraga and illustrated in her memoir *Waiting in the Wings*.

Despite the availability of in-vitro fertilization with an unknown sperm donor, Moraga avoids clinical meddling. Instead, she opts for a homemade insemination thanks to a syringe and to the man of her choice: Pablo, a gay friend. Suzanne Bost holds that, from the beginning of her narrative, Moraga poses her own identity as “ex-centric” to conventional motherhood because lesbians unnaturally or illicitly depend upon others —doctors, medical technology, sperm donors or one night stands— to become mothers, which deflates the purity of maternity while strengthening the queerness of motherhood and her personal need to re-create her role as a mother (2011). *In Waiting in the Wings*, Moraga narrates how she and Pablo do not copulate but engage in a ritual of parental desire with one another. This seemingly clinical and loveless sexual act is queered when insemination towards the sole purpose of sexual conception is triangulated by the presence of her Anglo lover Ella:

‘one way or another that sperm has just gotta get inside you.’ Very simple... and unromantic. Yet I did feel made love to. And whether pregnant or not, I knew I would never forget what that softness felt like, my legs up and open to receive whatever destiny had decided for me. I close my eyes and dream Pablo as a sweet twin lover. (Moraga 1997: 25)

Indeed, this queer sexual act *à trois* is the expression of generous love from both her female partner and the inseminator with a male name, and thanks to Ella’s words and caresses, it also becomes true love-making for Moraga.

Moraga cherishes a victory against the lesbian dependence on reproductive medicine when she confronts her already occupied womb with her incredulous doctor: she is a forty-year-old homosexual, but she became pregnant at home in one single attempt without

casual lovers or medical intervention. Nevertheless, the involvement of Moraga's inseminator transcends the expected limits of biological fatherhood. Instead, Pablo and his parents join her queer *familia* without herself and Pablo being a couple and, more importantly, without deprecating the vital role of Ella in the life of their child. Indeed, Moraga's monogamous gay relationship with a trustworthy female partner is vital to her decision to become a mother: "I would not have embarked on this journey alone: I chose motherhood because I knew Ella was that quality of woman who would never just up and leave" (Moraga 1997: 16). Ella not only offers emotional support to Moraga during her difficult pregnancy, childbirth, and postpartum, but she also acts as Rafael's co-mother, with devotion, for the first years of his life. Pablo does not share the same home with Moraga and their son in common, nor does Ella after their breakup, although both the biological father and the co-mother, who respect each other and unconditionally love Moraga, remain as a family unit without living under the same roof. Moraga's project of queer motherhood is, therefore, inclusive, not exclusive, but it must also welcome her *Mexicanismo* to fully build her desired identity as a lesbian Chicana mother.

Cherríe Moraga purposely obliterates those patriarchal elements of her Hispanic ancestry that are opposed to alternatives of queer motherhood: homophobia, the Church as an oppressive institution, men's tyranny over the female body, the prescription of compulsory gender roles limiting women to being financially-dependent-wives and mothers of numerous children. Conversely, Moraga is determined to integrate with harmony some positive heirlooms of *Mexicanismo* into her queer motherhood, such as some beneficial elements of the Catholic religion, the power of bloodline, the importance of sisterhood for Chicanas, and Mexican-American families as a powerful *We*, so as to forge her own identity as an individual. In *Waiting in the Wings*, its author describes at length the history of the clan Moraga, the meaning of family for Chicana/os, and the priority of family relations in her life because the construction of her Latina self is based upon having and keeping family roles:

I was blessed to be born into a huge extended Mexican family. A family in which aunts and uncles acted as surrogate

parents, and cousins were counted among siblings, and where my grandmother, Dolores, who died at the age of ninety-six, presided matriarchal y mandona over the lives of some one hundred-plus relatives. Today, the living Moraga clan spans five generations and a full century of U.S.-born mestizos, residing in what was once the Mexican territory of Alta California. [...] Growing up, the we of my life was always defined by blood relations. We meant family. We were my mother's children, my abuela's grandchildren, my tíos' nieces and nephews. (Moraga 1997: 17)

Cherríe Moraga celebrates the cohesiveness, the sense of belonging and the old ancestry of her overwhelmingly large Mexican-American family. The fact she emphasizes that her grandmother has possessed the diadem of power for many years suggests the matriarchal nature of her clan, despite the common figure of authority of the father or the grandfather in Chicana/o societies. Indeed, the matrilineal transmission of the Hispanic quality of *mandona* —or bossiness— from the grandmother to her daughters and granddaughters, can be perceived as a promise of maternal legitimacy and female empowerment for Moraga's own project of queer motherhood. However, the author also resents in *Waiting in the Wings* how some family members, like her brother, do not understand or even fear the idea of her becoming a single lesbian mother: “the harshness in his tone chills me. Is it anger? Fear? What he wants to know is: Who is the father? Where is the man in the picture? The chasm I would have to transverse to have my brother understand who I am in this is too daunting” (Moraga 1997: 37). The absence of a man, not the fact of his sister's non-normative sexual identity, is what seems to be intolerable to Moraga's brother.

Regarding the biological father of her future child, Cherríe Moraga makes the nationalistic and sexist choice of Pablo as a colored pure-breed stallion to inseminate her: “Nation. Nationality. I am to be the mother of a Mexican baby. I am the worst and best of those macho Chicano nationalists. I picked a man for his brains and dark beauty. And the race continues” (Moraga 1997: 39). While objectifying race by choosing her Chicano sperm donor, Sandra Soto argues that Moraga also elaborates her own butch identity that is “as resolutely maternal as it is masculine” (2010: 18). Paradoxically, the

author ridicules herself because she parodies the racial supremacism from her maternal lineage to queerly assert her embryonic identity with cockiness: she is proudly a butch lesbian, an expectant mother and a Chicana, while remaining a traditionalist because she wants to ensure the continuity of the Mexican bloodline in her unborn baby. Nevertheless, she further queers her maternal project because she makes sure that the biological father of her child is not a heterosexual man but a homosexual, so that he cannot develop any sexual desire towards her: “I picked him because I knew he loved me without wanting me. A gay man. A queer contract” (Moraga 1997: 39). Despite the fact that Rafael is on the brink of death and separated from his mother after taking him to the intensive care unit after his birth, Moraga is a proud mother when she perceives the “indio nose” (1997: 53) of her son because it ensures a physical *Mexicanismo* transmitted by both his father and, partly, by his mother. Although Moraga opts for keeping the blood ties of her maternal ancestors by choosing a Chicano father, her vision of a *familia* goes beyond biology because it also includes her social network of lovers and friends (Driver 2008).

Not only family values, culture and religious beliefs, but also sisterly love, strength and sympathy are transmitted among Chicanas. This sisterhood compensates for the gender oppression they endure in male-dominated Mexican-American communities, and can also enable Latinas to face the misogyny from the mainstream U.S. society. Theoretically immunized against racist, homophobic, and sexist prejudices as a self-sufficient writer and an out-of-the-closet lesbian, Cherríe Moraga’s triumph is not incompatible with her need to rely on her “closest circle of comadres” (Moraga 1997: 31) to undertake her project of queer motherhood. In particular, the reaction of her Chicana friend Myrtha: “La admiro, you’re doing it your own way” (1997: 17) reassures Moraga during her first trimester of pregnancy. As soon as they learn she is expecting a child, a pleiad of *comadres* enfolds her with “excitement and consejo” (1997: 40), or with tender words of encouragement: “You will make a wonderful mother,’ they say [...] he is all gift to me. But they tell me I also am a gift to my son” (1997: 40). These friends even discourage against choosing a hospital childbirth. Instead, they advise Moraga to put herself in the hands of an Indigenous midwife of ancestral wisdom. Nevertheless, this traditional Mexican birthing option in San Francisco is eventually

impracticable due to an emergency delivery in a hospital in Moraga's own city of birth: Los Angeles—the City of Angels, where Rafael Angel is also born. Together with Ella, the presence of Cherríe's biological sister, Jo Ann, closes a full circle of sorority.

When labor contractions grow strong, Moraga counts on both Ella and Jo Ann to hold her hands and to look after her emotional health during the critical hours of her pre-term childbirth, relatively painless for the expectant mother, yet life-threatening for her unborn son: “I knew as I held my lover's and my sister's hands in the grip of labor that this was what I understood as *hogar*, sustenance; that this is how a woman should always give birth, surrounded by women [...] that family of women to see me into motherhood” (1997: 54). During the even more difficult postpartum, recalling the words of her friends offers Moraga emotional nurturance to endure the three months when Rafael, on the verge of dying, must remain in the pediatric intensive care unit: “Sleep deprivation. I remember my *comadres* warning me of this physical state, near-madness” (1997: 86). The nurses, who take care of Rafael's health and comfort for three months in hospital, equally join the circle of sisterhood around Moraga. Whether Chicanas or not, non-biological or blood sisters, the different women in her life ultimately become essential members of her queer *familia* and the guardian angels of her son.

The significance of religion in Moraga's project of queer motherhood is reflected from the moment when she chooses the name of her unborn child. As soon as she learns that she is expecting a boy, Moraga not only endows her embryo with personhood and maleness, but she also calls him Rafael Angel, like the archangel of healers. Such a name is selected to honor her own family and her Mexican Catholicism, while St. Rafael's festival concurs with her due date on September 29th. Furthermore, Moraga will not forget the religious message behind the name Rafael, or “the healing power of God” (1997: 32), during the traumatic months when her baby is already born but he is fighting against death. However, mythical and spiritual mothers, rather than a male God or his archangels, constitute Moraga's personal religion and her sacred family, impregnated by her robust *Mexicanismo*.

Chicana motherhood is grounded upon the traditional masculine representations, which view women as others and upon the context of the good/bad mother dichotomy in Mexican culture: *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, *La Malinche*, and *La Llorona*, which inhibits women's self-realization as mothers (Herrera 2011). Although many Latinas teach their sons about the ideology of *machismo* and their daughters about *marianismo* to emulate the example of the chaste, sacrificing *Virgen*, other mothers, like Moraga, prefer to teach Hispanic women to reject these oppressive gender stereotypes about motherhood (Smith Silva 2011). As demonstrated in *Waiting in the Wings*, Moraga is herself the beacon of maternal individualism with an identity of her own as a self-confident lesbian Latina mother, willing to challenge the three male-constructed archetypes that rule maternity among Chicanas. *La Malinche*, or *chingada*, symbolizes the myth of the evil Indigenous woman who is accused of betraying her own race. She is sexually available and spies against her fellow Indians to cooperate with the *conquistador* of Mexico, Hernán Cortés, who impregnates her. According to Joyce Garay, coming out as a lesbian would exile Moraga as a cultural betrayer, or a *Malinche*, who chooses her personal desire instead of a nationalist union with a Mexican man to become a mother (2009). However, as a symbolic daughter of *La Malinche*, Moraga's biracialism fights to exonerate this myth from ancestral guilt and restore the honor of the so called bad mother, while Moraga also legitimizes her own choice of queer motherhood and her identity as a colored woman despite her Anglo ancestry from her father's side. Similarly, Lisa Tatonetti contends that Moraga would not be "a traitor to her race" (2004: 228) as a lesbian Chicana mother because she perpetuates the Mexican cultural heritage thanks to her queer motherhood, rather than in spite of it.

Paradoxically, Cherríe Moraga is with child and endures the first symptoms of pregnancy complications while she is rewriting the ancient Greek tragedy about infanticide, *Medea*, written by Euripides, combined with another Mexican myth, *La Llorona*. From the time of Mexico's colonization, *La Llorona* incarnates the selfish, immoral Indigenous mother. When her wealthy Spanish lover decides to return home with his illegitimate progeny to marry another woman,

La Llorona drowns her own children, endlessly weeps, and dies from grief but finds no peace in the afterlife. If her affiliation to *La Malinche* symbolically empowers Moraga, whose lesbian maternity would not betray but rather perpetuates the Mexican lineage for the next generation, recalling *La Llorona* disquiets Moraga during her pregnancy. *Waiting in the Wings* not only revolves around the Mexican queer childbearing and maternity for a lesbian artist, but also around Moraga dreading that her older age biologically predisposes her to gestate potential prenatal, natal, or postnatal illness and death. This second archetype of the Mexican bad mother, obsessing over her professional activity as a playwright, amalgamates vicarious infanticidal pulses from the myth with her own desperate craving for a child, so Moraga cannot reconcile her two halves: the woman and the writer. As an artist, she must objectively pursue her literary project about murderous mothers, although as a woman, she herself is subjectively afraid of becoming a Chicana version of Medea and *La Llorona*. Moreover, her association with *La Llorona* reveals how Moraga fears miscarriage or pre-term labor, which however irrational, would mean that she would murder her son before he could be born.

Moraga tortures and blames herself for being already a bad mother, like *La Llorona*, because at her age she considers herself to be reproductively unfit to give life to a healthy baby. This guilt particularly occurs in the later months of her pregnancy, when Rafael is born prematurely, plagued by respiratory distress, a heart condition, infections, and an intestinal disorder that required surgery. Then, Moraga cannot be a mother and take care of her child, but only doctors and medical devices can save the life of Rafael or extract her breast milk to feed him. It is then that her fears of being a bad or unfit mother reappear: “I think it is loss, then wonder if it’s really guilt I feel that my son had to go through so much suffering outside the womb because I couldn’t protect him inside” (Moraga 1997: 98). This postnatal helplessness, together with the understanding of the fragility of human life, distance Moraga from the institution of religion while, simultaneously, she is drawn closer to Catholic rites and the spirituality emanating from Our Lady of Guadalupe to mitigate her mental terrors.

The two supposedly bad Indigenous mothers, *La Malinche* and *La Llorona*, are the antagonists of the originally white *Virgen de Guadalupe*, placed in an altar of angelic virtue and self-sacrifice by the Catholic Church, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans. Our Lady of Guadalupe is a Catholic title of the Virgin Mary after a Marian apparition in 1531, which occurred in what is today's Mexico City, where a Basilica was erected and still stands today in her honor. Marina Warner highlights that Mary is the Catholic symbol of ideal femininity and "nobility of motherhood" (2013: 342), which not only establishes the child as the female destiny, but she also safely flees the sexual intercourse required for the rest of women to fulfill this mission. On the other hand, Gloria Anzaldúa claims that *La Virgen de Guadalupe* is the religious, political, and cultural image of the *Mexicanismo*, as well as the symbol of the mestizo because Chicano/a culture identifies itself with the mother —Indian— rather than with the father —Spanish (2007).

When she is baptizing her son Rafael, Cherríe Moraga understands that the Catholic liturgy, presided by only male priests, is an oppressive patriarchal institution. She also feels that this rite to embrace the Mexican religious faith forces her to betray her son: "I hold him tight against the breast of an answered prayer. I want to protect my son from deceit, from the failure of male gods and god-fearing males. [...] I am afraid of the power of men and their gods over our lives. I fear this even as I write it" (Moraga 1997: 108). Once she has become a mother, Moraga experiences distrust of God —the patriarchal figure of authority, the almighty Father who would not be her father because she believes that He does not nurture her faith with paternal love, but instead has abandoned her in order to ensure men's power over women and children on Earth.

Elisa Facio and Irene Lara argue that Chicana lesbians must create their own spirituality by altering the traditional notions of religion and family, regarded as antithetical to homosexuality, so the eradication of the oppression they suffer must relate their lesbianism to their own spirituality (2014). *Waiting in the Wings* demonstrates that the spiritual life of Moraga is based upon the worship of a maternal figure: The Virgin Mary/Our Lady of Guadalupe. Doubly oppressed by the heterosexual Catholic Church and the patriarchal Mexican

culture, Chicana lesbians seek refuge in the loving mestiza goddess Guadalupe who would accept all people regardless of their sexuality (Herrera 2011). Indeed, Moraga reinforces her *Mexicanismo* by affiliating the Mexican Virgin Mary to her personal cause: Moraga's own project of queer motherhood and her fight for Rafael's survival. She devotedly prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe to grant her maternal wish, when she does not know yet that she is pregnant: "I clasp together my hands before my altar, light a vela, study la virgen's impassive expression [...] and long for una respuesta" (Moraga 1997: 26). The longed-for answer ultimately does not come from the holy Mother, but from science—a pregnancy test confirms that Moraga is with child.

Later, when Rafael is hanging between life and death in hospital, Moraga's *mestiza* faith in the Aztec moon goddess Coyolxauhqui and in Our Lady of Guadalupe is intermittent, but she still imagines herself as the Virgin Mary suffering for her dying son Jesus Christ, as she agonizes for her baby Rafael under mortal threat. Yet, Moraga is not only a mother, but also a daughter. She recalls a childhood episode when her own mother was sick in the hospital, so she prayed for her recovery: "I [...] feared the wrong set of prayers, a forgotten passage, a misdirected look at a plaster saint could mean her death. I prayed and feared always God's punishment, God's closed ears and heart" (1997: 58). The girl from the past, still inside Moraga, remembers that the Christian male God is neither benign nor merciful. In contrast, her own old mother, who now remains by Moraga's side at hospital, persuades her daughter that the same prayers to God that restored her health many years before, can now help to save Rafael's life.

Gloria Anzaldúa claims that, because Our Lady of Guadalupe took upon herself the physical and psychological devastation of the conquered and oppressed *indios* under the Spanish yoke, she became the spiritual symbol of hope and faith that sustains and insures the survival of Mexicans (2007). Due to superstition, her mother's advice or her personal enlightenment, Cherríe Moraga still clings to the Catholic rite of supplications to ask for the Virgin's mediation when Rafael's intestine infection worsens and he is waiting for surgery: "I have brought a rosary, the wooden one given to me by my mother.

Ella and I [...] hold each other and pray ‘Dios te salve, María...’ (Moraga 1997: 64). Together with the prayers of her faithful conclave of *comadres* also gathered at hospital, the deceased members of Moraga’s Mexican *familia* are invoked to intercede for Rafael’s final move towards life.

Being a queer act or not, a lesbian Chicana mother like Moraga understands that prayers or lighting candles are not only Catholic rituals and customs against the threat of death, but also represent an affirmation of good wishes, confidence in human goodness, and caresses of sisterhood and sympathy among women beyond any conventional religious dimension. Moreover, Moraga sees that the Virgin Mary/Our Lady of Guadalupe is the universal mother of love and mercy irrespective of being traditionally viewed as one incarnation of the Catholic Church’s matriarch. In a turn of events, Rafael does not die and is eventually discharged from hospital after three months. Moraga is, then, thankful to nurses and doctors because she acknowledges that the scientific advances in California during the 1990s are responsible for the miracle to become true. Nevertheless, she also believes that the power of Our Lady of Guadalupe, or simply that prayers of life, are accountable for her son’s recovery: “from the beginning of his life he was surrounded by great love [...] the love from my blood familia and all my queer relations, with candles burning across the continent toward his survival” (1997: 80).

Despite the mournful climate in San Francisco due to her many friends dying as victims of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in the 1990s, Cherríe Moraga acknowledges that this cosmopolitan city where she resides is the most suitable place to become a gay parent and to found her queer Mexican *familia*. San Francisco is both tolerant with its potent gay/lesbian community, while being located in California —geographically proximate to Mexico— and boasting a large Hispanic community, which is ideal to raise her child in the desirable *Mexicanismo*. For Moraga, not only Rafael’s Mexican physical appearance and blood are wishes granted at childbirth, but also that her son later receives a Mexican upbringing, and that he is familiar with the Mexican culture, particularly the importance of family values as well as the respect owed to the elders and to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The presence of Pablo is vital to reach the goal

of cultural *Mexicanismo* in Moraga's already-accomplished project of queer motherhood after her baby is born. Both parents go to Watsonville, California, to offer thanks to the Our Lady of the Cannery Workers—an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe discovered in a tree in the 1990s—for saving Rafael's life. While Pablo becomes emotional when they celebrate the first Day of Guadalupe for his son, Moraga eagerly transfuses the passion and wealth of Mexican culture to her child, translated into the nurturing language hybridity as she declares in *Waiting in the Wings*: “There is no denying that I had this baby that he might be a Mexican, for him to know and learn of *Mexicanismo*, for him to feel that fuego, that llama, that riqueza I call lo mexicano” (1997: 91).

In her life-writing, Moraga also represents the intertwinement of life and death as something particularly Mexican (Bost 2011). Accordingly, she muses about her son's birth while she sees her parents aging and getting closer to death, or she converses with her own mother who, despite her old age, wishes to see her grandson for many years to come. Hence, Moraga makes sure that Rafael spends time with the eldest family members who are still alive, and that her son also witnesses the Catholic rituals of visiting, remembering and honoring the tombstones of her beloved family dead. Furthermore, Rafael is brought to visit the dying family members, as a Mexican cultural lesson taught by his mother: “as my altar clutters with the images of those who have passed on, my child learns the sacredness of candlelight and murmured prayer” (Moraga 1997: 119). Nonetheless, the main teaching that Moraga herself receives is that her longed-for tandem of *Mexicanismo* and lesbian motherhood has finally been achieved and crystallized in the person of her son Rafael thanks to—rather than in spite of—her brave and unconventional journey to motherhood. Andrea O'Reilly contends that mothers are empowered when they have a position of agency and autonomy, so motherhood becomes “a political site wherein the mother can effect social change” (2004: 12). *Waiting in the Wings* reveals Moraga's new sense of self-empowerment as a mother and as an autonomous woman, who writes both for herself and on behalf of other Chicanas. Achieving queer motherhood ultimately becomes both a personal and a collective project to defy traditional family models, which had

prevented lesbians from becoming biological mothers and Latinas from embracing their own idea of what a mother is beyond patriarchal myths of maternal sanctity or unmaternal evil.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Gloria Anzaldúa holds that the mestizo and the queer are “a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together” (2007: 107), and that all are spawned out of similar souls. As a woman and a writer, as a lesbian and a mother, as a Mexican and an American, Cherríe Moraga incarnates a unique human blending that pacifies the warring polarities of her homosexual identity and her traditionally homophobic Hispanic ancestors. Becoming a mother is, indeed, Moraga’s queer panacea to heal the wound of her previously separated selves: her lesbian self and her Mexican self. Life-writing turns into her strategy to explore this wound, its healing process and the final celebration of the recovery of her whole self. Furthermore, *Waiting in the Wings* is a suitable venue for Moraga to reflect upon the socially unfamiliar reality of her own dream family; to create sociopolitical awareness of the variety of women’s maternal choices, and to recognize the sexual diversity existing among Chicanas in the United States. The epilogue of her memoir unravels the key to success for her project of queer motherhood:

I remain awed by this mystery of how love and blood and home and history and desire coalesce and collide to construct a child’s sense of self and family. I know blood quantum does not determine parenthood any more than it determines culture. Still, I know blood matters. It just does not matter more than love. (Moraga 1997: 125)

Cherríe Moraga succeeds in reuniting her Mexican *pride* and her lesbian *genes* in harmony to guarantee both the perpetuation of her ancestral bloodline and the freedom of her sexual orientation. In the meantime, Moraga’s self-realization, thanks to the assertion of her identity as a lesbian Chicana mother and writer, ensures the happiness and the emotional health of herself and Rafael—an American boy who lives in California but learns to appreciate his Mexican origins. Her son physically resembles his homosexual biological parents, but his personality is also sculpted by the loving presence

of another woman in his life: his Anglo co-mother Ella. Moraga's life-writing about the empowerment of becoming a homosexual parent demonstrates that the notions of motherhood and family are not naturally monolithic, but richly queer and diverse, although they have been traditionally constructed to serve heteropatriarchal interests. Moreover, Moraga revises the misogynist representations of the bad mother figures from Mexican myths and customizes a spiritual life of her own to reconcile her homosexuality and queer motherhood with the vital role of religion for Mexican-Americans. While the patriarchal vision of God oppresses women and gays, Moraga cherishes maternal nurturance, solace and tolerance in the worship of Our Lady of Guadalupe and some Catholic rites to hope for her son's survival and to strengthen her *Mexicanismo*.

Despite the pressures of childlessness upon lesbians within and outside Hispanic communities in the United States still in the 1990s, Moraga defends that queer motherhood is her legitimate right to expect the unexpected—a child—and her colossal personal victory of building her own dream *familia*. Her American success story in *Waiting in the Wings* ultimately gestates a sisterhood among many anonymous female readers because Moraga's testimony can inspire and encourage other non-heterosexual Chicanas to become mothers while preserving their Mexican heritage.

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