## Evelina Fernández's *Mexican Trilogy*: "Setting the Record Straight"[1]

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The *Trilogy*, as the name implies, consists of three plays: *Faith* (2012), *Hope* (2011), and *Charity* (2012). Although the works were not written in sequence, we will approach them in chronological order, following the storyline of the Morales family first introduced in *Hope*. The trilogy covers six generations of Mexicans and their Mexican-American offspring over the course of a hundred years. Based loosely on the playwright's own family saga, the emphasis is placed on the female characters to validate, among other things, that they are not really the weaker gender; on the contrary, men come and go, but the women stoically remain the pillars of their homes. In effect, Fernández has avowed that she "was raised and inspired by strong, passionate, intelligent women and wanted to see those women on stage" ("Fernández"). She shows tremendous flexibility in the configuration of her characters. It must be noted that even though this is an attempt by a woman to rethink her family history and to write it from a female perspective, she does so without necessarily demonizing men. Instead, she demonstrates a good dose of compassion and understanding of the opposite sex in her approach. She takes a step forward in making the complexity of social changes comprehensible; not all negative male-oriented images in her plays, or for that matter positive images associated with women, are unequivocal or conclusive.

This is the story of a people on the move, like so many other immigrants in America's diverse landscape, who came to the country looking for economic prosperity and to partake in the American Dream. It is evident that many contradictions exist and persist between the older generations that came to escape a conflict, in this specific case the 1910 Mexican Revolution, and the younger ones who are looking to advance and to realize their dreams.

The *Trilogy* is not only a metaphor of the American experience, but also a specific manifestation of the struggles that a distinct group of people had and still has to face in order to understand America and Americanness from a different perspective. Foregrounded in history on both sides of the border, we witness the main events that shaped America throughout the twentieth century and the decisions that women had to make to survive and keep the family afloat.

A word about the use of language in these plays is in order. In *Faith*, the immigrant parents Esperanza and Silvestre supposedly speak Spanish (even though the play is written in English), while their children speak English and code switch between the two languages. At one point, Esperanza summons them: "either you speak Spanish or you speak English. But, not both at the same time . . ." Lupe, a friend and neighbor, replies: "*Comadre,* (*Dear friend,*) it's not their fault. They hit them at school if they speak Spanish and you get mad if they speak English with Spanish. *Pobrecitas,* (*Poor things,*) they're gone go mute" (21).[2] The second play, *Hope*, depicts third-generation Mexican-Americans who speak mostly in English, with the usual peppering of Spanish, mainly to create community. According to Frances Aparicio,

> The use of Spanish among Latino/as in the U.S. cannot be interpreted as a lack of interest in integrating themselves into the fabric of U.S. society, but as an example of personal freedom to use the language that binds them together, to form a linguistic community that serves as a boundary with those others whom they may consider outsiders to the culture. (14)

In the last play, *Charity,* which features a fourth generation of Mexican-Americans as well as recent Mexican migrants, the dialogue is bilingual, with entire scenes delivered in Spanish. Corresponding translations into English are supplied in the text, while supertitles were used on stage.

Most of the action takes place in their respective homes, which quite literally "sets the scene," as the focus is domestic. It is the private realm, customarily linked to the female gender, in opposition to the public sphere, which has been usually considered the privileged social space of men, that is being emphasized here. Nevertheless, the domestic interior, surrounded by public spaces that inevitably convey their unfolding power configuration, is projected into the homes as in a game of mirrors (Nigro). The space depicted by Fernández is, indeed, the site associated with the daily chores women carry out for the benefit of their family unity and propriety, in accordance with strict patriarchal rules as well as the precepts of Catholicism. Accordingly,

the titles of the plays (*Fe*, *Esperanza*, and *Caridad*) represent theological virtues that the Christian soul should possess in order to merit eternal life. In addition, the first two names are associated with passive abandonment and eternal waiting, traditional female gender attitudes. Charity, in turn, is related to generosity and selflessness, which also accentuates the ideal condition of a woman's relational subjectivity. Naming is quite blatant in the *Trilogy*, and, as we will see throughout the plays, the nominal identification with Faith, Charity, and Hope is intended to denote specific values beyond first names.

*Faith* covers the year 1915 and from 1940 to 1944.[3] Even though the title refers to the oldest daughter of the family, the play opens with Esperanza, the family matriarch, who physically and metaphorically occupies center stage. A coming of age ceremony is performed in Nahuatl by the Grandmother, who delivers words of wisdom to the 15-year-old Esperanza, who is dressed "in white dress, long braids and huaraches":

> Remember that one does not live easily upon this earth. But do not forget that above all you have come from someone, that you were born by the grace of someone; that you are both the spine and the offspring of our ancestors, of those who came before us, and of these who have gone on to live in the great beyond. (13)

The old woman also admonishes her: "The women in this family cannot lie. A promise was made many years ago. Do not lie or make up stories or it will go very bad for you" (13), a warning that will be repeated throughout the *Trilogy* as an omen of the misfortunes coming their way.

The second scene takes place in a church where Esperanza is confessing to the young priest Silvestre her very earthly love for him. His defense is as weak as her impetus is powerful:

> SILVESTRE. It's a sin.
>
> ESPERANZA. No! To love is not a sin! The sin is this wretched war that is destroying us all! The sin is the hunger that is killing us. To love is not a sin. It's a sin not to love. It's a sin not to be able to love the person who loves you. (15)

The force of Esperanza's passion clouds Silvestre's moral values and vows of integrity and he ends up eloping with her. This is actually the second instance in which the strong character of the women we are dealing with surfaces, the first being the presence of the grandmother instead of a wise man, or shaman, imparting the sacred words. By having Esperanza come on to him, instead of the other way around, particularly in that time period, the author diminishes the conventional category of the masculine.

*Faith*. Photo credit: Grettel Cortes.

Given the Revolution and Silvestre's situation—anticlericalism was strong—the couple moved north, along with an estimated ten percent of the population, to escape the conflict. It is interesting to note that despite the reference to the violent conflict, Esperanza's remembrance of it has nothing to do with the glorified image ingrained in the social imaginary of the Mexican people, an image forged by post-revolutionary official history and massively disseminated by the entertainment industry in and outside the country. If the Revolution has been highly romanticized and perceived through a nostalgic lens, in this play, all laudatory references dissipate to give way to an openly anti-war perspective, an attitude that will be shared by most members of the family toward the rest of the century's armed conflicts, including Esperanza:

> We were not poor, on the contrary, we always had food and clothes and animals, chickens, pigs . . . But, the Revolution changed all that. The Revolution took our house, took our land, took our life. The worst thing is that we were in favor of the Revolution. But to those who were fighting for justice, we were what they were fighting against. No questions were asked. If it looks that you have something, it was taken away. Revolutions are always messy that way and many times the road to justice is . . . unjust. (18)

Esperanza and Silvestre move to Jerome, Arizona, where we find them in 1940. Esperanza is now 40 years old and they have three daughters—Faith, Charity, and Elena—who are 16, 15, and 13. Esperanza spends her days in her living room doing embroidery with her daughters. One could say that the resemblance to Federico García Lorca's characters Bernarda Alba and her daughters may be merely coincidental if it wasn't that Esperanza, just like the Spanish matron, serves in a paradoxical and contradictory way as the guardian of her daughters' virtue and honor. In a clear reversal of roles, Esperanza, torn between maintaining rigorous order and complying with society's demands, harks back to the convent gatekeeper. Silvestre, in contrast, shows more leniency and understanding of his teenage daughters' needs as opposed to the ironclad system of rules that the mother imposes to deter gossip. Silvestre has evolved from a frustrated man of the cloth to a pro-union labor organizer in the mines where he works. In this respect, Silvestre's change can be read as an allegory of the transformation that took hold of a very important segment of the Catholic Church, in Mexico and the rest of Latin America, with the arrival of Liberation Theology and the movement's "preferential option for the poor" that emerged decades later.[4] His harangues to his fellow workers not only resonate with the standpoint of the dispossessed but also prefigure some of the basic tenets of the Chicano resistance movement:

> We have worked in this mine for years with no protection, no safeguards. We work the most dangerous jobs and have risked our lives and we work as hard, if not harder than the Anglo workers. Why do we only make half of what they make? Because we are *mexicanos*? Because our skin is brown and our hair is black? Because we are poor? Why can our boys go to fight for their country but they are not good enough to earn what the Anglo workers make for the same job working in the mine? God put us all on this earth and we are all God's children. Believe me when I tell you that God, yes, God himself, is on our side. (51)

Even though the *Trilogy* is derived from real-life situations, Fernández makes use of melodramatic framings for her texts. This should not surprise anyone, as family relations are the basis of most melodramas, which Matthew Bush describes as an often important means "by which [to] represent social issues" (69). Love affairs have always been an emotional bridge that keeps readers/spectators drawn in. In *Faith*, the melodrama stems mainly from Esperanza and Silvestre's love story which holds a terrible secret that they have kept from their family (the origin of their romance, his priesthood and defec-

tion from the Church), and the final resolution to the conflict. According to Daniel Gerould, stage melodrama often "makes dynamic use of a secret. The secret is the most powerful factor in the play's dynamics, permitting the melodramatist to hold the spectator's interest uninterruptedly throughout the performance" (1991:124).[5]

Sentimental *ranchera/bolero* songs, such as "Llegando a ti," are used sporadically to highlight Esperanza and Silvestre's intimate moments. According to Bush, "melodrama functions most seamlessly when it works with absolutes and static categories" (53). Taking into consideration that *ranchera* music developed as a symbol of a national consciousness that has not changed throughout the years (or perhaps centuries, since it actually pre-dates the Revolution), there is no doubt that the songs achieve an emphatic effect upon an audience hungry for melodrama with patriotic overtones. Furthermore, Fernández uses music as a parallel device between the two cultures—the Mexican and the American—to evoke history as well as sentiment. Thus, while their parents turn to traditional Mexican songs popular during the first half of the twentieth century, the daughters spend their time singing songs by the Andrew Sisters and Glen Miller, and even imitating Carmen Miranda while singing her hits. Lured by fame and dreams of economic gain, Faith wants to become a singer. She insists on performing her songs at the radio station managed by Ricardo Flores, who recognizes that she has talent and wants to endorse her, to which her mother is vehemently opposed. The dissemination of American popular music is done through the radio, which will also transmit the historical content of the play via President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's chats and orations, which will have implications for all.

Popular music, embraced by youth eager to challenge authority and in search of effective models, bears the collateral effect of undermining a natural affinity with their own, be it social class, ethnicity, or even occupation. This unforeseen consequence has, in fact, been studied in several fields. The British sociologist Bernice Martin, for example, marks the 1950s as the beginning of social change due to popular culture and its destabilizing effect among the working classes, when actually both the framework (the way people were classified) as well as the group definition (the distinction between the group inside and outside) weakened within the same context. But given the substantial radio transmission of popular music,[6] it is not surprising that the daughters, who identify with the broadminded themes of the Andrew Sisters' love songs and even the histrionic excesses of Carmen Miranda, view with contempt their mother's maneuvers to impose strict models of ethical behav-

ior. In fact, when Esperanza goes back to Mexico to visit her dying mother, the daughters' lives change radically. Off go the braids, while the use of red lipstick proliferates as Faith prepares to participate in the "Amateur Hour," a live singing contest and staple of early radio programming. Upon Esperanza's return, there ensues one of the most dramatic scenes of the play as the mother, knowing that physical punishment will no longer deter her daughter, threatens to poison herself if the latter insists on participating in the contest. Faith, who turns out to be as determined and rebellious as her mother was during her youth, challenges her: "What are you waiting for? Drink it . . ." (68). Silvestre intervenes and Faith, unable to cope with her mother's callous attitude, leaves home.

Frequent excerpts from radio speeches by FDR underscore the play's socio-historical context.[6] During this time, the mass deportation of Mexicans that followed the Depression was still lingering on the horizon, becoming truly "traumatic" for some members of the community (Acuña 140). Lupe, Esperanza's friend and neighbor, says of her husband, "Ignacio's afraid they'll deport him like they deported his father" (20). FDR in a sense becomes a character in the play. According to Esperanza, "If it were not for President Roosevelt we would have starved to death" (20). His voice became a regular staple of the household and was admired by all; his relaxed approach, as if talking directly to the American people on their own terms, is evident in the lengthy excerpts of his speeches. These include the declaration of war in 1941, which meant the military mobilization of many young men, among them Freddy, Charity's boyfriend, who will perish during the war.

At the same time that the radio airs the news of the President's death on April 12, 1945, Esperanza finds out that Charity was left behind pregnant, a discovery that marks the beginning of the end of her own relationship with Silvestre. When the already problematic relationship between the couple is exacerbated by what seems to be both divine intervention and human persecution by his bosses, Silvestre, torn between family ties and his Christian ethics, decides to abandon Esperanza and go back to Mexico to resume his interrupted pastoral duties.

> ESPERANZA. You didn't love me? You never loved me?
> SILVESTRE. Of course . . . I love you and I love my daughters. But . . .
> (*He falls silent*)
> ESPERANZA. Say it . . .
> SILVESTRE. Deep in my heart. I belong to God. To the promise I made so many years ago. ***(****Esperanza cries.)*

> ESPERANZA. Get out. Please get out of here and never come back. Go away. For your own good and for the good of our daughters. I will never be able to live with you. You coward. You were always a priest. You were never a man. You could never stand up to God. (81)

According to Mexican cultural historian Carlos Monsiváis's assertion, which we find pertinent given Silvestre's past priesthood, "Melodrama fundamentally depends upon the (slow) process of nineteenth-century secularization and the practical transfer of religious sentiments to private life" (ctd. M. Bush 91). But when the balance between good and evil enters the equation—no need to underline that women have traditionally been seen as the carriers of bad seeds—we are taken back to biblical times where women bore the brunt of adverse consequences.[7] As a resolution of the conflict, what could be considered a better "good ending" for this melodrama than the metaphorical reunion of the soul with its creator—the return of the stray sheep to the fold with renewed faith—at the expense of any mortal attachments and the consequent punishment imparted to the seductress?

After Silvestre's departure, Esperanza tries to restore normalcy in her life. Faith, who apparently has found some success in Los Angeles, writes to her and her sisters asking them to move to the city, where "Nobody cares about your past, whether you're rich or poor, whether you're married or not. Everybody is too busy living" (84). Esperanza, who always dreamed of being swept up by a wave and taken "far away to a place where everyone and everything was different" (27), comes to terms with her daughter's emancipation and decides to join her. But the substantial change, in everyone's mind, occurs when President Harry Truman, who inherited the podium at the radio, announces that the U.S. has dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima as a nefarious yet necessary preamble of the world peace to come. At the end of the play, Elena, who is only 15-years old, marries her boyfriend Charlie. In a full circle of events, Esperanza recites to her daughter the "words of wisdom" that she received when she was young, before her departure for California.

Part II of the *Trilogy*, *Hope*, covers the years 1960 to 1963.[8] The action takes place in Phoenix, where Elena, married to Carlos, lives with her four teenage children, Gina, Betty, Johnny, and Bobby. We are at the heart of the Camelot era in which Prince Charming (aka John F. Kennedy) is ruling supreme. It is no longer the radio that presides over Elena's household but visual media, which President Kennedy learned to take full advantage of rather quickly. The opening scene includes footage of his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, in which he delivered his unquestionably most famous

words: "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country" (93). Most of the images that accompany the historical events come from newsreel that was projected on the TV or in the movies during that time.[9] The Cuban missile crisis looms over the entire first act. If President Roosevelt was an all-time favorite historical character during the first half of the twentieth century for many Chicanas/os/Latinas/os, Kennedy's youth, good looks, and the fact that he was Catholic aroused fanaticism bordering on worship in many followers, especially women. The first scene between Gina and Betty, in their bedroom, denotes the excessive devotion Kennedy was capable of inspiring:

> BETTY. Oh, he's so handsome… I love his smile. He's so smart. I could listen to him talk all day long. He's so . . . manly . . . and . . . and . . . *(sigh)* so sexy . . . like a man, not a boy, but a man . . .
> GINA. He is a man. Twice your age.
> BETTY. I know, but I wanna marry him . . .
> GINA. . . . he's already married . . .
> [. . .]
> BETTY. It doesn't matter. I wanna have his babies . . .
> GINA. He already has a family, you can't.
> BETTY. Why not? Give me one good reason.
> GINA. One? Here's two. One - he doesn't even know you exist and two - he's the president of the United States of America. (95)

Betty's admiration goes so far as to imagine telephone conversations with both him and Fidel Castro during the Cuban missile crisis. She pretends to serve as a mediator in the conflict. In one such conversation, JFK tells her:

> Oh, I tried to over throw the Castro regime after I said I wouldn't. Damn! What made me think they could pull it off? Everybody knows Latins are lovers, not fighters. They'd rather be dancing the rumba or the mambo than to be fighting. In any case, this whole thing should come to a head, pardon the pun, *(He chuckles.)* . . . within the next couple of days and I hope we can come to some kind of peaceful resolution. I will try to keep you informed. Betty, you know what to do in case of a nuclear attack, don't you? (111)

Referring to the widespread panic that took over the country about the possibility of an atomic bomb hitting the nation, which at the start of the play has the siblings going over the instructions given to them in case of such an occurrence, the President is bringing to the fore his misapprehension about


*Hope*. Photo credit: Grettel Cortes.

the Cuban Revolution which, at that time, was seen with favorable eyes by many Latin Americans as well as Latina/os in the U.S. In this respect, Castro's imaginary dialogue with Betty is an indication of the general feeling the Cuban position instilled in the rest of the continent:

> Fidel Castro: Betty, the missiles are there for protection only. We are a tiny little island, Betty, ninety miles away from the largest super power in the world. (129)

Once again, Fernández moves fluidly between the fictional and the historical, reflecting a world in crisis. As America is stressing over the very real Cuban crisis, Elena, in her home, is dealing with another crisis of her own, prompted by a compulsively cheating and abusive husband.

Physical force is used as a form of correction and discipline by the father, with the tacit acceptance of the mother. Carlos whips his children, especially Bobby, whom he bullies, calling him a "sissy" (114) and "a mama's boy" (115). The siblings continuously tattle on one another, which comes with beatings, and even Elena receives occasional slaps from her husband. In a predictable way, Elena's self-blaming attitude is the result of psychological and physical domestic abuse and years of internalized sexism:

> Sometimes . . . I think it's as much my fault as it is his. I mean, maybe he needs a different kind of woman. You know, the kind who can laugh and be sexy and drinks and smokes cigarettes and . . . (122)

This is a traditional family unit in which men grow up with an entitled attitude and women are denied equal rights. The following dialogue between Carlos, who comes home after an inexplicable absence of several days, and his son Johnny is a lesson in "macho science":

> JOHNNY. Where were you, dad?
> *(Carlos smiles.)*
> CARLOS. Taking care of business. *(Johnny smiles)* A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. You know what I mean? Look, there must be a girl you like . . .
> JOHNNY. Lots of them . . .
> CARLOS. Son, there are a lot of women in the world. Some are for marrying and having a family with and some are for . . . *(Johnny doesn't like what Carlos is saying.)* Other things . . . You know what I mean? (113)

Nevertheless, eldest daughter Gina, following the path of her aunt Faith and her grandmother Esperanza and aware of the "curse" she inherited of never telling a lie, goes around saying things as they are, sometimes openly defying her parents:

> I'm not trying to scare you. It's a fact. Ducking and covering won't protect anyone from an atomic bomb and dad has sex with other women. Facts are facts! (110)

In this play, as in the previous one, romantic intrigue is one of the sparks that keeps us engaged throughout. If the relationship between Esperanza and Silvestre was founded on evident passion and lust (not to mention love on the part of Esperanza), in this second part of the *Trilogy,* the main liaison is more platonic. It is not between Elena and her husband Carlos, but between her and Enrique, one of their old friends. He spends hours in her home almost daily, talking with her about their dysfunctional marriages while she does domestic chores. Enrique is married to Mari, who apparently suffers from severe depression and whose only wish is to go back to Mexico. His comment on how Mexicans and Mexican-Americans are perceived in their own societies is telling of the contradictions and paradoxical behavior represented here:

> *No sé. (Don't know.)* I can't move to *México*. And do what? I'm from here, born and raised. In *México* I feel like a gringo and here I feel like a Mexican. *Qué pinche suerte. (What luck.)* I can't speak good English and I can't speak good Spanish . . . *Estoy jodido. (I'm screwed.)* (123)

Yet criticism is not one-sided. In this microscopic look at the interior of a community, there is also condemnation of internalized discrimination and prejudice. The following dialogue takes place against background footage of dogs attacking civil rights protesters:

> BETTY. I want a beautiful wedding, with a beautiful gown and a handsome groom with blonde hair . . .
> JONNY. A paddy boy?
> BETTY. What's wrong with paddy boys?
> ELENA. Nothing.
> GINA. Yeah, I guess they're better than Mexican boys.
> BOBBY. Hey!
> JOHNNY. Maybe you'll marry a colored boy.
> BETTY. Maybe I will, so what?
> GINA. Then Mom's family wouldn't talk to you because her family doesn't like colored people.
> ELENA. What? Your cousin Alice married a colored boy . . .
> GINA. And your family disowned her. They still don't talk to her.
> JOHNNY. Really, Mom?
> GINA. It's true, Mom, isn't it?
> ELENA. Yes, it's true. (146)

As with any melodramatic structure worthy of its name, this one is based on ethical binaries represented by the villain Carlos and the decent old gentleman Enrique, whom Carlos once called a *joto*. According to Peter Brooks, "What we must retain from any consideration of melodramatic structures is the sense of fundamental bipolar contrast and clash. The world according to melodrama is built on an irreducible manicheism, the conflict of good and evil as opposites not subject to compromise" (36). These characters are accordingly not willing to compromise; Carlos abandons his family because Elena goes against his will and gets a job to make ends meet. After a brief reconciliation, Elena finally kicks him out of the house. Enrique, at the same time, unable to leave his dependent wife, gives up his feelings for Elena. The only physical realization of their love is a single kiss that Elena asks for one night while she is intoxicated.

On the other hand, there is plenty of consummated love in the play; teenage Gina gets pregnant by Rudy, to whom she does not even feel attracted. Plenty of drama follows as she tries to get rid of the baby by swallowing sleeping pills. She is saved by her sister Betty, and the family, facing strenuous

economic circumstances thanks to the absence of Carlos's monetary support, decides to move to California.

Music plays a key role as a marker of the different generations on stage. Just as in *Faith,* the older generation prefers Mexican romantic music by the likes of crooner Agustín Lara or popular 50s melodies such as "*Piel canela,*" while the youngsters prefer 1960s hits such as "Dedicated to the One I Love" by The Shirelles, the Marvelettes' iconic "Please Mr. Postman," and "Mr. Sandman" by The Chordettes. At the threshold of the convulsive 1960s, with youthful rebellion accentuated by the Vietnam conflict, songs promising free love no doubt helped to define the era. Following the above-mentioned sociologist Martin, Scott Lash points to the 1960s as "the birth of adolescence as a socially constructed category" due to rock culture, the weakening of the working-class family, and youth participation in the labor market. According to Lash, these variables caused the "rigid normativity" based on circumscribed traditional norms to be "challenged and de-centered" (27). This is at the core of the social transformation process that Elena's children are going through from the beginning to the end of their journey.

The assassination, mourning, and funeral of President Kennedy accompany the final days of the family in Arizona. The play closes with the footage of John Kennedy, Jr. saluting his father's casket. In his book *Harvest of Empire*, journalist-historian Juan González describes the vacuum JFK left in many lives with his unexpected departure: "To this day you will find Mexican homes in the Southwest where a faded photo of John Kennedy hangs prominently near one of the Virgin of Guadalupe—a testament to Kennedy's role as the first U.S. president to address the concern of Latinos with the American family" (172).

In the third play of the *Trilogy*, *Charity*, the use of history as a narrative tool again extends beyond its backdrop function and forms part of the dramatic action.[10] This time around it is the death of Pope John Paul II—his wake, funeral, and the succession process—that interacts with the family and their daily activities via the TV set. The play takes place in Los Angeles, in 2005, where we again find Esperanza, now more than one hundred years old, spending her days in the upstairs room of Gina's home. Now in her 50s and trapped in a loveless marriage with Rudy, Gina is the mother of 20-year old Valentina. Her first son Emiliano, killed in the Iraq war, is ever present in Gina's memory as well as that of Esperanza, who shares long imaginary conversations and tequila shots with him. Her great-grandchild is not the only visitor; Silvestre fills her days and nights as she evokes their union and tries

to make sense of his still lingering absence. In this respect, the play brings closure to Esperanza and Silvestre's love story; he is there, in her mind, to accompany her on the last leg of her journey in this world. Esperanza is an echo of the "madwoman in the attic," so valued in nineteenth-century Anglo literature with the likes of Bertha Mason, in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, or the reclusive poet Emily Dickinson (See Gilbert and Gubar), but she also brings to the stage the unmistakable likeness of María Josefa, Bernarda Alba's mother, locked up in the attic. Like her literary ancestors, Esperanza, placed somewhere between the "angel" and the "monster," has considerably mellowed; she is now the practical voice of experience, liberated from any social constraints dictated by patriarchy. Just like María Josefa, her freedom "comes from being close enough to death to be willing to toss off the shackles of conformity and expectation" (Cedars).

If we were dealing with baby-boomers in the previous play, now we are facing the millennials with their characteristic skepticism and preoccupation with their appearance. They are unmoved by tradition, presumably unattached to organized religion, and more tolerant of diversity—Bobby is openly gay and a proud member of the family. Emiliano's response, when asked why he was named after Zapata, the legendary hero, points to the older generation's

*Charity*. Photo credit: Grettel Cortes.

political liberalism and counter-culture attitude: "They're from the 70's, you know. Reaching back to your roots, embracing your cultural heritage and all that" (197).

Music continues to be a cross-generational marker within the family; the elders delight us with renditions of traditional songs such as "Cuatro milpas," or the nostalgic melody of "Canción mixteca," while the younger generation talks about Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." But when it comes to the impact that the entertainment industry and its ancillary products engender in their consumers, not even Esperanza can escape their effect. The image she has of Zapata is based on movie versions of the hero on both sides of the border:

> ESPERANZA. You know why people revere Zapata more than they do Pancho Villa?
> JUAN FRANCISCO. Of course. Because he fought for the land and for the indigenous people. He spoke *Náhuatl* . . .
> ESPERANZA. Yes, yes, and what else?
> JUAN FRANCISCO. Because he said, "It is better to die than to live on your knees."
> ESPERANZA. *¿Y? (And?)*
> JUAN FRANCISCO. Because he said *Tierra y Libertad! (Land and Liberty!)*
> ESPERANZA. No! That is not why!
> VALENTINA. Why then?
> ESPERANZA. *¡Porque estaba bien chulo, el cabrón! (He was handsome, that's why!)* Those dark piercing eyes, the mustache, *su traje de charro* . . . (his *charro* suit) And yes, his passion for liberty and justice made him absolutely irresistible. *(They all sit on that thought for a second.)* (214)

We are definitely living now in the "society of the spectacle," where narcissistic personalities seem to be the norm and all are obsessed with easy success and fame. In this regard, too, Anglo and Latin American cultures are unavoidably intertwined. The third and fourth generations of Mexican-Americans become more Americanized, only to be interrupted by the newcomers, in this case Juan Francisco, a young relative from the "old country" who shows up at their door looking for Elena, who has been dead for over ten years. Juan Francisco makes his way into the family thanks to Gina's somewhat reluctant charity and activates a renewed commitment to the Spanish language and to native customs that they either originally came with or inherited from their progenitors. This kind of close contact with Latin American people is

evidently one of the reasons why the so-called "third generation assimilation theory" often applied to the Latina/o population has been stalled indefinitely.[11] Transnationalism has in many ways become the norm as migrants "tend to migrate along family and friendship networks," and, more often than not, go back to visit their country of origin (Stein). In any case, Juan Francisco, a keen observer of reality, aims his criticism at the Me Me Generation of Americans whose complacence, sense of entitlement, and cynical views of society contrast with the drive to work hard and get ahead that continues to characterize most Mexican immigrants:

> The people from *México*, we know we are screwed but we are still hopeful. We have dreams of a better life and we are willing to work hard for it. We come here and we will clean your house, take care of your children, change your mother's diaper, we will sell oranges or cherries or flowers or peanuts or wash your cars or sweep up your hair. We will do it, because we believe in the future. *(pause)* Here . . . Here you know you are screwed but you are so cynical. It is like you have accepted it as your fate. I notice it in your expressions: "Yeah, right," "Sure," "Whatever." I hate that every time somebody says something they end it with "whatever." Like you are giving up. Like you are defeated. (243)

Heavily invested in delivering social commentary, Fernández reserves her sharpest criticism for the American war efforts of the last decades. Johnny not only never recovered from his Vietnam post-war syndrome but also, referring to his nephew Emiliano's untimely death, manifests his strong disapproval of the war in Iraq:

> I think about these kids over there in Iraq . . . All scared, all afraid . . . They're all afraid . . . pretending not to be . . . Us, at least we were "fighting communism." But, these kids . . . Another generation of fucked-uptedness . . . Because the damaged goods are gonna come home one day, Rudy, to join the rest of us. And we won't be ready for them, just like they weren't ready for us . . . *(silence)* Maybe that's why God took him, Rudy. To spare him the pain. (235)

However, the hardest lines are delivered by Esperanza, who hits the nail right on the head by discrediting those who argue that war is a necessary evil of democracy:

> *Pinche guerra, m'ija. (Fucking war, my daughter.)* Listen to the voice of experience. War sucks! *Como dicen ustedes. (Like you say.)* But, it does. It sucks the life out of the young, the innocent, it sucks the

> love out of life, it sucks the faith and hope out of humanity. Young people die and if they don't, they come back . . . *dados a la chingada. (all fucked up)* [. . .] *Pinche gobierno. (Fucking government.)* All the governments, every one I've lived through . . . They think they can make peace by making war! Isn't that the stupidest thing you've ever heard? And yet, it happens over and over again. (193-94)

Although the characters in the final play can only remember "the 60's and the 70's maybe" as the last time they felt optimistic (243), there is no doubt that under the perspective of women's activism and their aesthetic creations, this *Trilogy* represents a positive entry of what can be accomplished when the conventional "legacy of narrative itself," which has traditionally placed women as subordinate entities (Diamond 95), is challenged. By confronting the present with the past, Fernández is forcing us not only to find our position vis-à-vis the representation of women upheld by hegemonic discourses, but also to reflect on the ways assumptions and misconceptions are created about women's agency. The *Trilogy* is a significant addition to the ever-growing bibliography on Chicanas' coming of age stories and an important stepping stone in the career of a far-reaching theatre artist.[12]

*International Hispanic Theatre Festival of Miami*

## Notes

[1] Evelina Fernández, "So what do I want to say with *Faith?* I guess I want to set the record straight about what being 'American' means in the context of my family and many others" (2012).

[2] All quotations come from Evelina Fernández, *A Mexican Trilogy* (2015).

[3] *Faith* had its premiere with the Latino Theater Company on October 20, 2012, at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. It was directed by José Luis Valenzuela, with Fernández in the role of Lupe, a neighbor and gossiper.

[4] From being a stalwart defender of the leading classes in Latin America, some segments of the Catholic Church under the influence of Marxist thought started to channel social, racial and even ethnic problems through the principles of Liberation Theology, which reverted to Christian primitive teachings from the perspective of the poor. The movement's theoretical basis was influenced by Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1921-1997) and elaborated by Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, Colombian priest Camilo Torres (1929-1966), and Salvadoran bishop Oscar Romero (1917-1980), among others.

[5] Melodrama was born in the nineteenth century in the hands of Alexandre Dumas, fils (1802-95) with *La dame aux camélias* (*The Lady of Camellias* 1848) and it was carried to its maximum expression by composer Guiseppe Verdi (1813-1901) in his opera *La Traviatta* (1853), a virtuoso adaptation of the play. Recognized by its excessive sentimental demonstrations, the genre stemmed from the Romantic period but survived the rigors of Realism and even the stoic Naturalism movement at the turn of the century in Europe. Melodrama was perceived as a form of literary escapism, but if the romantic hero had to be sacrificed it might as well take full advantage of the lachrymose style to incite emotions. It was given a

new life by Mexican cinema in the 1930s when film ceased to be silent. Mexican films spread all over the continent, including the U.S., and by 1955, when the genre was invigorated by radio melodrama, which originated in Cuba, it became the favorite medium of entertainment for many Latin Americans as well as Latinas/os in the U.S. It actually created codes of conduct that would be subsequently reaffirmed by the television industry's profuse production of soap operas. See Martin Hahn, *El paradigma melodrámatico en el teatro latinoamericano contemporáneo* (Caracas: Facultad de Humanidades y Educación, ULV: Centro Latinoamericano de Creación e Investigación Teatral, 1997).

[6] Radio transmissions started during the 1920s, and by the end of the following decade the impact of the radio was acknowledged by most media culture specialists, including those who prognosticated the "ushering in of a new age of consumer culture." Cited by Jack Lule, "Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication," in http://catalog.flatworldknowledge.com/bookhub/reader/3833?e=lulemedia_1.0-ch07_s030.

[7] Several feminist critics have recognized the fact that when it comes to women, "the Bible incurs in a fundamental moral mistake by not treating all human beings as equals" (Frymer-Kensky, 18). See also books by Elaine Pagels and Alice Bach listed in Works Cited.

[8] *Hope* was first produced by the Latino Theater Company on October 28, 2011 at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, directed by José Luis Valenzuela.

[9] This is also the epoch in which documentary theatre emerged in Latin America and spread out to the nascent contemporary Chicana/o/Latina/o theatre. See Rizk.

[10] *Charity* opened at the Los Angeles Theatre Center on May 5, 2012. It was produced by the Latino Theater Company and directed by José Luis Valenzuela, with the acclaimed Mexican actress Ofelia Medina in the role of Esperanza. The plays were performed collectively under the title *A Mexican Trilogy: An American Story*, from September 8 to October 9, 2016, by the Latino Theater Company under the direction of Valenzuela and with the acting participation of the author.

[11] Opposing the "straight line assimilation model" proposed by Milton Gordon, there have been other attempts to account for assimilation, or the lack thereof, in diverse groups living in the U.S. Some of them have derived from the seminal work of Gunnar Myrdal, who claimed that the American Creed, an equal-rights society where everyone enjoys the same rights under a Constitution, and American Racism, based on subordination and segregation, were not compatible. This fact would never entice an assimilation path to the core values represented by U.S. society, especially on colonized people as is the case with many Mexican and Latin American descendants.

[12] I would like to thank Polly Hodge for her help in editing this essay.

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