

WOMEN'S POETRY THAT HEALS ACROSS BORDERS: A TRANS-AMERICAN READING OF THE BODY, SEXUALITY, AND LOVE

MUJERES POETAS QUE CURAN Y CRUZAN FRONTERAS: UNA LECTURA TRANSAMERICANA DEL CUERPO, LA SEXUALIDAD Y EL AMOR

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Abstract

Drawing on the idea of literature as healing (Wilentz), this article examines the anti-dualistic restoring defense of the body, sexuality, and love in Angelou (African American), Cisneros (Chicana), and Peri Rossi (Uruguayan Spanish). My trans-American comparative reading seeks to transcend frontiers and join the poets' efforts to demolish racist, (hetero) sexist, and other prejudices. The authors insist on the body and emotions as providing reliable sources of knowledge; they propose that women can cure themselves by loving their bodies, poetry can close up the wounds of sexist violence, and respect for lesboeroticism can heal intolerant communities. While celebrating the female, the poetic personae embrace non-binary positions that defy sexual and gender stereotypes; moreover, their poems' cross-cultural and multi-tonal dimension functions as a bridge among people. In sum, the poetry of Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi has the power to cross borders and heal the world.

Keywords: Poetry; Healing; Body; Sexuality; Love.

Resumen

Partiendo de la idea de literatura curativa (Wilentz), este artículo examina la defensa anti-dualista y reparadora del cuerpo, la sexualidad y el amor en Angelou, Cisneros y Peri Rossi. Mi lectura transamericana busca trascender las fronteras y unirse a las poetisas para demoler los prejuicios racistas, (hetero)sexistas y de otro tipo. Las autoras insisten en el cuerpo y las emociones como fuentes de conocimiento; proponen que las mujeres pueden curarse a sí mismas amando sus cuerpos, la poesía puede cerrar las heridas de la violencia machista y el respeto por el lesbianismo puede curar a las comunidades intolerantes. Mientras celebran a la mujer, las voces poéticas adoptan posiciones no binarias que desafían estereotipos; además, la dimensión transcultural y multirracial de sus poemas funciona como un puente entre las personas. En resumen, la poesía de Angelou, Cisneros y Peri Rossi tiene el poder de traspasar fronteras y sanar al mundo.

Palabras clave: Poesía; curación; cuerpo; sexualidad; amor.

1. INTRODUCTION: HEALING WITH POETRY AND LOVE IN ANGELOU, CISNEROS, AND PERI ROSSI

Around the world, the curative power of chant has been celebrated in cultures from time immemorial, not least as part of the ancient healing rituals of our ancestors. Many centuries later, people have continued believing in poetry's medicinal qualities; Walt Whitman, for example, used to read verses to hospitalized soldiers during the American Civil War. Poetry can even be helpful in recovery from a stroke, as anthropology professor Renato Rosaldo recounts of his own experience: «eight days after the stroke poems started coming to me ... I never had the ambition to write poetry ... I thus say that poetry chose me ... [F]or me it's pure magic ... It's said that poems don't come 'from here' but from 'over there' ... I used to call ... [them] my healing songs» (Núñez-Puente 217-218, my translation). This account reflects the Aztec belief that poetry connects that which is above with that which is below, heaven with earth. That is, poetry functions as a bridge that affords access to the spiritual realm, which may lead to forms of knowledge that are non-oppositional or that are open to dialogue rather than confrontation. Before turning to the poets and theories to be discussed in this paper, I will briefly examine some other approaches to the restorative power of poetry and also of love.

Gay Wilentz, a pioneer in the study of the curative possibilities of literature, reminds us that the mind/body split is a disease that infects not only individuals but whole societies. The binary distinction that gives priority to the mind dates back to Plato, becoming central to the discourse of Christian and other religions, and being reinforced during the Enlightenment. As warned by Wilentz, the mentioned hierarchy can harm people's health, as it promotes a disconnection between their bodies and their feelings. From Hélène Cixous to Vandana Shiva, feminists have denounced that this binary opposition is especially detrimental to women and so-called Nature, since both of them are identified as the «other», or that which should be put under control. Therefore, French post-structuralist feminism proposes the joining of realms that have traditionally been separated, such as the semiotic and the symbolic. It does so through poetry and *écriture féminine*¹, since the latter employs poetic license to break the conventional structure of language with the hope of transforming our mentality and, hence, the order of the world. Another attempt to correct the Enlightenment's excessive emphasis on rationality is María Zambrano's concept of *razón poética* or poetic reason. She writes that «[p]oetry is a sort of supreme thought [which] ... captures the intimate reality of each thing [when it reveals itself as] the flowing unstable reality, the radical heterogeneity of being» (Zambrano 90, my translation). In other words, poetry reminds us that what many philosophers condemn as the «others» of logic and reason, e.g. the body and spirituality, are part of ourselves and that they are in constant flow. To have a healthy life it is also essential to have ethical relationships² with the others that surround us. As the World Health Organization has advised, «Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity»;

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1. The term *écriture féminine* (i.e. women's writing) was coined by Hélène Cixous in «The Laugh of the Medusa». According to Elaine Showalter's famous definition, *écriture féminine* is «the inscription of the feminine body and female difference in language and text» (249). Thus, Cixous' proposal is that women dare to use another kind of writing beyond patriarchal constraints in order to reveal themselves as different from men (instead of unequal/inferior to them).
 2. My concept of ethics comes from Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogics. Throughout Bakhtin's oeuvre (e.g. *The Dialogic Imagination*), dialogue is revealed as an excellent means of practicing ethics, but only when individuals speak and listen to each other with care and respect.

therefore, to be of sound health we should start to acknowledge connections (e.g. reason-heart, man-woman) where patriarchal tradition dictates there are hierarchies. Moreover, regarding the human being's ability to shift, as argued by Zambrano, we should have faith in our potential to restore ourselves and society thanks to poetry.

As we have seen, thinkers and writers across the planet have put forward that poetry's supra-rational form and content allows us to encounter our-selves and others in undualistic and healthy ways. It must be added that people, either poetry lovers or not, can also gain a non-hierarchical and even happier view of themselves and the world when experiencing love. To begin with, for psychiatrist Christophe André: «All the [wounds] that psychotherapists gather in ... their offices are linked to a lack of love» (352, my translation). A similar idea has been developed by feminists such as María Lugones, for whom in «the relation between women of color in the U.S. and White/Anglo women: there is a failure of love» (6); Audre Lorde, for her part, has contended that the erotic «can provide energy for change» (53). While alerting women of the artificial borders that divide them, both thinkers encourage women to use love as a decolonial weapon and thus come together to fight societies that are patriarchal, racist, classist, heterosexist, etc. Putting André, Lugones, and Lorde together, we can draw three claims: first, both poetry and love can be healing; second, since poetic writing is an excellent means of transmitting love, the curative power of love poetry promises to be especially effective; third, to build the foundations of a healthy society, it is vital to go beyond dualistic logic and use poetry as a basis for the creation of inclusive and dialogical life models.

This paper evaluates the restorative features of the poems of Maya Angelou (African American), Sandra Cisneros (Chicana), and Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguayan Spanish). Such a trans-American comparison is intended to focus on healing by means of discarding racist, (hetero)sexist, and other hierarchies; therein, the article hosts a dialogue between different cultures and languages (African-American English, Chicano English, and Latin-American Spanish), while seeking to foster ethics. Therein, apart from providing a close reading of each writer's work, I also draw comparisons between them, especially in section 4. In addition, the messages of the poems, which can be deemed curative formulas, are addressed particularly to women readers: black

women should heal themselves by loving their bodies and communities, while white women (and men) should learn to love their black counterparts as a means of definitively eradicating the epidemic of racism (Angelou); poetry can close up the wounds of sexist violence in the woman poet and reader (Cisneros); society should respect lesboeroticism as a valid form of existence, and so overcome the illness of heterosexism (Peri Rossi). Contemporary theories around affect (e.g. Damasio; Gregg and Seigworth), sexuality (e.g. Grosz, Segarra), and healing (e.g. Wilentz) provide valuable insights regarding these poets' rejection of dualisms and support of a border-crossing perspective; therefore, I will allude to these theories whenever necessary while focusing on the close reading of the poems, which is the essay's core. As for the previous scholarship on these poets, I should add that they have not been analyzed together before, or even interpreted individually from the theoretical synergy I am proposing; therefore, I expect to contribute with an original comparison. Having already discussed love and healing, I will now consider affect, the body, and sexuality.

It is generally agreed that affect studies emphasize bodily experience and that affect itself is a way of understanding experience beyond intellectualism³. My article also looks at how Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi portray feelings, emotions, bodily processes, and relations between embodied selves and people whose everyday experience «exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm» (Gregg and Seigworth 7) –e.g. Angelou's amour-propre, Cisneros' past masochism, and Peri Rossi's lesbo-menstrual sex (my term). Following Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, my approach emphasizes extra-linguistic issues related to «touch, taste, smell, rhythm, and motion-sense» (7) –e.g. the lilt of jazz music in Angelou and the taste of drinks in Cisneros and Peri Rossi. Furthermore, my analyses celebrate how «mutable matter and wonder ... tumble into each other» (Gregg and Seigworth 8), this through

3. Affect studies is a highly complex field, which touches upon several disciplines. In literary studies, volumes such as *The Affect Theory Reader* (Gregg and Seigworth) and *The Affective Turn* (Clough and Halley), both of which are used here, are considered relevant sources. Since one of the interests of affect studies is to reflect upon emotion, its insights are very helpful to approach art in general. Throughout my analyses, I will allude to affect studies—e.g. its anti-dualistic dimension, its reliance on the body, its departure from trauma studies, and so forth—in order to throw more light on my objects of study.

marveling at femininity (Angelou), art (Cisneros), and sexual ecstasy (Peri Rossi). In fact, as affect scholar Antonio Damasio has observed: «*Sociality enters the human cultural mind by the hand of affect*» (*The Strange*, 113, emphasis his), implying the inseparability of the body-mind-soul within the self. Given the diversity of women, the focus on the body's sexual difference is not enough; hence, what has emerged is a theory of embodiment that takes into account sexual difference together with «racial difference, class difference, and differences due to disability; in short the specific contextual materiality of the body» (Shildrick and Price 5). As shown below, the texts by Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi emphasize race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, among other particularities that allow us to realize the multiple possibilities of embodiment. Regarding sexuality, women have been diminished by patriarchy, seen as holed bodies to be penetrated (Segarra); the situation is worse still for women who are neither white (Angelou, Cisneros) nor heterosexual (Peri Rossi). Nonetheless, these three female authors have all rebelled against such ideas by writing both *about* and *from* their sexual subjectivity and agency. For Elizabeth Grosz, who could be deemed a continuator of French post-structuralism feminism, «the body provides a point of mediation ... from which to rethink the opposition between the inside and the outside, the private and the public, the self and [the] other» (Grosz, *Volatile* 20); therefore, the body can help us dismantle the binary order and bring forth a new one. The three poets examined here write respectfully about the body and sexuality, even connecting them with metaphysical realms—recent research in feminist studies (e.g. Wolf) has also confirmed a deep connection between sexuality, creativity, intellectualism, mysticism, and general well-being.

From a healing perspective, the poetry of Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi can be taken as alternative therapies to help us overcome the dualisms that infect the planet (mind/body, white/black, English/Spanish, heterosexual/homosexual, and so on); therein, they often embrace hybrid ideas and methodologies that aspire to a realm of ethical relationships, and thus of health. A trans-American comparative reading of these writers also lets us see their individual texts differently; for example, each one of them underlines the need to move affectively beyond narrow-minded notions of identity, and towards the practice of love as hermeneutics in order to seek affinities across sexes, genders, and cultures, as advised by the Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval, whose

work has been contextualized within affect studies (Brimmer). Therefore, as my analyses will demonstrate, Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi cure themselves and their communities, while illustrating that poetry can go across borders to heal the whole world.

2. MAYA ANGELOU: BLACK FEMALE SENSUALITY AND COMMUNAL LOVE

Angelou's «Phenomenal Woman» states: «I'm a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman, / That's me» (Angelou chap. 79). As we will see, the lyrical voice goes from showing self-love and love for the African American community towards infusing vitalism, sensuality, and love in people of any gender, culture, etc. In keeping with its wordplay, sinuous references, and hybrid point of view, the poem holds more meanings than it initially appears.

The poem's speaker begins by revealing that, although she is «not cute» (Angelou chap. 79), women and men constantly ask her for the «secret» of her attractiveness. Then she starts an explanation by naming several parts of her body, not to emphasize the parts themselves in the way of masculinist fragmentation, but to evoke physical and metaphorical interpretations. She refers to «The span of my hips, / The stride of my step» (chap. 79) –meaning how she sways her hips and feet as she walks–, «the fire in my eyes, / And the flash of my teeth» –hinting at the ways in which she looks and smiles. A key line for me is «The grace of my style» (chap. 79), which implies that true beauty is on the inside (i.e. the spirit) and only manifests itself on the outside once we have achieved an assertive and optimistic attitude. I also interpret her «inner mystery» (chap. 79) as something spiritual; that is, what matters is not what kind of body you have, but how you are as a human being, which, in turn, will affect what you feel about and do with your body. Such a conception, which might almost have been inspired by affect theory, corrects the Western notion of the body as a mere encasement of the self. In this regard, the play-on-words between «where [her] secret lies» and the «lies» (chap. 79) that pretty women accuse her of telling suggests that we should not be cheated by appearances.

Another crucial play-on-words, between «phenomenal» and «phenomenally» (Angelou chap. 79), gives the poem an extra meaning by focusing

our attention on the body even more. As the lyrical voice admits, she is «not built to suit a fashion model's size» (chap. 79), which forms the longest verse of the poem, as if showcasing her proportions. Angelou's speaker defies the Western standards of beauty that, as theorized by feminism (e.g. Bordo), support both anorexia and racism; in fact, studies have shown that African American women have a tendency to be overweight⁴. In consonance with other poems by Angelou—«Still I Rise», for example—«Phenomenal Woman» portrays beauty, love, and happiness where most readers would least expect them. The poet's joyful epistemology echoes affect philosopher Rosi Braidotti, who advises women to adopt a philosophy of positivity in their feminist practice throughout her oeuvre (e.g. *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*).

Angelou's lyrical voice further defies whatever people might believe or say about her body, which constitutes a call for self-esteem; she even laughs at how men «swarm around» her like a «hive of honey bees» (chap. 79), an animalizing metaphor which reinforces the parody. For affect scholars Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, affect can help us to be «open to more life or more to life» (12), which entails thinking beyond established ideas and being more prone to creativity. It is clear that Angelou's poetic persona has learnt to be content with herself, above all with her femininity—«the arch of my back», «The ride of my breasts», «the click of my heels, / The bend of my hair» (Angelou chap. 79); in this way she also encourages others to feel glad about it. Nevertheless, her bold position here, taking the lead, does not fit into the traditional concept of the feminine, being closer to a masculine or feminist one. That is, her psychological strength places her in a non-binary manner that challenges gender stereotypes. As we will see, the non-binary stance also characterizes the poetry of Cisneros and Peri Rossi. This suggests the possibility of a new literary school: a feminist healing poetry that rejects binary thinking; identifying such a group of poets would suppose adding another genre to Wilentz's pioneering study, which revolves exclusively around narratives.

It must be pointed out that saying with pride «I'm a woman» (Angelou chap. 79) is particularly relevant for an African American, in that blacks had

4. Obesity among African Americans is not in itself a matter of ethnicity, but a consequence of «socioeconomic and environmental factors» (Jones).

not been considered human during the time of slavery and continue to be the victims of racism today. In her seminal work on intersectionality, black feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw has shown how black women are constrained by factors (class and culture, among others) that are quite different from those affecting white women. Patricia Hill Collins has called attention to the kind of stereotypes attributed to black females (e.g. mammies, matriarchs, jezebels) and how these serve to perpetuate black women's subordination; consequently, she advocates self-definition as a «journey from internalized oppression to the 'free mind'» (Collins 112). Angelou also advocates a journey to the free mind, not only for her black peers, but also for white ones. Regarding embodiment or the contextualized body, it must be added that the bodies of black women have suffered remarkable levels of abuse, including rape. This was the case with Angelou herself during her childhood; despite suffering such an ordeal, she was able to recover by speaking and writing about it (e.g. Angelou, *I Know*). In contrast to canonical studies of trauma (e.g. Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), which maintain that the self is a closed and even split (mind/body) system, affect theory contemplates the self as a holistic organism that is open to information and change; this theorization defies the idea that traumas are incurable, as they do not simply «reduce [our] capacities» but may also «facilitate, develop, ... or redirect» them (Goldberg and Willse 282). This particular finding of affect scholarship can indeed be applied to Angelou's life and work.

By taking back her body, Angelou is setting out a triple manifesto –personal, feminist, and anti-racist– in which she declares that black women not only exist, but also have beautiful bodies and the right to enjoy them. For instance, in «Still I Rise», the female speaker boasts that she has «diamonds / at the meeting of [her] thighs» (Angelou chap. 98) as a way of claiming that a black woman's sexuality is invaluable. Her exhortative poems for black women to love and be happy with themselves continue the consciousness-raising efforts of «Black is beautiful», a cultural movement started by African Americans in the 1960s. The movement tried to release African Americans from their internalized racism, while fostering black looks and urging blacks to pursue a healthier life by loving themselves. In Black African thought, «the health of an individual person is directly linked to the health of the community and the culture» (Wilentz 30). Accordingly, Angelou writes

«Phenomenal Woman» as an act of love for herself and her peers; thus the line referred to «The curl of my lips» (chap. 79) can be a metaphor for a black person's prominent lips as being both beautiful and kissable.

To continue extolling the virtues of her community, «Phenomenal Woman» has a jazzy cadence that pays homage to the musical tradition of African Americans, bringing to mind the sensual lines of female jazz singers. The poem's musicality lies not only in its external rhymes –lies, size, lies; much, touch– but also in the internal ones –cute suit; shout, about–, which is coherent with its message of the inseparability of body and spirit. Despite this, her speaker cannot be accused of being either vain or self-sufficient, e.g.: the phrase «The need for my care» (Angelou chap. 79) has a double meaning which suggests she needs to be cared for by both herself and others. In an interview, Angelou asserts that «one must learn to care for oneself first, so that one can then dare to care for someone else. That's what it takes to make the caged bird sing» (Eliott 694). The phenomenal voice of this poem also conveys the idea that care is a human «need» (Angelou chap. 79), one with which the author is regularly concerned. It is not surprising, then, that she cares to sing her song in a joyful way. The author's philosophy reminds us of the ethics of care put forth by cultural feminists (e.g. Gilligan), among other reasons, to highlight the importance of the care-taking activities that women have performed throughout history. It is through the care we dispense to ourselves and others, as well as receive from them, that human beings can lead a healthy life.

In «Phenomenal Woman», after relating her conversations with women and men, the lyrical voice enters into a dialogue with a reader addressed as «you» to make her-him «understand / Just why my head's not bowed. / I don't shout or jump about / Or have to talk real loud. / When you see me passing, / It ought to make you proud» (Angelou chap. 79). This «you» refers especially to the people with a racist-sexist ideology. The poem's persona seems to be suggesting that we will only be able to reach a higher level of feeling-thinking, and thus a truly healthy existence, when we can feel proud of the people that have been considered inferior throughout history. In her groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the poet and philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa puts it as follows: «As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down» (106). I would like to argue that the misconception of difference,

which is commonly mistaken for inequality, has led us to forget that people of different genders, ethnicities, etc. also have features in common; for this reason we must reconsider our commonalities and learn to appreciate them. Angelou's «On the Pulse of Morning» exhorts all the cultures living in the United States to listen to the Tree, the Rock, and the River in order to «Lift up your hearts ... And look into your sister's eyes, / Into your brother's face, your country» and say «Very simply / With hope / Good morning» (chap. 169). In this and other poems, Angelou hopes that a «new day» has come for humanity to affectively encounter each other as well as all other living beings (i.e. Nature).

Apart from cherishing beauty, happiness, and self-esteem, «Phenomenal Woman» is also a declaration against racism. One of the goals of my trans-American reading is also to dismantle racism and other prejudices, for instance, by cherishing the value of each author while showing the affinities among them –e.g. their report of intolerance. Overall, Angelou's poem epitomizes the survival and victory of a black woman, one who loves herself and irradiates love toward others, in a way that has the potential to turn into worldly love.

3. SANDRA CISNEROS: LOVING POETRY AND THE POETIC-SEXUAL SELF

At first sight, Sandra Cisneros' «*Vino Tinto*» differs considerably from Angelou's poem in both form and content. A comparison, however, is potentially very useful in that Cisneros' piece delivers a proud portrayal of Chicana subjectivity and culture, as shown by its multi-tonal character, its rebellion against heteropatriarchy, and its unashamed defense of the body and its pleasures; this includes an understanding of poetry as bodily matter (e.g. words) to be played with too. Furthermore, the enigmatic last stanza of «*Vino*» invites an analysis in depth.

«*Vino Tinto*» poetically narrates a story in the first-person to a reader addressed as «you» (Cisneros 111). The lyrical voice begins by describing how drinking red wine reminds her of an old lover. The intimate tone indicates that the speaker could represent the author herself describing a past experience. Here we find the first mark of affect: the body remembers, which

is to say that «the essence of a feeling may not be an elusive mental quality ... but rather the direct perception of ... the body» (Damasio, *Descartes* xv). Cisneros' memory of «spiral[ing] like Egyptian silk, / blood bit from a lip, black / smoke from a cigarette» (111) suggests a sexual encounter, which included violence (due to either sadomasochism or gender abuse), and which was followed by smoking. The terms «thrum» and «hiss» (111) make connections to the music of poetry, a topic to which I will return below. I will also argue that «*Vino Tinto*» is the sequel to «*Amé, Amo, Amaré*» (I Loved, I Love, I Will Love⁵), which portrays the emotional and sexual abuse of a woman by her male partner. Published seven years later, Cisneros' «*Vino Tinto*» helps the poetic persona (as well as the author) to overcome the experience, to heal her heart, and to provide a cure for readers who might need it.

In the second stanza of «*Vino Tinto*», sexual allusions are mixed with comments about the moments when the author «write[s her] poems» (Cisneros 111). First we read, «Nights that swell like cork. / This night. A thousand» (11); since the cork could be a simile for the penis, the suggestion is made that her lover was male. Mentioning a thousand nights inevitably reminds us of *Arabian Nights*, which in turn takes us back to the Egyptian silk of the previous stanza. Cisneros' inclusion of Eastern cultures expands her already hybrid identity into a multi-cultural one suggesting that, despite our differences, all of us are equal and even similar when facing passion –something which Peri Rossi also agrees with. As noted above, I apply affect studies in my research in order to consider the affinities lying within human diversity as a means of claiming equality among people –an equality not yet acknowledged by racist heterosexist capitalist patriarchy. Furthermore, reading literature comparatively, e.g. across the Americas, seems important nowadays to help us change our paradigms of thought, meet each other in dialogue, and finally become an egalitarian society.

The first verse of «*Vino Tinto*» says «Dark wine reminds me of you» (Cisneros 111), which is an intentional mistranslation of the title; similarly, saying «This night» (111) instead of «tonight» is a purposeful (mis)transposition of the Spanish *esta noche*. On the one hand, such mistranslations, which abound in Chicanas' writing (e.g. Anzaldúa), function here as cross-cultural

5. All bracketed translations in what follows are my own.

wordplay that both marks the author's bilingualism and contributes to a whimsical tone; on the other hand, by saying «Dark» (111) instead of red, the speaker might hint at her lover's skin color: a possible mark of his Chicano identity and, perhaps, his dark/rough personality. As happens in the texts by Angelou and Peri Rossi, Cisneros' poetic bodies are inflected by a particular color and a particular culture –e.g. the «half-dark» lovers of her poem «*14 de julio*». For affect studies too, the «lived body» is characterized by embodiment: being «interlocked with racial, cultural, [gender,] and class particularities» apart from emotions (Grosz, *Volatile* 18-19).

The hints to Chicano culture in «*Vino Tinto*» can also be heard in the use of rhyme; for instance, /ai/ appears nine times. Apart from the English words «I» and «eye», the phoneme /ai/ can be *¡ay!*, a Spanish interjection that may express pain, surprise, or joy. Cisneros' speaker, then, might be understood as having a multiplicity of identities that manifest themselves as several forms of «I», as eyes that look back at her own past, and someone crying *¡ay!*. This confluence of interpretations enriches the multi-tonal spirit of the poem, which is lamenting, ironic, sad, yet also joyful. Cordelia Candelaria regards Chicano/a writers' use of *¡ay!* as connoting «*ahí*» (meaning «there») or Aztlán: the mythical name of the land that belonged to their ancestors but was lost after the Mexican-American war. The poem's persona of «*Vino Tinto*» speaks of the loss of love too; nevertheless, her multiple *¡ays!* are closer to those in the bolero «*Cucurrucucú paloma*», whose pigeon-protagonist sings, laughs, cries, and dies at the same time. «*Vino Tinto*» also brings to mind another bolero, «*Sabor a mí*», in which the singing person warns an ex-lover: you will always have the taste of me in your mouth. In this way, Cisneros celebrates the Mexican roots of Chicano identity, while allowing us to cherish the musical and cultural value of verse.

As we have seen, «*Vino Tinto*» includes intertextual references to what I call its prequel, «*Amé, Amo, Amaré*» (I Loved, I Love, I Will Love), published seven years earlier. «*Amé, Amo, Amaré*» mentions elements such as «burgundy» wine (Cisneros 94), «tug[ging]» (94 and 95), and the «Egyptian» world (96), all of which are present in «*Vino Tinto*». Written in the first person, «*Amé, Amo, Amaré*» tells the story of a woman having an affair with a man, who then breaks up with her to return to his wife. After telling her of his decision, the lovers have sex for the last time and the female voice ends

the poem saying: «I'm a simp I think. / But I'm wrong. / I know what I am» (97). Her sadness cannot go unnoticed; nonetheless, I have reasons to argue that «what» she knows deep inside is that she is a poet and that poetry is her love(r). First, Cisneros' intimate bonding with poetry manifests not only through her lyrical prose but also through her characters (see below); second, in «*Vino Tinto*», the female speaker affirms herself as an «I» nine times, proving both her stamina and ability to be «single», which is also mentioned; finally, the ever-present «moon» of the prequel poem («*Amé, Amo, Amaré*» 94, 95 and 97) is replaced by «lamplight» for writing under in the sequel («*Vino Tinto*» 111), which involves changing romance with a man for romance with the blank page. «Women's work of emotional nurturance has required them to develop a special acuity in recognizing emotions and in understanding the[ir] genesis» (Jaggar 165), and Cisneros' ouvre is an instance of this: not only of women's emotional acuity, but also of their capacity for renewal

In «*Vino Tinto*», the poetic persona confesses that she both remembers her old partner and writes poems «Under a single lamplight. / In public or alone» (Cisneros 111). Supposedly in a harmless manner, these lines contain various attacks on patriarchy: she is single, alone, and works in public; that is, she performs roles traditionally attributed to men. Nevertheless, the third and last stanza might be understood as questioning that loneliness: «Something of you still taut / still tugs still pulls, / a rope that trembled / hummed between us. / Hummed, love, didn't it. / Love, how it hummed» (111). These almost cryptic verses deserve to be analyzed in depth. The alliterations of /s/ and /h/ seem to bring calmness after the storm of passion. Despite this, the tone is still frisky due to the play on verbal tenses and what I consider a deliberate mistranslation of the Spanish *cuerda* since it not only means «rope» but also «string». Unlike the «Phenomenal Woman» who does not tell «lies» (Angelou chap. 79), Cisneros' speaker lies to us twice, although perhaps unconsciously: first, she is not alone but with the poem; second, love did not only hum for her in the past because she is «still» humming (Cisneros 111, repeated three times) while remembering a love relationship and playing the strings (not ropes) of poetry. There is a further potential play-on-words since «love» (111) can be both a vocative and the «it» that is being hummed. All in all, the voice of «*Vino Tinto*» establishes an erotic relationship with the poem that cures the pain in her heart. At the same time, her readers can find

emotional consolation or actual healing in her verses. Diane Stein also notes that women's ways of healing emphasize «the unity of body, emotions, mind and spirit» as alternatives to «patriarchal medicine, with its fragmentation of body[, emotions] and spirit» (cited by Wilentz 11).

Offering a multiplicity of meanings, the poem's final stanza invites further inquiry. The mentioned «rope» (Cisneros 111) could be taken literally for something used by the man to tie the woman, either to abuse her or to practice sadomasochism. Even so, as suggested above, I believe that this rope is actually a string, a mistranslation for the Spanish *cuerda*. Interestingly enough, the clitoris has been identified with the musical string «of a guitar, a harp, a lyre» (Portela Lopa 468, my translation). Cisneros' re-appropriation of the clitoris begins by comparing it with a string or a rope, not the typical rosebud or pearl, in order to acknowledge its true shape and length: about 10 centimeters from the inside. Moreover, the clitoris hums, which implies that women can both experience sexual climax and write verses through it. Hence, the clitoris has powerful and even phallic-like qualities, which may be one of the reasons why patriarchal cultures have denied and even extirpated it for so long. Therefore, Cisneros follows the examples of both Angelou and Peri Rossi, as well as Cixous' advice that «Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies» (875). By celebrating the clitoris, Cisneros rewrites female corporality beyond patriarchal parameters such as woman being a holed body (Segarra). In addition, if «narrative is a source of consolation» (Eagleton 161), the latter acquires a richer meaning in poems such as this one; that is, together with reading and writing, we may consider Cisneros' playing her string as self-eroticism: a queer sexual practice exempt from gender violence (or even male participation) that can provide women with pleasure, consolation, and healing.

In «*Vino Tinto*», the speaker's choice to have poetry as her partner is a queer act that disrupts the patriarchal order⁶. Interestingly, Cisneros' most famous heroine, Esperanza, chooses to become a poet in *The House of Mango Street*. The act of writing poetry—which comes from Latin *poesis*

6. For Elizabeth Grosz («Experimental») a heterosexual person can also be queer, if she-he does not completely identify or comply with the norm.

or «to make»—gives Esperanza, the personified voice of «*Vino Tinto*», and Cisneros herself the opportunity to remake themselves and the world into a site of ethical and thus restoring relationships. Such a world would be made of affirmative and resilient selves, who would employ poetry as a means of erotic expression and reception. As happens with «Phenomenal Woman», a poem which supposedly relates a very personal experience becomes a «*Vino Tinto*» that can quench people's thirst by multiplying its affects through the ethical encounters that can come about thanks to poetry.

4. CRISTINA PERI ROSSI: SPIRITUAL-MENSTRUAL LESBOEROTICISM

The verses by Cristina Peri Rossi that I will discuss now are naughty, funny, witty, and truly affirmative. Given her narrative style and tendency to parataxis, two of her poetry cycles in particular must be addressed—«*De aquí a la eternidad*» (From Here to Eternity) (Peri Rossi, *Poesía reunida*) and «*Comunión*» (Communion) (Peri Rossi, *La noche*). In both, the Uruguayan Spanish poet creates a religion based on herself having sex with a goddess-like woman, whose body is menstruating in «*Comunión*», something which I have termed lesbo-menstrual sex. As with Angelou and Cisneros, Peri Rossi's poems are written in the first person; however, their tone and point of view are more blatant and go from critical irony to playful tenderness, from laughing at herself to making the reader laugh.

Before approaching the Rossinian universe, we might usefully turn to the legacy of affect scholar Silvan Tomkins, who writes that «unlike the [Freudian] drives ... 'any affect may have any 'object' ... [Furthermore, unlike] behaviorism ... the affect system ... [has] 'no single 'output'» (cited by Sedgwick and Frank 503). That is, affect theory challenges one of the principle ideological cornerstones of patriarchy: heterosexuality. In *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig has also demonstrated that lesboeroticism can serve to pull down heteropatriarchal ideas like desire emerging from absence, and sex being merely genital and reproductive. Although Peri Rossi's account of lesbian sex revolves around genitalia, she is also able to go beyond it (like Angelou and Cisneros); this is how she contributes to heal the homophobia that infects society. Moreover, Peri Rossi's interest in the fluidity of the female body is comparable to Luce Irigaray's in *This Sex which Is Not One*, in that fluids seem

limitless and may overflow conceptualizations; thus, both authors refute the notion that women's anatomy can be framed within a (masculinist) definition.

Peri Rossi's lyrical combination of women, menstruation, eroticism, and religion functions as a criticism of the binary oppositions imposed by patriarchy (e.g. men are spiritual/women are bodily). The Chicana scholar and writer Ana Castillo has argued that the «taboo against woman's blood is inherently Judeo-Christian. In pre-patriarchal times, menses was ... symbolic of woman's creatrix ability, once revered as magical» (123). Rossinian verses also exalt the physical in diametric opposition to Christian belief, for which the body is nothing but a repository of sin. On the contrary, for Tantra, women «emit medicinal fluids from various parts of their bodies, including ... from their vaginas» (Wolf pos. 318) which «are considered health-giving to her partner» (Wolf pos. 319). Medical research has further proved that there are «over 300 different proteins found in menstrual blood ... that ... might reveal a lot about possible cures for endometriosis ... stroke and Alzheimer's» (Beatrice 45-46). Contemporary body studies questions the Western view of the body as «the excluded other» (Shildrick and Price 2), while thinking about embodiment (e.g. the lesbian body) as a «site of potential» (3) from which to achieve a healthier world. Hopefully, readers will remain open-minded to Peri Rossi's poetic personae, who are portrayed drinking menstrual blood⁷; in fact, her recurrent insistence on the sense of taste functions to counterattack patriarchy's excessive emphasis on the look that has reified women throughout the centuries.

In the first poem of the cycle «*De aquí a la eternidad*» the speaker confesses her spiritual-sexual practice by means of religious metaphors; hence, parodying a Catholic priest, she prepares herself to «*Descubrir a Dios entre las sábanas*» (Discover God between the sheets) and nowhere else (Peri Rossi 791). While she is doing so, she suddenly discovers that «*Dios / era una diosa*» (God / was a goddess) who can take her to the orgasm which is out of space and time, which is eternity in itself. Before that, the lyrical voice manages to «*saber*» (know) something beyond belief (791). This goes doubly against the Biblical dictum, as her knowledge both exceeds faith and reveals that a sweating God is «*escondido entre las sábanas / ... / consagrando tu sangre*»

7. Women artists' menstrual activism has been a feminist vindication from the 1970s until today –as in Yolanda Castaño's and Lupe Gómez's poems, to name but two examples.

menstrual / elevando el cáliz de tu vientre» (hidden between the sheets / ... / consecrating your menstrual blood / raising the goblet of your belly) (791). That is, not only does God have a body that sweats, but he also consecrates a blood which does not come from Christ but from a woman's period, while blessing the unfertilized female. For Mikhail Bakhtin, performing a corporeal rite against the law of institutionalized religion is a carnivalesque act that involves grotesque humor to attempt a rebellion (e.g. *Rabelais and His World*). In this case, such rebellion is also gendered and feminist, which extends upon Bakhtin's views on carnival.

Castillo continues that Christian religions appropriated the spiritual meaning of woman's blood in order to weaken her: «The wound on Jesus' side as he hangs on the cross is nothing less than an imitation of a vagina bleeding ... [since blood was] considered necessary for ... [having] magical powers» (124). Similarly to Angelou and Cisneros, Peri Rossi returns to woman the power and magic that were confiscated from her, and names her secret parts –e.g. «*húmedas cavidades*» (wet cavities) (791)– also to symbolically return woman's body to her. Besides, Peri Rossi's hyperbolic metaphor underlining the animal side of orgasm –«*el grito vertiginoso / de la jauría de tus vísceras*» (the vertiginous cry / of the pack of your entrails) (791)– celebrates female sexual pleasure beyond Angelou's love for one's own body and Cisneros' controversial portrayal of heterosexual intercourse. Equally important is the fact of affirming female sexual pleasure, be it lesbian or not, which is both a form of power and a right that every woman should enjoy.

In the second poem of the cycle «*De aquí a la eternidad*», the lyrical voice confesses that her cult to lesbianism is due to her self-consciousness of the passage of time: «*Este éxtasis de la carne / ... / es un camino de perfección / ... / antes de ser destruidos ... / por un dios terrible y vengativo*» (This ecstasy of the flesh / ... / is a path to perfection / ... / before being destroyed ... / by a terrible and vengeful god) (Peri Rossi 793). Using the masculine «*destruidos*» instead of *destruidas* could reflect a double-edged desire to claim universality while also to play with a non-binary view of gender –the latter being present in the writings of Angelou and Cisneros⁸. The author's Uruguayan Spanish

8. Certainly, the poet's choice of the grammatically masculine «*destruidos*» could be deemed part of her queer performance; even so, it may also be taken for the generic masculine.

is evident in the third poem of the cycle when the lover tells the speaker: «*Dejad [vos] toda esperanza*» (Leave all hope) (794). Like those of Angelou and Cisneros, Peri Rossi's verses both reveal her ethnic origin and attempt to reach humanity as a whole. A trans-American comparison of the poets also contributes to point out this view of difference more explicitly: we are different but not split either from ourselves or the others; we are different but share basic needs such as love. Coming back to Peri Rossi's individual work, her hybrid way of writing –e.g. both masculine and feminine, both Uruguayan and universal– is coherent with her interest in women's borderless flows as a means of helping us think outside dualisms in an Irigarayan manner. Finally, the hybridity of Peri Rossi's proposal manifests itself in the seemingly opposite combination of nasal and sibilant sounds quoted above.

«*Comunión*», Peri Rossi's poetic sequel to «*De aquí a la eternidad*», again oozes with vaginal symbolism. The poet continues to lesbo-eroticize the abject: the leaking, overflowing female body that «disturbs identity, system, order» (Kristeva 4); in so doing, she aims to dismantle the patriarchal ideology that fosters homophobia. This second cycle is even bolder than the previous one, in that here the lesbian lovers drink each other's menstrual blood: «*Y como de un cáliz / bebí la sangre de tus entrañas*» «*Y luego, / te di a beber mi propia sangre*» (And as if from a goblet / I drank the blood from your entrails And then, / I gave you my own blood to drink) (Peri Rossi 25). The title «*Comunión*» suggests the religious feast of shared eating and drinking. In line with affect theorists (e.g. Jaggar, Sandoval) and the poets examined here, Peri Rossi advocates an epistemology through the senses as well as the intellect.

Moreover, drinking a red fluid reminds us of Cisneros' «Dark wine» (Cisneros 111), as well as of the connection that the Chicana author makes between sexuality and the (re)writing of the world. In «*Comunión*», drinking menstrual blood is a pact that seals «*la hermandad del amor / y del género*» (the sisterhood of love / and of gender) (Peri Rossi 26), which questions the traditional family: «*yo me bebo tu sangre menstrual / y soy tu hermana / tu amante y tu pariente*» (I drink your menstrual blood / and am your sister /

The wish on the part of the author to include men is not strange in that, despite her insistence on female-male differences, she ultimately believes that all of us are equal and indeed similar when exposed to desire (Peri Rossi, «Prólogo»).

your lover and your relative) (31). On the one hand, Peri Rossi's homosexual sisterhood offers an alternative to the presumably heterosexual sisterhood of second-wave feminism; on the other, if Angelou often worked towards providing emotional support to women, the also African American author bell hooks has created Sisters of the Yam, «where black women ... name their pain and find ways of healing» (hooks 23). It seems that women from diverse environments are joining together to cure themselves; while doing so, they also manage to pull down the patriarchal walls blocking their hearts. This gives us hope that, one day, all of us will reunite and heal each other beyond gender, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, and other divisions.

The «*hermandad*» (sisterhood) (Peri Rossi 26) and «*amistad*» (friendship) (31) of Peri Rossi's lesbians are especially in focus when it comes to understanding menstrual pain and looking after each other: «*y yo deposito mis manos cálidas sobre tu vientre / lamo tus lágrimas / acuno tu dolor y lo mezo*» (and I place my warm hands on your belly / lick your tears / rock your pain and comfort it) (28). The anaphora of the first person pronoun («*yo me bebo*» «*yo deposito*»), which is unnecessary in Spanish, underlines the fact that the poetic persona is performing a ritual as a medicine woman; in addition, the laying on of hands here is of threefold significance, having religious, sensual, and maternal connotations. Peri Rossi would thus agree with Jean Achterberg, for whom «[w]omen have always been healers. Cultural myths ... describe a time when only women knew the secrets of life and death, and therefore they could practice the magical art of healing» (cited by Wilentz 12). Unfortunately, the man described in Cisneros' poem is very far from being so tender with his female lover, whereas the truth, as Angelou assures us, is that «care» is a vital «need» (Angelou chap. 79). As suggested above, care is what sustains life, especially when we are ill –in fact, tending to the other with love is part of the cure. A trans-American approach to Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi emphasizes the call for a new model of (heterosexual) masculinity that can close up the wounds caused by the brute force and abuse of power stereotypically linked to the old model.

The Uruguayan Spanish author goes further to affirm that woman is «*más compasiva*» (more compassionate) (29) to grasp and take care of «*el dolor de otras de otros*» (the pain of female and male others) (29), this due to the menstrual pain which humanizes her; although this idea could be deemed

essentialist, the poem's humorous ending –«*Bendice ese dolor que da la vida / pero tómate un analgésico*» (Bless that pain that gives life / but take a painkiller) (29)– reveals the speaker's ironic unidealistic view of menstruation. What is more, evoking Angelou's and Cisneros' preference for the non-binary, Peri Rossi also considers that the power of woman's blood is both masculine, a seed («*semilla*»), and feminine, giving birth to the world (27-28).

«*De aquí a la eternidad*» and «*Comunión*» encourage the birth of a new society, taking lesbian love as a model for human beings to become kinder and more generous so that we can cure each other from prejudice, mistreatment, and domination. Despite the poet's hyperbolic depiction of genders as being totally different, she finally embraces the non-binary and suggests that desire is something we have in common. Following Peri Rossi, we may wish to heal society in order that everybody can enjoy respect, empathy, care, pleasure, and fun.

5. CONCLUSION: THE HEALING POWER OF LOVING CONNECTIONS IN (AND OUT OF) POETRY

As we have seen throughout, a trans-American perspective of Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi teaches us that it is imperative to rebuild the world as one that is free from prejudice, so that the voices of so-called minorities are listened to. Comparing these three artists also suggests the possibility of a new literary school such as feminist healing poetry, while adding insights into each one of the authors; that is: Angelou is revealed as a poet of the ethics of care, while Cisneros' verse harbors a demand for a new (more sensitive and feminine) masculinity like the one represented by Peri Rossi's poetic personae. What is more, comparative approaches like mine can contribute to current globalization studies, by tending bridges among cultures as a way to encourage the kind of affective understanding leading to world peace.

Given poetry's peculiar shape –its rhyme, metaphors, plays-on-words, and so on– it should inevitably alter our consciousness. Reading and writing it helps us to put the mind and the body back together, mending the split experienced by most people in the West. Making us feel an emotion is one of the undoubted aims of poetry; emotions that both question the self/other border, making all of us equal. Emotions thus help us to relearn difference,

not as inequality or separation, but as a means of having ethical relationships; furthermore, we can also be different and have similarities. It is precisely human beings' commonalities –which can be used against racist, sexist, and heterosexist arguments– that are currently being highlighted and celebrated by (affect) scholars as well as poets, and also trans-cultural comparative readings like mine.

In an attempt to fight binary oppositions and create connections between people, this article has examined three authors –Angelou; Cisneros; Peri Rossi–, three forms of love –self-to-community (Angelou); poet-to-poetry (Cisneros); woman-to-woman (Peri Rossi)–, and three cultures –African American (Angelou); Chicana (Cisneros); Uruguayan Spanish (Peri Rossi)– mainly from a triple perspective of healing, affect, and sexuality. The three writers use the power and magic of verse to cure illnesses in both themselves and in society –racism (Angelou); love wounds (Cisneros); homophobia (Peri Rossi). Moreover, they demand a lot of work on the part of readers, so that we can experience the transformative healing process conveyed by poetry.

In the writings of Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi, love and poetry seem to be excellent platforms from which to gain a psycho-emotional-spiritual comprehension of ourselves and others, achieving a position from which to cure and make the world anew. That is, the love relations described by these poets are non-normative or queer: a black woman loving herself and her people (Angelou); a heterosexual woman poet loving her art over men (Cisneros); meta-physical lesbianism (Peri Rossi). They rely on emotions and the body as sources of knowledge, effectively dislodging reason from its traditional place of honor. Although cherishing their femininity, the three embrace non-binary empowering positions that defy stereotypes, starting with the fact that they are both women and artists –a strong, bold, and proud black woman (Angelou); a desiring heterosexual female subject (Cisneros); a lesbian lover parodying a Catholic priest (Peri Rossi). The intercultural scope and multiple tones of the poems (e.g. irony, mistranslation, and humor) are also ways of breaking established borders.

The poets are further able to prove their resilience, showing the reader that it is possible to fall and rise again like a phoenix: Angelou, who overcame rape, heals readers from racism and other evils through her self-empowering verses; Cisneros' lyric-playing self manages to overcome the pain caused by

a lover through writing about it and helping readers to close up their own wounds; Peri Rossi's poetry fights the prejudice of heterosexism by means of a humorous exaltation of lesbian sex. In addition, whereas the body and sexuality are finite, poetry is eternal and involves a spiritual dimension, just like love. Being deeply sensual, the verses of Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi ooze with love and spirituality addressed to the world as a whole.

In the end, only love can let us experience happiness, respect, and care (for ourselves and others), all of which are necessary to be in good health. Poetry can certainly help us to be healthy, by deepening the feelings that can move us, both emotionally and into ethical action. It is my hope that my trans-American reading of Angelou, Cisneros, and Peri Rossi can also help us to celebrate cultural richness without borders, so as to renew the psycho-emotional-spiritual landscape of the world⁹.

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