

Lovers, Mothers and Lamias in *Cocinar hombres* by Carmen Boulosa

Juli A. Kroll

It was not vanity that drew her to the mirror; it was amazement at seeing her own "I"....

Staring at herself for long stretches of time, she was occasionally upset at the sight of her mother's features in her face....

She took after her mother, and not only physically. I sometimes have the feeling that her entire life was merely a continuation of her mother's....

Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (41)

The two major plays of Carmen Boulosa's 1987 work, *Teatro herético: Aura y las once mil vírgenes* and *Cocinar hombres*, use both the diegetic and the exegetic planes to deconstruct the hierarchies and arbitrary preferences upon which mainstream financial, cultural, religious, and other social institutions are built. Unlike Boulosa's early novels, the plays' radically innovative content and style hint at possible resolutions to female suffering. *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, about a washed-up advertising executive who "deflowers" virgins in exchange for creative inspiration, reveals the arbitrariness of the value placed on female virginity and beauty as dictated by the interrelated demands of consumerism, Catholicism and masculinism in western society. While *Aura* critiques various sociocultural paradigms that configure both femininity and masculinity in Mexico, *Cocinar* points toward the possibility of female solidarity and active negotiation of womanly roles in the dialogue of two adolescent female characters exploring their hopes and fears vis-à-vis the transition to womanhood. Boulosa's strategic inclusion of *Propusieron a María* – presented as the transcription of a "found" tape

recording of the Virgin Mary's reflections on the banality of marital life – completes *Teatro herético's* trilogy of works as it focuses attention on the lack of adequate social agency and representation of women in Mexico. *María's* inclusion, in turn, suggest the usefulness of Luce Irigaray's discussion of the mystification of the mother as foundational for the rise of western civilization ("Plato's *Hysteria*")¹ as a means to frame a discussion of *Cocinar's* transgressive social critique.

Indeed, *Cocinar hombres* deconstructs the discursive conscriptions of "femininity" via the dialogic mediation and, ultimately, dispersal of the extremes of the "good" and "bad" woman, effected through its exploration of both the celebrated and negated female body and social roles. While both the content of Ufe's and Wine's dialogue and poetic intertexts suggested by details such as red shoes invoke the Hélène Cixousian imperative that women write through their bodies ("The Laugh of the Medusa"), the play also unravels syntactical speech and memory by culminating in the inverted sentence "Ya no recuerdas nada." This detail suggests that the play creates space in which the reader may feel inspired to experience both the solidarity and new language that Luce Irigaray imagines could exist prior to normative language ("When Our Lips Speak Together"). In order to read *Cocinar hombres*, then, we must pay close attention to its mediation of women's social roles, its attention to womanly solidarity, motherhood, and sexuality, and its poetic intertextualities. Further, we may understand *Cocinar hombres's* feminist sociocultural criticism as exploring many of the problematics expressed in poststructuralist feminist theory's re-reading of Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic claims regarding the body, language and the role of the mother in subject formation (Julia Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray).

The Third Space Feminism of *Cocinar hombres*

Dos mujeres despiertan en una casa sin puertas. Ambas al acostarse tenían diez años y al despertar tienen 23, no por haber dormido el tiempo equivalente a su crecimiento, sino por haber sido llevadas a una ceremonia (o fiesta, como ellas la llaman) de bastante particularidad. En esa larga noche, fueron iniciadas como mujeres y fueron también aceptadas en un círculo más restringido – o más amplio, si hemos de creer a aquellos autores que aseguran que hubo un tiempo en el cual las lamias volando

protegidas por la noche cometiendo cuantos horrores podían, constituían la tercera parte de la población de Francia.

(Prologue, *Cocinar hombres*)

A detail buried in the heart of the play *Cocinar hombres* creates an important intertextuality and provides privileged insight into the world of Boulosa's early texts. Halfway through the play, the reader/spectator discovers that the character Ufe's father is named Ciarrosa, also the last name of the family whose daughters disappear in Boulosa's novel *Mejor desaparece*, published the same year as *Teatro herético* (1987). Although *Cocinar* was first performed just before the novel was published, the connection implies a continuation: Ufe could be one of the Ciarrosa daughters who disappeared from the dinner table never to be heard from again.

Or so the reader thought: Ufe not only appears in *Cocinar*; she seems to express all that the Ciarrosa daughters of *Mejor desaparece* kept silent. If the female historical figures (among them Eve, la Malinche, Sor Juana, Carlota) speaking in Rosario Castellanos' satire *El eterno femenino* (1975) might have at one time been burned as "witches" for the audacity they show in the text, the women of *Cocinar* begin to embrace "witchdom" as a way to positively embody femininity and move outside of patriarchal mandates and the masculine gaze. This inversion of values is emphasized in the play's title, "Cooking Up Men," which indicates both the generative power of women as mothers who give birth to sons and the desire to create the ideal man rather than be punished (burned) for transgressing gender codes (Susan Wehling).

A new "monstrous" femininity is also signaled by the use of the word "lamia" as interchangeable with "witch" in the play's prologue, quoted above. "Lamia" comes from the Greek word for "devouring monster" and means "female demon" and "vampire" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 1985). Susan Wehling indicates that Lamia in Greek mythology was a devouring female and "grief-crazed woman" whose "own children were killed by Hera, who was jealous of Zeus' love for her; thereafter Lamia, out of envy for happy mothers, stole and killed the children of others" (52). She says "Lamia was also used to name-stereotype a woman who lured 'a youth to his destruction.'" We will see the trope of vengeful engenders, or lamias, embodied in *Cocinar*'s spirited female characters.

Cocinar hombres, like *Aura y las once mil vírgenes*, was first performed in the mid eighties; it premiered in 1984 and ran hundreds of performances at the theater/bar El Cuervo, which Boulosa owned with her

husband in Coyoacán, Mexico City. Though it debuted the year before *Aura*, it is the second play published in the trilogy *Teatro herético*. In *Cocinar*, two girls awaken to find that in the space of an evening, they have aged from ten to 23 years old due to a special, magical ceremony they attended the night before. The play consists of the increasingly expressive dialogue of characters Ufe and Wine, who come to realize that their sudden puberty has transformed them halfway to being “witches,” and that they now must find ways to deal with the onset of womanhood. This means forever leaving behind the fraternal company of their brothers and fathers in favor of a lifetime negotiating the romantic, sexual and familial roles that alienate them from the equality with their brothers that they seemed to enjoy as girls. They discuss their hopes and fears about their potential roles as wives, lovers, mothers, sexual objects and maybe even tormentors of men and boys. Through the course of the dialogue, the women form a trusting bond and explore the idea of “womanhood.” The play ends with Ufe and Wine forging a liberating new signifying space between them. In the play’s original performances at El Cuervo, they escaped into the night air through a window in the performance space (Costantino), an ending that is akin to the women flying away as if to Neverland – or to never land, meaning that they would reject being grounded in static gender roles and leave behind both the Earth and the world of men.

Hélène Cixous describes the powerful creativity of the woman writing in her poststructuralist tome “The Laugh of the Medusa” and in Cixous and Catherine Clément’s *The Newly Born Woman* (*La jeune née*), saying “For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to ‘fly’” (“Laugh” 343). Cixous indicates that women’s creativity occurs at the moment they wrest creative power from masculine discourse. This dual movement of freedom and subversion is expressed through Cixous and Clément’s use of the French verb “voler” meaning “to fly” and “to steal” (*Newly Born Woman* 96). They say “To fly/steal is woman’s gesture, to steal into language to make it fly. We have all learned flight/theft, the art with many techniques... It’s not just luck if the word “voler” volleys between the “vol” of theft and the “vol” of flight... Woman partakes of bird and burglar, just as the burglar partakes of woman and bird.” This “bird/burglar” takes pleasure in “scrambling spatial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things, and values around, breaking in, emptying structures, turning the selfsame, the proper, upside down” (*Newly Born Woman* 96).

Certainly, two witches flying away into the night sky inhabit a liberated corporeality and expansive signifying space akin to what Cixous describes as the imperative of both the sorceress and the hysteric, female figures born of patriarchal repression and resultant desire to transgress boundaries. Within the Boullosan *oeuvre*, *Cocinar* continues *Aura*'s feminist critique by developing a hybrid or "other" feminist space through the dialogue between the two radically distinct female characters, both in the transitional space en route to being witches. One is the traditional and romanticized potential wife and mother as portrayed by the character Ufe's subject position; the other is the more transgressive potential witch, Wine, whose option is to fly over the Earth at night tormenting men in their dreams, even though she would become acorporeal in order to do so by accepting a second "witchy" initiation ceremony.

The play, like western culture in Irigaray's conception, is predicated upon the fear of the powerful, potentially vengeful mother figure, an unease that leads to taboo formation and aggressive impulses toward the mother figure. Ufe and Wine seem to supplant their mothers, leaping into adult bodies as they become women suddenly by way of a magic ceremony whose completion and lasting effects will occur the next evening. The ensuing dialogue represents their exploration of the possible feminine roles available to them, accompanied by their expression of fears about the limits of romantic paradigms and prescribed alternatives. Together they will forge solidarity and engender a new life and love object: a man they will cook up who will not be just a substitute for what they could be perceived as lacking corporeally, linguistically, and sexually, but rather will have real desirable attributes of his own that the women will design.

Boullosa has said that the play represents the transformations associated with adolescence ("Procuro pulir mi feminidad asalvajándola"). While the thirteen-year gap puts the girls' age at over 20 years, they indeed must mentally grasp the very sudden changes that make them "women" overnight, the same rapid occurrence of womanhood that accompanies the onset of puberty in *Antes* and *Treinta años*. This is understood as the beginning of menstruation, the restriction of multiple drives to strictly heterosexual paradigms, and changes to the body's shape, among other transformations.

After its prologue, the play consists of an opening sequence called "Sueño," followed by two acts; Ufe tells her "dream" at the end of the play's "Sueño":

Hace un momento iba yo por la carretera en el coche ese rojo de mi mamá, ¿sabes cuál?, el coche grandote, y lo iba manejando yo, aunque no sé manejar, de verdad que no sé, pero de pronto me di cuenta de que iba manejando a media carretera, y tuve miedo.... Me paré. Detuve el coche en la cuneta, y cuando me bajé había muchas personas mirándome y supe que yo tenía el cuerpo de mi mamá. Yo ya no era yo, y todos los que estaban ahí se daban cuenta. Yo ya no tenía mi cuerpo: tenía el cuerpo de mi mamá. ¿No te ha pasado?
(48)

This account represents a common childhood dream motif of driving an adult's car even though the child's body does not allow her to reach the pedals and not knowing how to drive makes the sudden necessity of navigating the road in a dream both appealing and terrifying. The dream's visuals and excited emotions result from a child's memory of the sensations and sights of riding in a car, or perhaps from car chases she may have seen on television or in movies. The dream functions to express latent anxiety about sexual maturation and separation from the parent via its image of the child taking the parent's place in the driver's seat and because of the adolescent's association of the car with certain social freedoms. In this instance, the dream subject's separation from the child self is exaggerated and shown as premature and dangerous. The resulting anxiety accompanies an awareness of difference (sexual, gender, generational, psychic), expressed in the dream as the discrepancy between the child's own age and size and that of the spot she must occupy in the car which is, metonymically, the adult's body. Ufe's dream carries out the logical conclusion of the waking consciousness, which is the knowledge that the child must one day grow into the adult size and driver's seat. The dream, however, extends beyond the normal dream ending in that instead of the car crashing or the dream content morphing into something else, Ufe's dream self stops the car to reflect on her condition. This becomes a conscious meditation on gender difference and hierarchy as mediated by the alienating, masculinist gaze – a gaze that, even more eerily, Ufe's dream self accepts as "reality." This is evidenced when as she looks at the bystanders looking at her, it is just then that she realizes she has her mother's body.

Figuratively having the mother's body confers femininity and identity according to the gaze of others, the spectators who see Ufe exit the vehicle. While the journey to adulthood in the mother's red car may seem to be a pell-mell careening through an unknown course or passageway, it is contained, temporarily, by a symbolic vehicle of adolescence (the car, a fetishized symbol

of transgression, like red shoes or red lips). As the transition to womanhood is both fetishized and contained in the symbolic vehicle of adolescence, the potential for a dangerous, fearsome outcome is underscored in the fact that Ufe stops the car when she realizes she is in the middle of the road, thus interrupting her passage. The semblance of control, however, does not change the specular nature of socially conditioned femininity, and Ufe recognizes that the masculinist gazes of passersby already see the red vehicle of puberty (the mark of menstruation's onset) which confers to her the status of woman and potential mother.

The mother's death, then, is equal to her displacement via the girl turning into her by occupying her body (symbolically, the driver's seat) and car (menstruation, puberty, the canal or channel). The red car is the flashy vestige of an institutionalized and fetishizing gender performance: mass produced, plasticized, and showy, even as it is the color of blood and transgression. The metonymic occupation is simultaneously the death of the girl due to puberty, the departure from indeterminacy, and the entrance into polarized, fixed gender identity and subjectedness within the symbolic order. Similarly, the girl narrator of Boullosa's *Antes* succumbs to these changes, which render her a melancholic, acorporeal phantom and alternately, a subjugated woman negating gender-determined reality as she yearns to recapture the pre-symbolic space and language that both Kristeva (semiotic chora) and Irigaray ("When Our Lips Speak Together") describe.³ This recapturing is the motive for and occurs during the narrative act, even though *Antes's* narrator's post-semiotic knowledge generates and idealizes childhood through the privileged perspective's denial and melancholy. In this way, we see that recapturing childhood's freedoms may generatively and retrospectively redress those effects of adulthood that are most damaging to individual and cognitive freedoms, even as the generative narrative act recreates the space of the Kristevan thetic phase.⁴

Boullosa's characters construct a semiotic system for transmitting values and ideas, so it becomes possible to imagine that they live and act in between narratives, like the Ciarrosa daughter of *Mejor desaparece* who seems to literally appear as Ufe in *Cocinar*. Both young women of *Cocinar*, like the daughters in *Mejor desaparece*, are daughters of *hembrismo*, improperly constituted as desiring subjects and marked by melancholy. Their characterization occurs in the liminal space created by the flow between two diametrically opposed feminine archetypes, represented by Ufe's obedience to patriarchal prescriptions of femininity, and Wine's equally powerful

rebellious womanhood. The characters' discussion of their options results in emotional solidarity, the reclaiming of the womanly body for purposes chosen by the women, and the imagining of a new "feminine."

Cocinar's self-reflexivity – as revealed by the characters' self-conscious discussion and critique of what it means to be "feminine" – allows it to explore biologicistic sex identities and prescribed, reified alternatives without relying on utopianism. The play presents the two young women dealing with real problems of contemporary womanhood in Mexico, implying that if we treat our actual circumstances as best we can perceive them, we may gain real, enactable solutions. Consequently, *Cocinar*'s protagonists initially seem to mock the gender dichotomies that structure their relationships and the possible identities available to them. Even the prescribed alternative of "lamia volando" is parodically presented, even gleefully perverted by the self-confessing "author" who pardons her "misuse" of the trope of the witch, which in an epigraph she announces once constituted one third of the female population of France. Yolanda Flores notes:

In addition to celebrating community among women, Boullosa vindicates witches who are traditionally rendered as hideous, silent, and monstrous through myth and narrative because they represent female power and sexuality. *Cocinar hombres* subverts this tradition by portraying witches in a new light, strong and likable precisely because they embody female power and sexuality. Boullosa ingeniously introduces witches and the supernatural to present a dimension uncontrolled by men.⁵

Such tongue-in-cheek manipulation of stereotypes cedes to the piece's sincere representation of the characters expressing their hopes, fears, delusions, delight, and disappointment regarding dominant romantic and familial paradigms. I believe that both women desire to appropriate a sense of male approval and paternal and sexual love as a way toward self validation. However, the energy they will expend attempting to meet others' expectations will never return their way, and they seem to figure out even before attempting it that they may never achieve self fulfillment and authentic agency as mediated by the unfortunately reductive gaze of another, even one who is their father. This signifies irrevocable loss of identity, which Ufe thinks can be prevented if the nuclear family allows the girl to enjoy a gradual transition to adulthood, as shown in the following dialogue from Act One:

UFE: ¿Cómo le hicieron ellas para volver? A ver, ¿cómo?
WINE: No sé.

- UFE: Sus papás y sus hermanos no dejaron de llamarlas; repetían sus nombres cuando las vieron perderse en la oscuridad y eso las hizo volver.
- WINE: No creo, no creo que aunque ellos realmente las llamaran eso tuviera algo que ver.
- UFE: Entonces, ¿qué traían que les dio el ancla para volver con lo de antes, para que aunque dejaran de ser niñas conservaran la misma identidad y su cuerpo cambiara suavemente, como cambia de hojas el árbol, sin violencia, sin dejar de ser las que fueron siempre? (53-54)

This description of the sudden entry into adult gender identity conveys the sense that their fathers and brothers have betrayed them. The realization is part of the special knowledge the women have gained in their nocturnal ceremony with the witches, replete with laughter and dancing. Wine explains: “Solamente a ti y a mí nos cambiaron de nombre y nos obligaron a volver y a volver a cambiar de nombre. Solamente tú y yo vamos a regresar con esa multitud hoy, en un rato, esta noche. Sólo a ti y a mí nos explicaron y nos hicieron comprender tanto secretos. Sólo a ti y a mí nos pusieron los zapatos.” Through the witches’ teaching Ufe and Wine seem to understand the dangerous loss of identity that can manifest itself in kinship ceremonies and western marital laws, which traditionally have coded women as possessions and property. This heritage Luce Irigaray poignantly critiques as part of the “phallic economy” that limits women to “The Vanity of a Commodity” (“The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry”). Ufe and Wine’s changing names suggest various imposed social roles while the shoes bring to mind several intertexts; at least one of the pairs of shoes is later revealed to be red, implying intertextuality with the Hans Christian Anderson story “The Red Shoes,” which was also reworked by Anne Sexton. The trope involves non-dominant spirituality, uncontrollable dancing and female expression that lead to suffering and finally death, which grants the only free expressive space.

Ufe and Wine reveal that during the ceremony they were given candles and pouches containing the hair of a saint and amulets made of bones – objects symbolizing Catholicism and “paganism” or the “good” and “bad” woman. They discuss the existence bestowed on them as solitary, nocturnal, even animal-like, with no physical place to call home. Ufe dreams of having children, but Wine explains to her idealistic companion that the child, if you do not devour pieces of it in order to cripple it, grows independent

of you and leaves; single motherhood is the worst, because you die inside without the love and comfort of a mate, which provides a spiritual and emotional home. Ufe plans her revenge for the state of limbo their initiation has created, a state in which they will never have bodies, hence will never love, nor be loved and have children, companionship, and homes. Ufe initially says she wants to return to haunt her family members' nights, but eventually she relents because of her fear of being caught, in which instance she would be burned alive like the "women cooking" she has seen the previous night, especially the woman on whom a cake was being baked. They discuss the concept of witches' martyrdom and plan to torment men's dreams, causing unfulfilled desire. But when Ufe says she wants to go back to being ten years old, Wine's questions allow Ufe to reveal flaws in the familial structure and her own fear of Electra's desires, which she eschews in what she imagines would be her own father's reaction to her adult breasts or "adornos":

UFE: Porque si no tengo diez años ¿cómo voy a ver a mi papá de frente? (¿cómo, con esto. . . ?)

WINE: ¿Con qué?

UFE: Con estos adornos. ¿cómo lo voy a ver a los ojos?

WINE: Qué ridícula. No son adornos, eres tú. Y, ¿cómo no lo vas a ver a los ojos?

UFE: Porque él no me va a ver a los ojos. ¿Entiendes? Mi papá nunca miraba a las mujeres a los ojos. (59)

Ufe fears being objectified by the male gaze, which she divines may happen to her because of the way she has seen her father look at women. She simultaneously fears that he will not recognize her as the (pre-sexual) person that is his daughter, and that instead of returning her gaze he will see her first as a woman and stare at her breasts – rendered mere ornamental objects in the sexist western social imaginary.

In addition to exploring Ufe's legitimate fears, the play reveals that Ufe's father is named Ciarrosa; she, then, represents the disappeared and lost daughters of the Ciarrosa family of *Mejor desaparece* (which was published the same year as *Teatro herético*). Similarly, in her desire to recapture childhood, she is like the girl narrator of *Antes*. Abhorring the reaction that her own breasts potentially could provoke, Ufe refers to the abjection of the female body espoused by Catholic symbolism and by advertising in the neoliberal economy. But abhorring the breasts also means that the girl has learned the incest taboo that prohibits Electra's desire for the father, for if she has breasts, she must replace the mother she no longer

needs. Anne Sexton's "Dreaming the Breasts" captures the ambiguous heritage of breasts received from the devoured (through breast feeding) mother who is simultaneously feared, longed for, and admired, and who is eventually freed by the daughter's inhabiting of the body and positive conceptualization of it:

Mother,
 strange goddess face
 above my milk home,
 that delicate asylum,
 I ate you up.
 All my need took
 you down like a meal.

What you gave
 I remember in a dream:

.....

the breasts hanging like two bats
 and then darting at me,
 bending down.

The breasts I knew at midnight
 beat like the sea in me now. (1-9, 13-17)

While Sexton's poem ties the daughter's identity to the cannibalized mother's body which is abject ("bats...darting") but also celebrated ("goddess," "beat like the sea in me now"), Ufe, for her part, resists the negative consequences of becoming a woman. She interprets the transformation as the loss of her father's love's specificity, a change that will occur as soon as she becomes a generic sex object for men. She expresses an obedient daughter's romantic belief in love in family, which Wine calls "tacky." And unlike the speaking voice in Sexton's poem, which inhabits, is inhabited by, and celebrates the adult woman's body, Ufe wants to have a girl's body and considers the woman's body indecipherable and split in half.

And while Ufe calling the woman's body indecipherable and split in half expresses a certain confusion at the sorceress' potential parthenogenesis (in the ova's spontaneous cleavage without male fertilization), Ufe's character already expresses the Freudian bifurcation that Cixous relates to the hysteric or "bisexual" woman: she who is simultaneously woman and man. Bisexual

women, Cixous explains, are “women in their responses to masculine demands for spectacle and suffering and, at the same time, men in the misdirected, stammering and bound up initiative of an attack that goes beyond spectacle and turns its back upon the voyeur” (56). These “incompatible” and “contradictory” gestures, for Cixous, “anticipate the impossible.”

Wine, on the other hand, is the *mujer mala*, the witch and “lamia” – a Greek word that is related to the Latin “lemures,” meaning “ghosts.” Her desire to experience sexuality predates the witches’ rites, and she laughs at Ufe’s wish to have a child, now impossible since the other witches would abandon her if she ever loved a man and a child. Both women admit that a baby’s connection to its mother’s flesh is spooky, and when Ufe suggests that she would eat her son’s umbilical chord, Wine says she would go even further. She would devour whatever part necessary for them (the women) to be able to continue doing the important work that not even the best scientists can master, that is, the domination of the spiritual and material realms.

The desire to devour appears to imitate one of the qualities of men that the young women eschew: the coveting and appropriation of objects and people, which is akin to destroying the other. This would imply that the ambiguously gendered lamias inhabit both male and female worlds. But in actuality, Boullosa does not associate women with pacifism; she uses violence to express womanly sexuality, and sees femininity as especially savage. The devouring mother fits within this attitude and is a monstrous trope that Ufe and Wine explore in their exchanges. Barbara Creed explains that the woman, the womb, and the monstrous have often been linked, and cites Margaret Miles’ study of the grotesque, which points out that Christian art often depicted hell as a “lurid and rotting uterus.” Miles, for her part, attributes the connection between women and the grotesque to the fact that women are so closely associated with natural phenomena (43).⁶

Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* directly implicates the mother’s body as a source of abjection, saying that both males and females fascinated with the abject continually look “within what flows from the other’s ‘innermost being,’ for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body” (54). But she also says that the trope of the archaic mother is so fear-inspiring because of her generative power, a power that must be subdued by the tradition of filial lineage. This is precisely the perspective, and potential power, of Boullosa’s characters in *Cocinar hombres*. It is a power that both excites and scares them, partly because of its ambiguity, a primary characteristic of the abject (Kristeva). *Cocinar’s*

characterization of the mother's body, like Sexton's poem "Dreaming the Breasts," emphasizes the generative power of the mother's body that produces the child and the milk that it consumes. Nursing is a trope for expressing their psychic connection, a fearsome link because it does not allow a clear boundary between self and other. Anxiety about being both devoured and subsequently abandoned by the child lead the women to fear that they might in turn devour the child (like real lamias) in order to continue the intimate, albeit abject, even grotesque relationship.⁷

Ufe and Wine's solution, devouring the umbilical chord, indicates that any links to origins are erased, in turn implying possible spontaneous engendering without fertilization. By eschewing the woman's traditional social and biological role in the nuclear family, Wine especially rejects complicity with kinship structures; like the Cixousian sorceress, who could be said to (desire to) engender without a father, it is as if she "emerges, pressed out by the 'soul press,' a living product of psychological crushing" (*Newly Born Woman* 56). However, Ufe and Wine, the Cixousian hysteric and sorceress, will continue to embody on the one hand, "incompatible," "contradictory" gestures of ambivalence (Ufe), and on the other: whatever gesture is necessary in order to continue to dominate the spiritual and material realms (Wine). By stealing into Boullosa's *cocina*, the hysteric and the sorceress steal/fly together; in the first act, their bodies and mortality erased, Ufe and Wine are born(e) into new identities as part of the witches society, meaning that they are without a mother and father, without origins, intransigent. Although ceasing to be teleological, Christian/rational Cartesian subjects, they are generative and "becoming," as illustrated when at the end of the first act, Ufe decides to cook up a man to desire. Wine encourages her.

The second act shows Ufe invoking her creation, the first in a series of golems and whom she calls "Israel." The women, who have said they will be forced to go by different names, call one another "Rosario" (Ufe) and "Lucero" (Wine) – names in turn meant to remind us of the social dichotomy of the "good" and "bad" woman. Rosario's and Lucero's feminine chatting covers the "marriage" of Ufe and Israel and Ufe's hope to have a son. They engage in banal banter about clothes, the absent mate Israel, their acquaintance Dulce's pregnancy and whether or not someone called Claudia has had children yet. However, the themes of the first act reappear suddenly and are molded by the added information that Ufe's marital experience brings. It is an experience that has disappointed her previous romantic hopes; as a result, both women become totally disillusioned with romantic love and motherhood.

The impossibility of mastering another's free will has interfered with Ufe's self determination, causing a heretofore unknown fear of loss. Wine cautions that if she does not properly love the husband as a sovereign other – not just as part of herself – she will be unable to accept the child as separate from her self and will consume him, rather than see him desert her one day. The resulting “monstruo de dolor” is the new mother who experiences immediate separation anxiety. The anticipation of this suffering responds to the perceived risk that she will become the devouring mother (the lamia), driven by the same destructive urges that would make the child have to sever all ties with her (in essence destroy her) in order to preserve himself.⁸

Ufe tries to make a man again, this time a timeless, boundless romantic lover whose unconditional love will stay her through the pains of motherhood. But she soon tires of “Julián” as well, and even though she has known love in him she sends him the way of all the ephemeral pleasures of nature, which disappear. As Wine prepares to attend the second ceremony that will complete their witchdom, Ufe falls into a crevasse of despair, and bidding her brother and her parents good-bye, dismisses them along with her lover and by extension, the mandates of patriarchy's foreign gaze which always would other her:

Sí...vete Juan, si un día tuvimos la misma sombra...hoy recompón tu sombra sin mí; yo ya sé reírme sin parecerme a ti...vete solo papá, ¡vete!, no necesito de ti porque no necesito mirar hombres ni que me miren, te puedes llevar contigo la llave del secreto para que yo pueda gustar del amor...no puedo tener junto a mí nada más de eso, y los celos, la compasión, la ternura, la envidia, váyanse, váyanse: por fin podré ser lo que la noche obliga: ¡ay! ¡Ya no recuerdo nada! (81-82)

Ufe rejects complicity with the cultural paradigms that would ultimately render her silent, deserted, and voiceless, and instead embraces the alternative lifestyle that the witches' company will bring. But there is a purely poetic message to be derived as well, in that Ufe's long good-bye means she has accepted the loss of her human form, and that positive results include the absence of pain from earthly ties, mortality, and imperfect love. However, clearly, these are precisely the qualities that define humanity, and are to be savored as the fragility of the ephemeral, cyclical existence and as the unpredictability and fluctuations of free will and the human body's chemistry.

The nature of Ufe's and Wine's existence is reversed when they become witches, and the final ceremony begins just as Ufe finishes her sentence, as indicated through the fact that it is Ufe who responds to her

own exclamation, “¡Ya no recuerdas nada!” with the same phrase uttered backward in the interrogative mood: “¿Adan sadreucer on ay?” Ufe and Wine indeed are engendering, archaic or archetypal females, especially at the close of the second act as the “ceremony” plays with language as a form of creation and re-naming things. This perverts and changes the Judeo-Christian story of God’s patriarchal and filial creation of the world and first man, Adam, in that the Spanish word for “Adam,” “Adán,” is irreverently rendered the mere reverse of “nothing” (“Nada”) in Ufe’s self-mirroring question. In the end, the two women who appear to represent the good woman or virgin, and the bad, fallen, or sinful woman, are together negotiating their new existence. They have come through an in-between, liminal space in which they communicated and helped navigate fears and desires regarding womanhood and the imperfect relationship with men and offspring. But their destination is a textual “beyond” of radical engendering for which others before them have been burned. This sisterhood is superhuman, thus cannot be properly called “feminist” within the new existence of Ufe and Wine. They are nevertheless engaged in a sisterhood, putting their voices together in the end to incant the play’s last utterance: “Ovív ojih odanev le oíroma le ogeuj le se eliab etse adilas al adapacse al atreup al se ehcon atse...” The reader or listener must work backward, back into the heart of the play, in order to make logical sense of the phrase (“esta noche es la puerta la escapada la salida este baile es el juego el amorío el venado el hijo vivo”) or alternately, enjoy freedom of poetic disassociation through the backward speak. The reversed statement’s content invokes various poetic and religious ceremonial traditions of paganism and witchdom, the border crossing of a new identity paradigm, the freedom of creative expression in the dance and its enchantment, the stag that is ceremoniously killed as a sacrifice in some Mesoamerican indigenous traditions, and the live son to represent and affirm a new, alternative-to-Christianity spirituality. This is a crossing through the looking glass to a wonderland of new possibilities, completed when the two women exit through a window in the performance space, exiting to new possibilities in their own Neverland. This culmination strives toward opening space in which anyone may speak freely, incoherently, beyond the bounds of normative gender and syntactical rules. The lamias’ discursive freedoms come close to what Cixous celebrates as a triumphantly gynocentric signifying (the writing of/through the body that she invites in “The Laugh of the Medusa”). Cixous liberates discursivity and identity through the excess and ecstasy of women’s sexuality and creativity as expressed through the physical and imaginative

acts of writing. Irigaray also encourages a very lamia-friendly, free (dis)associative speech when she calls to other women in solidarity, saying:

How can I touch you if you're not there? Your blood has become their meaning. They can speak to each other, and about us. But what about us? Come out of their language. Try to go back through the names they've given you. I'll wait for you, I'm waiting for myself. Come back. It's not so hard. You stay here, and you won't be absorbed into familiar scenes, worn-out phrases, routine gestures. Into bodies already encoded within a system. Try to pay attention to yourself. To me. Without letting convention, or habit, distract you. ("When Our Lips Speak Together," *This Sex Which is Not One* 205-06).

The play's morphological inversion in the mirroring, backwards-speak identifies Ufe and Wine's sisterly engendering as a "witchdom" that would reread "femininity" beyond the flat, insufficient reflective surface of a specular, determined-from-without womanhood. The outcome is alternative to what the viewing public might expect; their resultant freedoms allow Ufe and Wine to negotiate identities that do not fall necessarily within gender polarity and hierarchy; nor do they succumb to stereotyped tropes of monstrosity or deterministic utopianism. Rather, the play constructs for its characters a signifying practice and expanded articulation of homosociality, heterosexuality and empowerment, seen as Ufe and Wine explore vulnerability and free will. Because of the womens' body of knowledge, the performed rite of passage allows for liminal flow in the spaces between them as told in the names "Ufe" and "Wine," which are very similar to the Spanish words "Fue," meaning "you/he/she/it went or once was" and "Vine," which translates to "I came." "Wine" also is an old English word meaning "friend."

While delivering its optimistic message of solidarity and identity liberation, *Cocinar hombres* avoids over-sentimentalizing and relying on utopianism; instead it reveals the importance of negotiating pain and fear and shows that some men – along with the likelihood of living in a traditional, nuclear family – must be sacrificed on the road to alternative subjectivities, female homosociality and sisterhood. And in the end, rather than remain hidden like the girls who wear their mothers' and grandmothers' crimson footwear in Sexton's "The Red Shoes,"⁹ the new generation of girls grows up and changes the rules, similar instead to Sexton's "Dreaming the Breasts." It is a poem that finishes on a note of acceptance and memorial of the matrilineal:

.....
 In the end they cut off your breasts¹⁰
 and milk poured from them
 into the surgeon's hand

.....
 I took them from him
 and planted them.

I have put a padlock
 on you, Mother, dear dead human,
 so that your great bells,
 those dear white ponies,
 can go galloping, galloping,
 wherever you are. (21-24, 25-26, 27-32)¹¹

Although the past may be unchanged, populated by moribund female ancestors who were punished for their gender/sex/linguistic transgressions, language and the body are the sites for de- and re-semanticizing semiotic unities that make up selfhood. Beyond the biologism of Hélène Cixous's imperative that women write through their bodies, Irigaray suggests a lingua-corporeal feminist paradigm:

If we don't invent a language... find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized. Asleep again, unsatisfied, we shall fall back upon the words of men – who, for their part, have “known” for a long time. But *not our body*... Your body expresses yesterday in what it wants today. (“When Our Lips Speak Together,” *This Sex Which is Not One* 214)

While in Boullosa's text the conservative past is eschewed, as if in response to Irigaray the women of *Cocinar hombres* negotiate the womanly body's and “femininity's” semiotic codes; they adapt the trappings of rebellious femininity just as many hereditary forebears have. They enter an ancestral “womb” rendered “beyond” in a liberating way. It is a figurative space in which alternative identities may be created by the women who have already adapted corporeally to a new environment (witchdom, in this case). In this adaptability, the women embrace the virgin goddess engenderer as a response to the sorceress' negated familial role. As new Gaias they may participate in the parthenogenesis that would remove them forever from the world of men,

as mammals they would bear female offspring, two X chromosomes, the ovum split upon itself. According to Cixous, this “parthenogenetic virgin remains the living matrix of last night’s philosophy: the girl, a minor, is hesitating before the troubling, free space of her majority” (*Newly Born Woman* 57). Ufe and Wine show the adaptability that has allowed both Cixous’ Medusa and the lamias to thrive, to signify through their desire even as they retain ties to maternal ancestors; this in turn is akin to what Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem “Letting Go” finds: “like a fish to the air / you come to the open / only between breathings. But already gills / grow on your breasts.”¹²

University of St. Thomas

Notes

¹ From Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Irigaray discusses the fact that western thought hinges upon the habitual mystification – to the point of disappearing – of the ancestral womb or *hystera*. This practically eliminates the mother as empirical origin within masculine discourse by reducing her to the status of Idea, the “unbegotten begetter,” the invisible origin (294-95).

² Wehling quotes the 1975 Columbia Encyclopedia and 1975 New Collegiate Encyclopedia, respectively. Susan Wehling “*Cocinar hombres: Radical Feminist Discourse*” (61).

³ In Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* (205-18).

⁴ See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (43-5). Narrating the return to pre-subjectivity from a space of adult consciousness recreates the thetic phase of transition from the semiotic to the symbolic, albeit generatively and in inverse ontology. Kristeva borrows from Husserl’s generative grammar when she theorizes the thetic phase as that which establishes the “identification of the subject and object as preconditions of positionality.” This phase becomes symbolic because its images and objects “connect two separated positions, recording them or redistributing them in an open combinatorial system (43-4). Calling the thetic the “deepest structure’ of the possibility of enunciation,” Kristeva reminds us that this is like the Husserlian *theses*, which he calls the “productive *origin* of the ‘free spontaneity’ of the Ego” which radiate from a “primary source of generation” (44). We are reminded of Irigaray’s discussion of the *hystera* as *materia prima* for western metaphysical thought (“Plato’s *Hystera*”).

⁵ Yolanda Flores, “The Drama of Gender: Feminist Theater by Women of the Americas.”

⁶ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*.

⁷ This is the same dually generative and devouring power that during sexual intercourse may appear to encompass the male’s body, thus devouring his subjectivity. Western culture’s insistence on the importance of filial engendering attempts to assuage fear of dependence on the female, a dependence that would infantilize or cripple him.

⁸ This returns us to Irigaray’s and Kristeva’s discussions of western civilizations’ fear of the vengeful engenderer (“Plato’s *Hystera*” and *Powers of Horror*). In Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* and Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

9
I tie on the red shoes.

They are not mine.
They are my mother's.
Her mother's before.
Handed down like an heirloom
but hidden like shameful letters.
The house and the street where they belong
are hidden and all the women, too,
are hidden.

All those girls
who wore the red shoes,
each boarded a train that would not stop.
Stations flew by like suitors and would not stop.
.

But the feet went on.
the feet could not stop.
They were wound up like a cobra that sees you.
.

.
What they did was the death dance.

What they did would do them in. (10-22, 33-35, 42,43)

Anne Sexton, "The Red Shoes," *The Complete Poems* (315-16). Originally in *The Book of Folly*, 1972. Note similarity of this ironic title to Boullosa's novel *Papeles irresponsables*. Each indicates that either authorship, authority, or both are ironically disavowed.

¹⁰ Sexton's poem suggests remembrance of the maternal body and medieval martyrs, many of whom suffered heinous tortures, including the brutality of having their breasts cut off. The most well known of these is the third-century Italian Saint Agatha, a beautiful woman who was punished for spurning a powerful man's advances. She was tortured, her breasts severed, and she was beheaded between A.D. 250 and 253. Often depicted holding a palm frond and carrying her breasts on a platter, she is associated with Mount Etna and with volcanoes and earthquakes. Her feast is celebrated February 5th.

¹¹ Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (314-15). Orig. published in *The Book of Folly*, 1972.

¹² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (166).

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987.
Boullosa, Carmen. *Antes*. México: Era, 1987.
_____. *Cielos de la Tierra*. México: Alfaguara, 1997.

- _____. *Mejor desaparece*. México: Océano, 1989.
- _____. *La milagrosa*. México: Era, 1993.
- _____. *Papeles irresponsables*. México: Juan Pablos, 1989.
- _____. "Procuro pulir mi feminidad asalvajándola," interview Erna Pfeiffer/Carmen Boullosa in Pfeiffer, Erna. *Exiliadas, emigrantes, viajeras: encuentros con die escritoras latinoamericanas*. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1995.
- _____. *Teatro herético*. Puebla, México: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 1987.
- _____. *Treinta años*. México: Alfaguara, 1990.
- Castellanos, Rosario. *El eterno femenino*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991: 334-49.
- Cixous, Hélène with Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Intr. Sandra M. Gilbert. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.
- Costantino, Roselyn, "Carmen Boullosa's Obliging Heretic Art: New Challenges for Criticism" in Catherine Larson and Margarita Vargas, eds. *Latin American Women Dramatists: Theater, Texts, and Theories*. Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1998: 181-201.
- _____. "Postmodernism and Feminism in Mexican Theatre: *Aura y las once mil virgenes* by Carmen Boullosa." *Latin American Theatre Review* 28:2 (1995): 55-71.
- _____. *Resistant Creativity: Interpretative Strategies and Gender Representation in Contemporary Women's Writing in Mexico*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Arizona, 1992.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- Flores, Yolanda. *The Drama of Gender: Feminist Theater by Women of the Americas*. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1995.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. New York: Columbia UP 1985.
- _____. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. New York: Columbia UP 1985.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- _____. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. Originally published in 1980.
- _____. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia UP, 1984. Originally published in 1974.
- Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Trans. Michael Henry Heim. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.
- Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.
- Wehling, Susan "Cocinar hombres: Radical Feminist Discourse." *Gestos* 16: (1993): 51-62.