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Re-membering the Goddess in Chicana Feminism

"I found God in myself, and I loved her fiercely."

This quote, from Ntosake Shange's Broadway play *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, is the starting point of Carol P. Christ's essay "Why Women Need the Goddess,"[1] in which she establishes the importance of the Goddess symbol as an alternative to the patriarchal God, especially as it pertains to women. Shange's uplifting quote has the resonance of a lifetime of alienation, of ostracism, of the desperation which comes from being separated from the sacred, from believing the sacred could not be attached to us, all rushing through Shange's ten words of relief at having found that natural, beautiful, essential part of herself—"God." This, essentially, is the subtext of Irene Lara's essay "Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta Dichotomy": the need for women to find in the sacred the endorsement of their full humanity, which, as Simone de Beauvoir pointed out, men enjoy by the simple virtue of resembling the masculine God figure.[2] Irene Lara, though, distinguishes herself from Christ by focusing her essay on the needs of specific women in a specific spiritual construct: Mexican women, whose traditions and faith was torn and blemished by the Spanish colonization.[3] Women whose history, as opposed to Christianity's, holds the traces of the affirming Goddesses women need in order to see and realize their full identity, in all its complexity and nuances.[4] Women whose ancestors saw their Goddesses dis-membered, distorted, and thus destroyed, and who now seek to re-member them.[5] In this essay, I will delve into the reasons and reasoning behind the colonizer's dismemberment of the Native Mexican Goddesses; the effects this dismemberment had on women's relationships to their own subjectivity (and thus the extent of the Goddess figure's importance for women); and the ways in which modern women seek to not only re-member their Goddesses, but through them, regain control of their mind (or spirit) and their body (or flesh).

Lara opens her discussion on the re-membering, re-fleshing, and re-spiriting of the Goddess in decolonial discourses by invoking two prominent female figures in Mexican culture: Guadalupe (the full title used by Lara being, significantly, *La Virgen de Guadalupe*), and *La Malinche* (who, significantly again, remains nameless throughout Lara's essay). Their identities and histories have been simplified over the course of colonization to fit an opposing scheme of female behavior and representation: the Virgin/Whore dichotomy.[6] While Guadalupe, the Virgin Mother, is treated and referred to as a "good" woman by virtue of her purity, La Malinche, remembered for her sexual relationship with the conqueror Hernan Cortez (and thus her betrayal of both patriarchal standards of purity and of her tribe), holds the role

[1] Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," in *Women's Studies in Religion: A Multicultural Reader*, eds. Kate Bagley and Kathleen McIntosh, (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2007), 163.

[2] Ibid., 165.

[3] Irene Lara, "Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary: Beyond the Virtuous Virgen/Pagan Puta Dichotomy." *Feminist Studies* 34.1-2 (2008): 99.

[4] Ibid., 104.

[5] Ibid., 106.

of the bad woman, the “fucked mother”, as Lara calls her, in clear opposition to Guadalupe’s “purer” example of motherhood.[7] This, Lara is quick to explain, shouldn’t be taken to say that La Malinche truly is a bad woman, or even that Guadalupe should be hailed as an example of what a “good” woman is: rather, these two figures exemplify the perversity of the Virgin/Whore dichotomy, which pits women against each other and judges them under misogynistic and reductive standards of sexual purity and submission.[8]

If this construct struck as familiar, it is because this particular way to relate women to each other has been used throughout the history of Christianity for the figures of Eve, held responsible for the Fall, associated with sin and, more implicitly, sexuality; and Mary, the impeccable Mother and “model” for Guadalupe.[9] This opposition is not an unfamiliar concept to those living in the Western world (though this attitude towards women doesn’t constrain itself to the West). The idea that a woman’s worth can be tied to her sexual habits is very much ingrained into our culture; as Lara points out, it is found, for instance, in Bernardino de Sahagun’s *Florentine Codex*, which links a Nahua doctor’s “crushed, friction loving labia” to her medicinal malpractice,[10] and another’s “loose, wind-blown hair” to sexual looseness by comparing her negatively to other Aztec women, whose bound-up hair was supposedly indicative of their higher moral standing and “goodness.”[11]

The emphasis of this construct on a judgement of women’s morality warrants an interrogation that may seem simple-minded at first glance, but actually poses the problematic of women’s role in the Christian patriarchy: why is it so important for women to be “good”? And, to boot, what does “good” even mean—that is, what does being “good” mean as it relates to women (for, we’ll see, the definition varies between the genders)? To answer this question, we must dig deeper into the myth of Eve and the Fall, as recounted by the many theologians Margaret Miles cites in her essay “Adam and Eve: Before and After the Fall.” As the myth goes, according to Genesis III: Adam and Eve, the first humans, lived happily in the Garden of Eden, free of death, until Eve ate the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, disobeying God’s order to eat off all the trees except for this particular one, and encouraged her husband Adam to do the same; but as “the eyes of them both were opened and they realized that they were naked,”[12] the first feeling of shame at their nudity swept through them, and caused them to seek cover from prying eyes. Upon witnessing their disobedience, God banished Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, and doomed them to sin, lust, and mortality. Ambrose, Augustine, Hildegard and Luther (all of them theologians Miles mentions in her essay) concur on these key facts, despite differing readings on the finer points, such as Adam and Eve’s creation, and their equality prior to the Fall. Another point on which they all seem to agree to, and perhaps the most significant, is Eve’s undeniable responsibility in the Fall. Moreover, the idea that Eve, the woman and thus inferior human being (whether or not the theologian thought her to have been created equal to Adam, as Luther and Hildegard did), is to be blamed for the descent of mankind into sin has impacted and endorsed attitudes and beliefs about women for centuries.

6 Ibid., 99.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 102.
11 Ibid., 101.

12 Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 85.

Paradoxically enough (and this is important to note, as it gives precious information on the workings of the patriarchy), the thought-process leading to Eve's blame has both informed and been informed by women's place in society and the Fallen world. As such, common preconceptions of women can be found, for instance, in Augustine's analysis of the Fall and Eve's character—she is "designed and built for procreation, limited in rationality, and dangerous to men,"[13] and has "in her heart a love of her own independence and a proud presumption of self"[14] — and in Luther's reading of Eve — though relatively charitable in the sense that he saw in her the epitome of female perfection, (not to be confused with human perfection, for Adam, the man, is obviously the recipient of this highest honor, just as "the sun is more excellent than the moon (though the moon, too, is a very excellent body).")[15] These heavily gendered terms, used to describe the first woman, upheld a social construct which saw women as inferior to men. That being said, it is also Eve, exposed through the words of these same theologians, who taught to Christian societies the sinfulness inherent in women, and who ingrained in their collective minds the importance and justice of the hierarchical and misogynistic gender relations they lived by. As Miles explains in "The Female Body as Figure," Eve bore the burden of representing not only the "bad" woman, but all women: "it was the figure of Eve that defined the nature and potential of *all women*. Eve stood for—and replaced—the bodies of particular and actual women in the discourse on gender of the societies of the Christian West."[16]

It is thus obvious that, under the specific societal construct through which the cited theologians operated, Eve is not a good woman. However, the question of "why be good at all?" still remains to be answered. While an explanation of what exactly pushes humans to be moral and seek to do good rather than bad is quite of out of this paper's depth, an introduction into how religion impacts our behavior—both social and personal—is very much relevant, if not necessary, to the broader point. As Frederic Streng exposes in his essay "Creation of Community Through Sacred Symbols," behind the choice to live in accordance with a religious set of rules—such as the unequal gender hierarchy plaguing Christian societies—is an honest belief that the following of these rules and guidelines will lead to a lessening of what Streng calls the "problematic in the human situation," which is, simply put, the feeling of powerlessness which comes with the realization that our existences aren't in our control.[17] This mechanism, which is actually the third step of Streng's Basic Elements of religious following ("Means to the Ultimate Transformation"),[18] can be brought back to the notion of "strong power" that Miles evokes in "The Female Body as Figure" as she explains the reasoning behind the internalization by men and women of the inferiority of women.[19] As she explains, "the cohesive force of strong societies is not achieved by the coercion of behavior and belief; rather, "strong power," as Michel Foucault has argued, effectively *attracts* people to the beliefs and behavior necessary for the maintenance of society."[20] People following religious beliefs do not do so with a gun to their heads. The reason religion is so effective and has attracted such a following, as Streng posits, is that it feeds directly into our need

[13] Ibid. 97.
[14] Ibid. 95.
[15] Ibid. 07.
[16] Ibid. 120.

[17] Frederick J. Streng, "Creation of Community Through Sacred Symbols," in *Understanding Religious Life* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1985), 44.

[18] Ibid.
[19] Miles, *Carnal Knowing*, 119.
[20] Ibid.

to make sense of our existence and see life as a "game" with an understandable set of rule, rather than an arbitrary whirlpool of random events, meaningless in its development.

In the context of Eve's responsibility in the Fall and women's subsequent place in the world, the relation to Streng's elements, and thus the importance given to female "goodness," is simple: if Eve is responsible for the Fall, which is, by all accounts, the worst thing to have happened to humankind, and Eve is the prototype for all women (meaning they are all Eve), then what else can stop another event like the Fall from happening than rigorously policing women's behavior and instilling in them, as much as possible, the wish to be as different from Eve as possible—to be "good ?" Furthermore, if, as Augustine and Luther maintain, what caused the Fall was not only Eve's inherent femaleness—and thus fallibility and sinfulness[21]—but Adam's lack of control and restraint on her due to his love for her and his weakness for her flesh,[22] not only are patriarchal gender roles given more weight, but the policing of women also takes a physical aspect; thus is ingrained the idea that women's flesh, more than anything else, is a cause of evil and the source of sinfulness.

We arrive, then, at the root of our main problematic: the notion, in the Christian West, that female bodies are sinful, and that women, as a conglomerate, can be defined through and by these bodies in narrow categories of "good" and "bad," moral or immoral, pure or impure. Thus Eve, the fleshy woman, the perennially naked woman, whose nudity is often associated with promiscuity, has been, as Margaret Miles points out in "The Female Body As Figure," coded by artists and viewers alike as a "bad" woman. In comparison, Mary's clothed figure, distinct from any sexuality, exemplifies the good woman, whom female viewers should strive to emulate[23]: "Female good and female evil are clearly identified in these contrasted figures. [...] Mary is disembodied [...] with only enough body to protect and nourish the infant Christ. Eve, on the other hand, is body. [...] Her naked body (...) signals her sinfulness, just as the Virgin's lack of body reveals her goodness."[24] It is important to notice that these characteristics are only applicable to women; and while the flesh as sinful is a religious theme affiliated with all genders, male nakedness very rarely, if ever, suffers the same sexual stigmatization and eroticization the female nude does. Indeed, as Miles continues, male nakedness carries the weight of human subjectivity,[25] while the female body carries the proof of her obedience or disobedience to the patriarchal, hierarchical norms of the Fallen world; a disobedient woman—a sexual, fleshy woman—is a "bad" woman, and one needs look no further than her body and her sexual habits to come to this conclusion.[26] Such is the strength of this association of flesh with sin that, as traditional representations of the always clothed Mary proves, the idea of a woman who is both good and "fleshy" seems unthinkable to Christians. Considering the importance, for women, of being good, we can come to the conclusion that fleshy women were not only seen as "bad"; they were seen as dangerous, as posing a threat to the Christian societal order.

This, and the linking of sexuality to morality is, in part, why an important aspect of the Spanish colonization of Mexico focused on the dismembering of their Goddesses and the removal of the flesh from the spirit. For instance, the pre-colonial Goddess Tonantzin was, in a construction very reminiscent of the polarization of Mary and Eve, cast as Guadalupe's pagan "Other";[27] this polarization, of course, playing into the demonization and eroticization of the Nahua racialized body, and thus its associations with the flesh, sin and evil. But, inter-

twined with Christian ideologies about women lies another, more political reason for the dismemberment of the Goddesses. Beyond the physical violence inherent to colonizations (exemplified through murders and genocides), the subjugation of a colonized group passes through the illusion of the colonizer's superiority:[28] the colonizers must apply "strong power" to the Natives communities, and frame their colonization as a positive. This rhetoric is still used by many European countries regarding colonization, and this in itself should be a proof of the ubiquity of this mind frame which canonizes the "developed" West. Thus, when the Spanish arrived in Mexico and discovered their multi- layered, unashamedly fleshy Goddesses, who held power beyond the scope of Christian restrictive gender roles, they eradicated them: not only to implement a patriarchal society, but also to establish their moral superiority. "Here is the cause of your problem," they said as they pointed to the sexual and powerful Tonantzin, the nurturing and fearsome Coatlicue, and erotic and motherly Tlazolteotl. And in the dismemberment of Tonantzin, in her insertion into Christian, reductive schemes of female behavior, in the destruction of Nahua Goddesses, the colonizers touted a solution to the problematic that is women. Reproducing (and following) the solution to the Fall (the cause of the problematic under Streng), the colonizers advocated the acceptance throughout society of women's inferiority, and the rightful policing of their bodies, sexualities, behaviors and minds.

Streng defines the profane world as a world uninformed by the sacred:[29] a world in which people live without instructions from the Ultimate Reality, thus unable to defeat the problematic of the human situation. As we've seen, Christianity has traditionally placed the problematic on women; a profane world, uninformed by the solution of gender roles, would then be a world in which people are unaware that the problematic to the human condition is women—all of them, like Eve, inherently bad. As we've seen, the Spanish colonizers were working under this construct; genuinely believing, under the "strong power" of the Ultimate Reality, that the gender hierarchy lessened the problematic by rendering women less threatening to the human condition. But it is important to remember that these beliefs are not made universally true simply because they were the dogma of the Christian Church in the past; neither the problematic, nor its solution, function as a fixed value. On the contrary, they are incredibly dependent on the specific context of the people who believe in them. This is how Irene Lara, in her essay, moves from a patriarchal problematic basing and based on the inferiority of women in gender dynamics to a problematic which addresses this subjugation and wishes to solve it; better put, a problematic which yearns to solve the problems of women. But in order to do so, the idea that the solution to women's problems lies in changing themselves (or being made to change) and in taking away from them all which the society that constrains them deems "sinful" needs to be eradicated. Women need to learn not how to make themselves "good", but how to see the good which was always in them, through a new ideological construct in which the problematic in the human situation is shifted from the women and their flesh to the construct

[21] Ibid., 95.
[22] Ibid., 97.
[23] Ibid., 144.
[24] Ibid., 141.
[25] Ibid., 144.
[26] Ibid., 124.
[27] Lara, "Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary," 100.
[28] Ibid., 103.
[29] Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, 46.

through which they were reduced to a problematic. The solution, or the means to the Ultimate Transformation in Streng's terms, would thus be unlearning everything the patriarchy, and, in the context of the women Lara focuses on, everything the Spanish colonizers have ever taught them about themselves. As Lara posits in her essay, this process of unlearning involves re-membering the Nahua Goddesses.

The reason for this is simple: as Christ demonstrates in her essay, symbols are important.[30] Create a figure of ultimate power who is continually and unambiguously coded as masculine, and the concept of power and authority will be associated to masculinity.[31] Create a God whose body is regarded (in Christianity, at least) as male, and women will grow unable to recognize their own bodies as sacred and essential.[32] When (as is the case with Christianity and colonized Mexico), all representation of women is constrained to reductive dichotomies meant to erase all complexity and duality from women, this directly affects women too. Culture, and the images and figures to which we are exposed, goes a long way into determining how we apprehend our humanity and subjectivity; this is doubly true of women, people of color, queer (to use Lara's term) people, and other people facing marginalization, as the images representing them often do so without representing the full scope of human behavior and characteristics they hold in their bodies and minds. As such, when women (by which I mean women who live under the patriarchal culture implemented in the Western world, or similar cultures) live their lives being told, implicitly or explicitly, that their sexualities are sinful, that their flesh itself is sinful, and that the only way to resist sin is to separate their bodies and flesh from their minds and spirits, it's only natural that women should grow up with an overwhelming sense of shame and indignity for not only their bodies, but also for their minds, which are necessarily more complex and unpolarized than their reductive society asks them to be. So when the colonizers took Goddesses —which exemplified the power of women, their sexual and spiritual agency—and tore them into halves meant to fit into an unthreatening "good"/"bad" scheme, it stands to reason that it affected the female psyche; suddenly, the Goddesses were no longer where women could look up and have their full humanity validated: they were patriarchy's figureheads, and told women, by separating themselves into "good" and "bad" Goddesses based on purity and the absence of flesh, how to act to be "good" and save themselves.

Re-membering the Goddesses, then, becomes about more than honoring history (though this is an important goal in itself) for Chicana feminists: it is about reminding themselves, and women, of their right to be who they are without shame. Because no woman is strictly "good" or "bad": these categories could never be enough to contain all that goes into making a human being (which women are every bit as much as men). It's about giving back to women their agency, their pride, their bodies and minds. For this, and through this, Chicana feminists, such as Liliana Valenzuela, take upon them the task of putting the spirit and the flesh, two values Christianity has always opposed (the flesh being associated with sin, the spirit being what is higher and holier), back together, as they were meant to be, as they *are*, instead of refusing the flesh to "good" women and the spirit to "bad" women. Valenzuela chose to do this by creating, in her short story "Virgencita, Give Us a Chance," a Mary (or Maria) so rife with life, spirit and sexuality, so filled with the soul and presence of other mystical and mythical women (Venus, Lilith, Mary and Eve are all inside this prodigious body), that any judgement, any reduction, any violence on her is near impossible.[33] Maria, in "Virgencita," is unapologetically erotic (and yet not eroticized, as her sexuality aligns itself with her subjectiv-

ity and agency, and not her objectification), and brandishes her sexual experience and pleasure like a weapon, a badge of honor.[34] In her is still the purity inherent to Mary and so often robbed of bodies of color, but this purity, opposing itself to traditional patriarchal values, does not demand virginity or innocence: rather, it links purity with sexuality—the spirit with the flesh. Furthermore, through Maria, the Virgin Mother reclaims her body for herself, using it not for the sole protection of the infant Christ, but for sexual acts as well as for the nurturing of Camila and Antonia, two young women she chooses to protect and help in their growth and passage from childhood to adulthood.[35] Through the reconquering of Maria's agency, Valenzuela allows Mary, and, to an extent, all women, to reconquer their nudity, the pride they should feel for their bodies in a world where nakedness does not need to be assimilated with sin, but can be a symbol of defiance and power. In "Virgencita," the spirit is thus fleshed, and the flesh spirited, as Maria's body, her glorious, erotic, mothering body, is at the same time the canvas of her subjectivity, the embodiment of her spirit, and, in the poetic and religious imagery used by Valenzuela to describe it, the ultimate proof of the spiritual transcendence of the naked female body.

These actions are important. Thirty-or-so pages long short stories might not seem important, in the grand scheme of things, but they are: they help us remember. They remind us that healing and loving ourselves go hand in hand, and should always take precedence over forcing our identities down into small, non threatening pieces to fit the demands of a patriarchal society which, we need to know, does not seek to heal or save women, as it claims. They remind us of the history of women, of colonization, of the harm done to populations through the power of ideologies. Valenzuela never forgets, in "Virgencita, Give Us a Chance," the baggage that lies behind Maria's naked flesh, or Camila's love of Antonia; it is only by acknowledging that baggage, those issues, that we can work on fixing them—or last least, on challenging their basis. This is why, when Lara speaks of Tonantzin, the Mother Goddess, the complicated female deity who had to be stopped, torn down, reduced, she refers to her as "Tonantzin-Guadalupe": to honor and remember the history behind this title; how, back then, the hyphen between those names would have exemplified their contrast and difference, while Lara seeks to use it in the present as a link between two women, two types of Goddesses, which must not be seen as opposites or as separate.[36] We must not forget, when moving forward, what pushed us to break from the past; we can't heal something we pretend didn't exist. And until we get to a place where the sheer act of women loving and honoring all of themselves and all of other women isn't seen as a radical concept, we haven't healed completely.

Irene Lara's discussion, and the mere concept of the re-membering of Goddesses for the empowerment of women, is an important and radical one to have. Not only does it twist patriarchal constructs, held as true and defining of the human situation for centuries, into a process whose express purpose is to give back to women the empowerment and respect the patriarchy refused them, but it does so by focusing on the lives and specific needs of women of color (often marginalized in conver-

[30] Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," 164.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid 167.
[33] Lara, "Goddess of the Américas in the Decolonial Imaginary," 111.
[34] Ibid., 113.
[35] Ibid., 114.
[36] Ibid., 104.

sation about gender and sexism) in a way that strives to respect their heritage, and puts the real-life experiences of women at the forefront of the argument (notice how all the women Lara cites are intimately concerned with the issue which they address). Furthermore, the idea of a world in which the problematic is not women but the way they have been treated, centering thus the solution on the healing of female bodies and minds—especially, again, bodies and minds of color—through the guidance of Goddesses as the Ultimate Reality and other women as their prophets, works in inherent defiance of patriarchal norms and tradition. But it is not enough for feminist thought to deconstruct patriarchal structure: we must also provide women with alternative representations, new stories, new narratives, new readings on old Goddesses, or even simply, as Lara points out, old readings of changed Goddesses. Through their reconstruction of Nahua Goddesses, Chicana feminists have given their flesh and bodies back to them, placing back into their history the limbs severed by the colonization. And through this recognition of the right of Goddesses and women to be complex and ambiguous, to have flesh *and* spirit, the dismembered Goddesses have been re-membered.

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