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# ‘Woman-Identified Women’: The Politics of Feminist Neo-Indigenism in Estela Portillo-Trambley’s *The Day of the Swallows*<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In Sandra Cisneros’ 1984 novel *The House on Mango Street*, the image of the Chicana woman, who is sequestered within the confines of patriarchy in the form of normative significations of home, family and gender, is challenged. The need to create a new identity for Chicana women is emphasized, in not only society and culture, but also in fictive narratives. Continually through the novel, most of the women stare out of windows listlessly, waiting for their husbands to return or for something to happen, occasionally coaxing one of the children playing in the street to fetch a soda for them from the neighbourhood store. They have no say in their choice of spouses, being considered objects for men to control and manipulate. Oppressed, humiliated and devoid of purpose in their lives, they symbolise the unfortunate condition of women in the Latin-American community. The heroine of the novel, however, named Esperanza, is different from the major stereotype thus described. She is a strong, opinionated woman who desires a house and understands the need for a female space, whether physical or narratorial: “Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own” (Cisneros, 1984, p.108) It is this deep desire for a house which signifies that women in Chicano literature in the 1970s onwards, whether female characters or female authors, had begun to articulate their “need for a space to call their own” (Martinez, 2002, p.131), which would help in the creation of their new socio-political identity independent of men. In fact, it is this articulation of feminist liberation, which becomes representative of a discourse of resistance to patriarchal traditions, and is symptomatic of the emergence of feminist indigeneity in Chicano culture and literature.

## I. Tracing Roots: Neo-Indigenism and the Rise of Feminist Chicana Literature

While Indigeneity or Indigenism, as it is more popularly called, has had wide-ranging and long-lasting effects in Mexico and Latin America for over a century now, feminist Indigenism is a new theoretical paradigm that has defined Chicana literature in recent years. The first impetus for Indigenism was provided by late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century by

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<sup>1</sup> “**The Woman-Identified Woman**” was a ten-paragraph manifesto, written by the Radicalesbians in 1970. It was first distributed during the “Lavender Menace” protest at the Second Congress to Unite Women, on May 1, 1970 in New York City. It is now considered a turning point in the history of radical feminism, and one of the founding documents of lesbian feminism.

archaeological excavations which hinted at a pre-Columbian past of Latin America. Later, the publication in the 1880s of *Aves sin nido* (*Birds without a Nest*) by Clorinda Matto de Turner brought forth the truly Indigenist work in Latin America. It was a new perspective, full of empathy for men and women belonging to the Latin American community. From this point onwards, in the last century, indigenist art and thought have generated more and more works that have “transformed the Europeanized cosmivision securely in place among the power elite and the educated circles of Latin America in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.” (Ramirez, 1995, p.71). The result was a recognition of the influence of Indigenist thought in many realms of contemporary life, including political rhetoric and revolutionary ideology, and attempts to return to an Indigenist past that encompasses for example, land reform, collectivism in working the land, and an almost mystical attachment to the land. Yet, beyond this pro-land agenda, there are several essences which have become the ideological and philosophical pillars of the movement. At a more practical level, the Indigenist movement began in Mexico in 1904, several years before the Mexican Revolution, when Dr Atl (or Gerardo Trullillo as he was born) became a pioneer of Indigenist philosophy and ideology. After the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920, various aspects of Indigenism moved from the realm of idealism to practical implementation. Jose Vasconcelos, author of *Indology* (1925) and *The Cosmic Race* (1927) and Diego Rivera, an artist (sometimes better known as Frida Kahlo’s husband), became the pioneers and fore-runners of the movement, transforming aesthetic thought and intellectual life in Mexico.

A generation later, in the 1960s, Chicanos referred to this earlier period of Indigenism and used it as a political and cultural tool. Jack Forbes and his book *Aztec del Norte* influenced Chicano thought and life, and the concept of Aztlan, the homeland of the Aztecs to the north of the Aztec Empire as it was established in the Valley of Mexico in 1325 was revived among the Chicanos. Stories of the grandeur and dignity of the old Aztec Empire were told. Cultural nationalists such as Rodolfo ‘Corky’ Gonzales and Alurista spoke of this past and developed an indigenous perspective in art and life. In this way, Chicanos “felt empowered in the very real force of Indigenism and its continuing present day permutations and vitality” (Ramirez, 1995, p.72). It began to represent a deep-seated desire in many Chicano artists, historians and intellectuals to believe in the ideals of the origins of the indigenous past. Their faith in it could, they hoped, revive respect and self-esteem for the Chicano community, while revealing the historic past. This two-pronged tool to lift the morale of the Chicano individual as well as to supply an answer to the present condition of the Chicano community, was located in the revival of the indigenous past. And yet, in spite of this, Indigenism also carried with it several complications, such as the accusation that it involved reference to a ‘past paradise’ which never existed, as well as that it was an ‘escape route’ for those who could not face present harsh reality. The belief turned to cynicism, and Indigenism began to fade away slowly. Existing only in fragmented relative importance, it did not partake of the same vitality with which it had started, and what existed was just a shadow of the intensity of its original theoretical underpinnings. However, in recent Chicana literature, Indigenism has reappeared with a new vigour and intensity. Its original theoretical strains and

philosophical ideals have re-emerged in recent years as an essential part of Chicana Renaissance, which has added to the development of Chicano Renaissance of the 1960s and its original adoption of Indigenism as a vital force in art, literature and intellectual life. Significant works such as Alurista's *Floriscanto en Aztlan* or *Nationchild Plumaroja* which had lost their relevance in time, now gained momentum again and were taken up by feminist authors who wanted to locate a sense of empowerment in Indigenism. By the mid-1970s therefore, feminist authors were taking forward the theme of Indigenism to a new space, where it was appropriated for entirely new purposes. Chicana feminism became 'the best thing about Chicano literature' in the words of Nicolas Kanellos<sup>2</sup>, and Chicanas were re-inventing Indigenism to serve feminist ends. Authors such as Estela Portillo-Trambley, Sandra Cisneros, Denise Chavez and Lorna Dee Cervantes demonstrated subtle references to neo-Indigenism, coupled with feminist ideology. Indigenism arose again in a new and transformed way as part of resurgence in feminism, and these Chicana authors became highly significant in this process.

This convergence of feminism with neo-Indigenism was achieved in multiple ways by Chicana feminists; a largely revisionist process of imagining Chicana women and their roles in history was underway. While some propagandists stressed upon the strong basis of feminism in Indigenism, by focussing on the original matriarchal system and the importance of the fertility goddesses, others emphasized the need to revise perceptions of La Malinche (lover and translator of Hernan Cortez and who helped in overthrowing the Aztec Empire) and La Llorona (the folk figure in Aztec myth who is known as 'the weeping woman'). In this paper, I propose that Estela Portillo-Trambley in her play *The Day of the Swallows* portrayed feminist Indigenism in a unique way through the character of Josefa who is representative of this convergence of feminism with neo-Indigenism. Estela Portillo-Trambley is most noted for her two dramas, *The Day of the Swallows* and *Sor Juana*, and is also praised for her collection of short stories and plays entitled *Rain of Scorpions and Other Writings*. In *The Day of the Swallows*, the character of Josefa has been singled out by critics for immense appreciation and applause, as she underlines the convergence of feminism with neo-Indigenism. Josefa emphasizes her liberatory feminist ideals of resilience and independence by means of identifying with a greater natural power, which is opposed to the normative social order identified with both, the Spanish heritage and Roman Catholicism. Her identification with indigenous beliefs, the power of nature, concentrated in a kind of inherent animism, coupled with a strongly lesbian sexuality, indicate that Josefa is a woman who draws her feminist strength from the ideals and beliefs of her Mexican past. Much like Estela Portillo-Trambley herself, who declares that "(she) has the feel, the earth-roots, the historical consciousness of a Mejicana" (Vowell and Trambley, 1982, p.60), Josefa too is a woman strongly rooted in the tradition of the Mexican past, believing in the power of the land. In this paper, I will explore this ideal of feminist indigeneity in the character of Josefa, and thus, demonstrate that the backbone of feminism in Chicana literature is the faith and belief in the power of indigenous Mexican tradition and religion.

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<sup>2</sup> Kanellos is the editor of *Americas Review* journal and publisher of Arte Publico Press.

## II. Reading Josefa: Lesbian Feminism and Neo-Indigenist Chicana Artistic Identity

*The Day of the Swallows* is a play about the secret life of Josefa, a highly respected member of the Chicano community of San Lorenzo. She is a caring spirit known for her charitable deeds, who rescues the oppressed and the poor. Alysea is a girl rescued by her and taken into the safety of her home. Unknown to the townspeople, Josefa and Alysea become lesbian lovers. One day, David, who is another of the disadvantaged youths living in Josefa's house, witnesses Josefa and Alysea in the act of making love. Josefa, in order to protect her secret, cuts off David's tongue and pins the blame on an imagined intruder. Horrified by this act, Alysea leaves Josefa for a young Native American man named Eduardo. Josefa is full of despair and confesses to a Roman Catholic priest, Father Prado, about her lesbian relationship as well as David. In the final scene, Josefa drowns herself at the lake of San Lorenzo, as her secret is bound to be revealed to all. She prefers to die in dignity rather than face retribution at the hands of the largely male Mexican community. Therefore, she is a lesbian feminist with strong faith in Mexican Indigenism, and is caught between the cultural differences between the indigenous culture of the 'New World' and the Spanish culture of the 'Old World.' The indigenous worldview or cosmology identified with past Mexican intellectual life, is indicated by the pantheistic nature of animism, while the Old World culture is identified with the normatives of Roman Catholicism. Josefa, is at "the nexus between animism and Roman Catholicism" (Detwiler, 1996, p.147). Animism is the belief that that "all natural phenomenon have souls independent of their physical beings" and that "the souls of individual creatures are capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body" (Tylor 1953, p.48). Josefa, is conscious of the indigenous belief-systems and rejects the patriarchy of the Roman Catholicism; her belief in 'The Earth as Mother' rather than in 'God as Father' is an indication of her intellectual and philosophical life. She identifies with the animistic symbol system of her indigenous heritage, calling forth an age wherein fertility goddesses were worshipped instead of patriarchal male figures. As such, her identification with her indigenous heritage serves as the basis of her feminism, in opposition to a dominant patriarchal social and religious order. This interpretation is supported in the text by Josefa's worship of the natural cosmos of the 'magicians', her relationship with Father Prado, her lesbianism, and her transformation into light at the end of the play, which I argue, are the very bases of her feminist Indigenism.

In the introduction to Josefa, she is described as a "tall regal woman about thirty-five. Her bones are Indian, her colouring is Aryan."(8) She tells Eduardo, "I am Indian, you know... yet, not of the desert, not of them, in a way... yet, totally theirs." (17). She tells Alysea that "men don't love... they take" (27), thus rejecting the patriarchal forces of society. Also, in an animistic system, the desert is an important symbol for death, with life-taking, and therefore with men, rather than women who are conceptualised as caregivers and nurturers. Thus, Josefa's rejection of the desert is a rejection of patriarchy, and her room is symbolic of this preference: "There is no desert here, only light" (11). Light, on the other hand, indicates the softer nature of women, "a dream of gentleness and peace" (14). In this way, Josefa's house is a sanctuary which keeps her safe from the dominant

ideas of patriarchy, and Portillo-Trambley has portrayed this by means of animistic symbols which signify this conjunction between feminism and indigenous culture.

One critical indication of Josefa's belief in indigenous animistic world-view, is her worship of the "magicians" who are the spirits of the natural world. She says:

The wonder was my magicians. That night at the lake there was a different music . . . the stillness sung inside me . . . the moonlight grew in me ... it became my lover. . . . There by the lake, I felt the light finding its way among the pines . . . to me. ... It took me . . . then . . . perhaps it was my imagination ... it said to me . . . "We are one . . . make your beauty . . . make your truth." Deep, I felt a burning spiral ... it roared in my ears ... my heart.... It was too much to bear ... so I ran. . . . then I opened my eyes and found myself calmly looking up at the stars .. . sisters of my love! The moon followed me; it lay a lake around me, on the grass.

This deep reverence of the 'magicians' who speak to her, prove that she is a believer in the power of the natural world, as opposed to Roman Catholicism, which is founded on the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is at this moment that Josefa truly taps into her indigenous consciousness and evokes a sense of being among ancient fertility goddesses. Feeling the souls and fullness of the moon beckons her to freely enjoy and experience the passion of her sexuality (Case, 1988, p.73) as she becomes its lover. She is "of the lake," with "the soaring sea in her" (19). Josefa worships the forces of life inherent in the symbolic sustenance of water. The special relationship between women, the bearers of life, and nature is identified in "nature's solstices, women's menstrual cycles, the cycles of the moon, and the cycle of life and death" (Case, 1988, p.72). Thus, in her communication with these fertility goddesses, Josefa finds in them power and life for herself and all women. Thus, she reveres the moon, the lake, the swallows, the stars and light, all of which are aspects of nature. It is at this moment in the play, that Josefa most intensely connects to her indigenous consciousness and expresses her sexuality, strongly rejecting the yokes of the Spanish heritage, by both, her choice of sexuality as well as her preference for a natural religion, and expressing her feminist ideals by means of recourse to a animistic system which believes in the power of the land. With regard to Josefa's confession to Father Prado, who is a symbol of Roman Catholicism and therefore Spanish heritage, Josefa "disdains men, yet she holds Father Prado in high esteem, and confides in him" (Rodriguez, 1980, p.154). This is possible, only because, like Josefa, Father Prado recognizes a "holier temple" in nature, but he does not worship it. His is the temple built to "God the Father" of Roman Catholicism, and yet he is enchanted with Josefa as a spiritual extension of the natural cosmos. When he tells Josefa, "There is so much God in you!", he declares his reverence for her natural religion, to which she responds by declaring "God in me? ... no, Father ... no. ... It was not faith, it was the light of my magicians ... I bear the children of light! I am its high priestess" (44). This dialogue makes direct reference to Josefa's distinct animistic cosmology and is further confirmed within the dramatic text during Alysea's conversation with Eduardo. When Eduardo tells Alysea that his God is among nature, Alysea responds: "Father Prado understands your God too.... I told him about not attending Mass because we go exploring ... to find the tallest

pinos ... I told him about your God ... he smiled and told me I had found a holier temple" (15). Thus, we see that Father Prado recognized a certain power in nature but he does not worship it. This is why Josefa finds confiding in him not a difficult task, and her relationship with the priest does not complicate her acceptance of indigenous tradition and religion.

Thus, we can safely say that Josefa's feminist Indigenism is a strong characteristic of her persona, and yet the question arises as to how we might then approach her sexual preference of lesbianism. Do we also understand Josefa's lesbianism to be a part of her feminist indigeneity or was Mexican culture against it? Portillo has presented the character of Josefa as a lesbian in the play. Alysea is her sexual partner who later decides to go back to heterosexuality, by eloping with Eduardo. Josefa's, lesbianism is of course in a simplistic sense, a way of opposing the rigidity of patriarchy as well as the limitations which societal norms and conventions impose upon women. In this sense, Portillo-Trambley's conception of lesbianism seems to be a strand of the idea of lesbian feminism which emphasises that lesbianism should be regarded as the most complete form of feminism, as per the 'Woman-Identified Women' essay by the Radicalesbian collective (ed. Anna Koedt, 1973). This essay proposes that lesbianism is central to feminism because it turns away from various forms of collusion with patriarchal exploitation and instead consists of relationships among women which by definition constitute a form of resistance to and a radical reorganising of existing forms of social relations. If this is so, Josefa is certainly part of this tradition. She views her lesbianism as a feminist project and encourages Alysea not to go away with Eduardo both because he being a man is bound to disappoint her, and because she is in love with her. In this way, her lesbianism is an extension of her feminism, and both gender and sexuality coalesce in her argument to persuade Alysea to stay back with her. Also, love and sexuality too fuse together in her appeal to Alysea, and we get a sense of the perfectly harmonious, ideal partnership which has eluded Josefa, and the displacement of which she feels most strongly.

Also, interestingly, there had emerged a number of lesbian feminist Chicana writers during the Chicana Renaissance who militantly promote a neo-Indigenist point of view. Gloria Anzalda and Cherrie Moraga in *This Bridge Called My Back* (and later in *Making Face*) tie together the power and autonomy of feminists with the feminist principle of indigenous earth goddesses. Their primary focus is on expressing female power of the earth goddesses by means of which feminism is adopted as a political and social agenda, which promotes lesbianism at its final evolutionary stage. Secondly, their emphasis is also on the creation of a "Coatlicue state," something Gloria Anzalda incorporates into her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), where Coatlicue, the Aztec earth goddess, promotes the creation of work in the "deep, dark earth of the unconscious. ... by which a seeming stasis or immobility is broken by underground activity that bursts through, a highly dynamic energy that cannot accept interference from the conscious mind" (p.47). Such evocations of goddesses represent the creative process, or by extension, an individual's creative power which ultimately cannot be repressed, and Josefa is representative of the power of the indigenous earth goddesses. She, thus, not only is a lesbian feminist, but also a symbol of creative strength - drawing

her power for both from feminist reworking of indigenous culture and tradition. In this sense, her lesbianism is supported by and, in fact, draws its power from her feminist identity, as well as her indigenous identity as a Chicana woman who is symbolic of earth goddesses such as Coatlicue. Also, interestingly, Queer theory in recent years, as discussed by Judith Butler for example, in *Inside/Outside: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, proposes that identity categories like straight and gay 'tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for libratory contestations of that very oppression'. Hence, lesbianism according to Butler is based on the 'fluidity of identity', which is also voiced by others such as Eve Sedgwick in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, whereby lesbianism becomes a shifting signifier. This 'fluidity of identity' is a diffusion of identity, where one's individuality is based on one's creative power, a kind of power "that inhabits, or passes through my psyche," in the words of Anzalda. This power, she continues, is "a consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche," and "the incarnation of cosmic processes" (1987, p.46). It represents duality, and even beyond that, it is "life-in-death" and "death-in-life" (Anzalda, 1987, p.46). It is this 'diffusion of identity' that is embodied in the 'light' which envelops Josefa as she commits suicide by drowning herself in the lake. The light is symbolic of her diffusive yet powerful, identity as a lesbian. She finally becomes a person who is able to make her own life-choices and her lesbianism not only becomes a way of defying patriarchy but also a way of expressing her creativity and her individuality. In this way, Josefa's lesbianism is strongly connected to the myth of Coatlicue, and to her indigenous roots. It is her indigeneity that allows her to become what she wants, by achieving complete subjectivity, and her apparent suicide, is actually a celebration; a 'life-in-death' and a 'death-in-life.' This is why the ending of the play is not tragic but celebratory – a celebration of freedom and individuality, through the means of adherence to indigenous tradition and culture. The ending transforms into a jubilant celebration of lesbianism as she merges with the lake, which she calls her lover, and which is almost like a character throughout the play. She refers to past experiences in the lake constantly, couching her feelings towards it in sexual terms and hinting that therein lies the key to her liberated, emancipated self. It is not an ordinary lake, but the lake of subjectivity from which she drinks, and which informs her selfhood. As such, her volitional merging into the lake at the end is not tragic, but comic in a celebratory, self-affirming sense. It shows that Josefa has conquered rather than being conquered. In this sense, the play defies convention and falls into that liminal space between tragedy and comedy, which is rarely seen.

In conclusion, I would like to re-iterate that feminist indigeneity is an essential part of Chicana literature and Estela Portillo-Trambley's play is a testimony to this strain of Latin American cultural nationalism. Linking ancient roots with the present, and illuminating the contemporary era with old traditions, feminist neo-Indigenism contributes significantly to Chicana literature, and *The Day of the Swallows* is a brilliant instance of this resurgent force. In this sense, by creating a character such as Josefa, Estella Portillo-Trambley does not fit into the idea of the writer who has a relation with the dominant ideology of his age as written by Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory*, but

rather into Helene Cixous' idea of women writers in 'The Laugh of Medusa' where the writer embody as birds and thieves, who imply anarchy, 'fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down' (Cixous, 1976, p. 887).

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