The Raw Edges of the Mind: Sandra Cisneros Reads Mercè Rodoreda

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> Sometimes when I write, I feel I am drawing from the most silent place in myself –a place without image, word, shape, sound...
>
> Cherríe MORAGA (72)

Although Mercè Rodoreda is arguably the most important woman writer in Catalan and one of the most important literary voices of twentieth-century Spain, it is nevertheless striking that Sandra Cisneros, a contemporary Mexican-American writer whose work is rooted in English and Castilian, claims Rodoreda as model and mentor. Despite her eminence, Rodoreda's works are known to most of the world in translation, if at all; indeed, in Cisneros' account of her passion for Rodoreda's work, she claims to have been introduced to *La plaça del Diamant* (1962) accidentally, by a Texas parking-lot attendant who discovered it himself through reading Gabriel García Márquez. The contingency of Cisneros' introduction to Rodoreda underscores the difficulty of bringing the literature of minority languages into world consciousness. At the same time, this episode also suggests the critical importance of contact between languages and cultures. The border locations of these two writers –Rodoreda because she was exiled from Barcelona and from her native language, Cisneros because she is bicultural and bilingual –have enabled them to explore the limitations of symbolic language. Their understanding of the aporia between word and experience seems, paradoxically, related to their experience of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "a complex intersection of languages, dialects, idioms, and jargons... an active plurality of languages and the ability to see [their] own media from the outside" (*Rabelais* 470-71).

"Mercè Rodoreda reminds me of the writer I want to be," says Cisneros in a recent interview in Ms. magazine;

> She's a Catalan writer from Barcelona who exiled herself when the Franco regime in Spain sought to repress her language... Gabriel García Márquez has called *The Time of the Doves* the most exquisite novel ever written about the Spanish Civil War, but I would go farther than that and say it is the most exquisite novel ever written, period. (Walker 71).

In another interview, for an anthology on post-colonial writers,

when Cisneros is asked about influences on her work, she responds with a comment about Rodoreda: "She's Catalan. She's taught me a lot about voices and monologues... . She taught me a lot in writing this last book [*Woman Hollering Creek*]" (Cahill 465). Other contemporary writers "don't do to me what Rodoreda does to me," Cisneros continues. "And I think that you have to stay with those writers that are somehow touching those passion buttons in you." Cisneros is also drawn to Rodoreda, she explains, because Rodoreda is not confined by "the linear novel form" (466).

The stories of both Cisneros and Rodoreda return again and again to the process of transforming emotional experience into the language of consciousness, usually within an arena of physical or psychological violence. The monologue forms that both writers favor allow their characters to express pain and confusion, unmediated by the artificial order of third-person narration or the linear form that Cisneros finds so limiting.

Cisneros' obsession with the raw edges of the mind, which she sees reflected in the works of Rodoreda, has a subtle and complex relationship to life within a linguistic and literary borderland. In these tributes to Rodoreda, Cisneros' juxtaposition of concerns about language with the representation of passion invite a comparative study, in which the tools of psychoanalytical criticism are employed to illuminate literary language, and in which issues of identity serve as starting rather than end points. Her 1993 introduction to the English translation of *El carrer de les Camèlies* (1966) makes this connection explicit. Here, Cisneros compares the early years of Rodoreda's exile from Catalan to "the months I lived without English in Sarajevo, or the year I lived without Spanish in northern California"(*Camellia Street* ix). Rodoreda's silence lasted twenty years, more or less, between 1939 and 1959; and like her predecessor, Cisneros found that she had difficulty writing in an alien linguistic environment. "What would a writer do," she ponders, "not writing for a year? For twenty?" (ix). But even though Cisneros finds that she must have access to *two* languages, she recognizes that her own position is easier, for Rodoreda was also marginalized, at a critical point in her creative development, as an exile from her native Barcelona during and after the Spanish Civil War, as a woman writer who lacked formal education, and as a woman whose primary relationship existed not in the arranged match forced on her when she was twenty, but outside the legal boundaries of marriage, with someone else's husband.

Both Rodoreda and Cisneros, then, occupy multiple frontiers –between conflicting cultural and political bodies and between levels of consciousness. This multiplicity, intensified by living between languages (Ortega and Sternbach 14), is for both writers so complex as

almost to defy articulation. And paradoxically, Cisneros implies, living in a borderland makes articulation all the more necessary:

> What is it about Rodoreda that attracts you to her, a Catalan journalist will ask. I fumble about like one of Rodoreda's characters, as clumsy as a carpenter threading a needle.
>
> Rodoreda writes about feelings, about characters so numbed or overwhelmed by events they have only their emotions as a language. I think it's because one has no words that one writes, not because one is gifted with language. Perhaps because one recognizes wisely enough the shortcomings of language.
>
> It is this precision at naming the unnameable that attracts me to Rodoreda, this woman, this writer... adept at listening to those who do not speak, who are filled with great emotions, albeit mute to name them. (*Camellia Street* xiii)

For Cisneros, literary language is visceral, not cerebral–it "is not something in a book or in your dreams. It's on the loaf of bread that you buy, it's on the radio jingle, it's on the graffiti you see, it's on your ticket stub" (Rodríguez Aranda 151). Perhaps that is why, as she tells us in the *El carrer de les Camèlies* essay, Cisneros searches for Rodoreda in the streets of Barcelona, even when she has no money for lunch or bus fare, even though the landmarks described in Rodoreda's stories have been demolished. And though she is bilingual in English and Spanish, she encounters an even greater barrier because she cannot read Rodoreda's works in their original language, and so must approach them indirectly. Like Rodoreda, Cisneros struggles to name the unnameable. These writers do not narrate or explicate the problem of living between worlds, between words; rather, they metonymically encode it.

Despite the complexities implied by Cisneros' comments about writing and influence, and despite a general trend toward understanding that writing by women (especially Latina women) is profoundly concerned with linguistic play and code-switching, analysis of Cisneros' work is weighted toward a concern with thematics in general and identity in particular: responses to her work have not dealt fully with the psycholinguistic complexities implied in her gestures toward Rodoreda.[1] Readings of Cisneros have so far emphasized her place within Latino culture, her feminism, and her interest in childhood, but not the way these themes take shape within her literary language.[2] Rodoreda's *oeuvre* has also been discussed as an

[1] Recent criticism and theory devoted to American ethnic literatures is highly conscious of tensions between identity politics and the identification or creation of other kinds of subject positions. A good summary of this argument can be found in Margaret Higonnet's "Comparative Literature on the Feminist Edge" (*Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, 1995).

[2] Critical works focused on identity and general thematics in Sandra Cisneros'

example of marginalized literature, an exploration of childhood, and a more or less oblique commentary on the oppression of women. However, there is, in addition, a body of critical literature linking psychological, political, and linguistic exile in Rodoreda's work which suggests an important critical approach to the fiction of Cisneros.[3]

Some aspects of Julia Kristeva's theory have been invoked in studies relevant to both writers –in Rodoreda's case, to provide some insight into her treatment of sexual difference and the patriarchal/symbolic order, in Cisneros', less positively, in discussions of identity issues in Latino culture.[4] But it seems to me that Kristeva's semiotic theory can illuminate the most difficult aspects of the work of these two writers, and indeed, what links them together– that is, their struggles, worked out through the struggles of their alienated and inarticulate characters, to name the unnameable, to write about the unravelling of words from both concrete and abstract realities. The importance of Kristeva's theory as an approach to these stories is hardly coincidental: a Bulgarian woman who migrated to Paris in 1966, into an alien political fray and an all-male intellectual milieu, she was herself labeled "the stranger" by Roland Barthes in a review of one of her early works. She begins *Semiotics* (1969) with the assertion that "labour[ing] in the *materiality* of that which society regards as a means of contact and understanding, isn't that at one stroke to declare oneself

writing include Ellen McCracken's 'Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*: Community- Oriented Introspection and Demystification of Patriarchal Violence" (*Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writing and Critical Readings*, ed. Horno-Delgado *et al.*); Jeff Thompson's "'What Is Called Heaven': Identity in Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek*" (*Studies in Short Fiction*); Maria Elena Valdés' "In Search of Identity in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (*Canadian Review of American Studies*).

3 García Marquez's remark about the significance of *The Time of the Doves* indicates how seriously Rodoreda's work is taken even beyond the Catalan community. In 1987, *Catalan Review* published a lengthy special issue (2.2) on Rodoreda. In 1994, Kathleen McNerney and Nancy Vosburg published a collection of articles on Rodoreda's fiction, *The Garden across the Border*. McNerney's follow-up volume of criticism, bibliography, and translations, *Voices and Visions: The Words and Works of Mercè Rodoreda* is forthcoming. In addition, several biographies of Rodoreda have appeared since Carme Arnau's in 1976, including two in the last six years.

4 Articles which suggest Kristeva's theory as a way to explicate Rodoreda's approach to gen- In Mona Fayad's "The Process of Becoming; Engendering the Subject in Mercè Rodoreda and Virginia Woolf" and Jaume Martí-Olivella's "The Witches' Touch: Towards a Poetics of Double Articulation in Rodoreda" (both in *Catalan Review* 2.2), aspects of Kristeva's theory provide springboards for close readings of texts by Rodoreda.

In contrast, discussions of Latina writing minimize the insights available from a study of poststructuralist theory. For instance, Sonia Saldívar-Hull comments that "Kristeva's deconstruction of the metaphysical constitution of masculine and feminine" offer few solutions to "the concerns of many politically aware Latinas" (Calderón and Saldívar 210). (However, see Elizabeth Ordóñez' brief positive reference to Kristeva in a discussion of Alma Villanueva (66), in the same volume.)

a stranger to language?" (Moi 150)[5] Indeed, the major work of Kristeva's early period, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) takes up the notion that literary language is a privileged site for exploring the alienation of the psyche from language: poetry, she writes "attest[s] to what it represses." Further,

> If there exists a "discourse" which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers... and is, instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction –productive violence, in short– it is "literature," or, more specifically, the text. (16)

Speaking through the fractured consciousness of their characters, Cisneros and Rodoreda do privilege the terrible borderland between the fluid, inarticulate inner life of childhood and the more fixed, articulate order of the adult world. Both writers explore the possibility that nothing human can be wholly contained or expressed within a single linguistic code; and both are obsessed with the rupture between words and experience. The most compelling characters in their stories are those who experience a psycholinguistic dislocation bordering on schizophrenia.

Following traditional psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva divides the psychic continuum into three phases which represent not only developmental stages, but modes of psychic life; like Lacan, Kristeva links these phases to linguistic development. In her terms, these stages are the semiotic stage, the symbolic stage, and the "thetic" moment in between. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva stretches out the received psychoanalytical model, emphasizing the thetic, which she defines as "that crucial place on the basis of which the human being constitutes himself as signifying and/or social," the space between the semiotic field and the symbolic order (69). The semiotic is a safe place in psychic life–before language, before differentiation and separateness, before responsibility. The symbolic, too, offers relative psychic safety, for it is a place of order and correspondence between words and things, words and abstractions. The thetic, on the other hand, is dangerous, uncertain, and unstable, but it is also the locus of dynamism and creativity. Throughout *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva repeats the notion that at the thetic stage (adolescence) or during thetic moments, we are conscious of being "the subject in

[5] See *The Kristeva Reader* (74), ed. Toril Moi; Moi supplies additional background information about Kristeva in the introduction to this anthology and in a chapter about Kristeva in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (150-73). A translation of Kristeva's own memoir of her early years in Paris (1984) has been reprinted in Domna Stanton's anthology *The Female Autograph*.

process/ on trial." The thetic is a moment of schizophrenia, denoted in language by verbal distortion, stereotopy, and hyperkinesia, which defies the symbolic order (152). (*Hyperkinesia* is abnormal movement; *stereotopy,* abnormal repetition of gestures or phrases, a symptom of schizophrenia.) In Greek drama, specifically the choral odes, the thetic moment occurs with the short syllable at the end of the poetic foot, the moment at which the dancers set down their feet –a fleeting moment of auditory and visual disruption (*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 52). Kristeva's focus on literary language, which is also made clear in the title of her book, derives from the insight that poetic language "make[s] free with the language code... reorder[s] the psychic drives which have not been harnessed by the dominant symbolization systems... and seek[s] out and make[s] use of... the ensuing fracture of a symbolic code which can no longer 'hold' its (speaking) subjects" ("The System and the Speaking Subject" 30). "*Mimesis* and poetic language do not," says Kristeva, "disavow the thetic, instead they go through its truth... to tell the truth about it." And if they seem sometimes to be in complicity with the symbolic order, of dogma, "they may also set in motion what dogma represses" (*Revolution* 60). According to Kristeva, the passage from any signifying system to any other replicates the action of the thetic; in this moment of passage, the perceived unity between the object and the word give way to the perception that the "'place' of enunciation and its denoted 'object' are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered"(60).

In the fiction of Rodoreda and Cisneros, this sense of division can be felt in every speech act which emerges from the interior life. Outside Spain, Rodoreda is best known for her novels, especially *El carrer de les Camèlies* and *La plaça del Diamant*, works Cisneros specifically mentions. However, it is not surprising that Rodoreda's short stories resonate even more than her novels with Cisneros' stories. Unlike the novel, the short story narrates a single incident, describes a single crisis –and in the typical story by either Rodoreda or Cisneros, that crisis occurs at the thetic moment, when a character's control of the symbolic has not caught up with the complexity of her experience, or when a character's experience is so overwhelming that she slips backward into chaos, and toward silence. The formal elements of fiction which Cisneros claims to have learned from Rodoreda –that is, the (non-linear) monologue form and the ability to represent voices–are necessary for the compelling description of such interior crisis. Sometimes, the characters in these stories self-destruct; sometimes they cross the bridge of crisis and reach the safety of the other side –and that often means recovering the psychic freedom of childhood. Most painful are the stories which end exactly at the thetic

moment, and readers of Rodoreda's stories, particularly, have the urge to predict whether the characters will survive, change, or die. Yet there is nothing on which to base a prediction, for the Rodoredan subject is "in process/ on trial."

To show the parallels between Cisneros' delineation of the thetic and Rodoreda's, I have chosen for closer reading two stories by each author. Rodoreda's "Tarda al cinema" (Afternoon at the Movies) first appeared in *Vint-i-dos contes* (1958) and "El riu i la barca" (The River and the Boat) in *La meva Cristina* (1967). Although the first of these two stories, like the others in the collection, is set in the "realistic" surface of Barcelona working-class life and the second, like the others in *La meva Cristina*, breaks through this surface into the realm of the fantastic (the speaker is liberated into the form of a fish), each story centers on a painful moment of visceral chaos. Similarly, Sandra Cisneros' "Red Clowns," a monologue from *The House on Mango Street* (1984), recalls both the psychic displacement delineated in "Tarda al cinema" and the character's experience of the difference between life in the movies and "real" life. "Woman Hollering Creek," the title piece of Cisneros' second short story collection (1991), also explores the breakdown of language and the difference between mass-produced romantic images and the lives of everyday people, but this story also recalls the fantastic motif of transformation in "El riu i la barca." Each of these four accounts takes place at a thetic moment, that is, a point after language breaks down under stress and before the consciousness is able to reconstruct a new symbolic language to contain and control the emotional experience. All four stories seem incomplete because they narrate crisis points of the psychic life–fluid, inconclusive, perhaps life-affirming, perhaps destructive. These stories tempt us to read beyond the ending, but they provide no clues about how to do so.

In *Vint-i-dos contes* (1959), Rodoreda broke her twenty-year silence. "Tarda al cinema," a representative story from this group, is a stuttering three-page diary entry by a girl who vacillates between acknowledging and repressing her feelings. In the evening she writes an account of her day, which has been filled with drudgery, boredom, and low-level frustration. In between lazy reproaches and attentions to the wine bottle, her father dozes in his rocking chair. Her mother, preoccupied with her own chores, can only complain that Caterina has lost the blue thread. Her boyfriend, a loser who depends on the black market for friends and money, seems equally indifferent to her interior life. The afternoon's romantic movie, a story of true lovers torn apart by tragic circumstance, resembles an addictive drug: Caterina craves such representations because they offer an escape from her own dreary existence, but they also remind her of the dreariness of her existence.

As a diarist, she oscillates between articulation and bafflement, acceptance and denial: "Jo tenia ganes de plorar" (I wanted to cry"),[6] she recalls several times, but she is not sure why, and she constantly regrets the inadequacy of her thoughts and language (214). The last paragraph of the entry begins,

> Ara he llegit tot això que acabo d'escriure i veig que no és ben bé el que volia dir. Sempre em passa igual: explico coses que de moment em sembla que tenen importància i després m'adono que no en tenen gens. (215)
> (Now I've just finished reading what I've written, and it's not exactly what I wanted to say. The same thing always happens: I explain things that seem important right then, and later I understand that they aren't.)

The diary becomes a metonymic representation of an adolescent life in crisis because Caterina's surroundings, including her parents and her irresponsible boyfriend, fail to give it meaning or joy. Finally, she stops writing: "Jo ja ho sé que sóc una tanoca, i el pare sempre em diu que ell és un beneit, i això al capdavall és el que em fa estar més trista perquè penso que serem un parell de desgraciats. Però mira..." she ends in mid-sentence (215). (I know I'm an airhead, and my father is always telling me he is a fool, and really that's what makes me sad, because I think we're going to be a couple of losers. But, anyway...) The final grammatical chasm of the ellipsis, beyond which Caterina cannot put her feelings into words, is the most revealing point in the story. Under pressure to encapsulate and reflect experience, language crumbles, and its symbolic function, to fasten words to things and relate the present to past and future, disappears. In its entirety, the story represents a thetic moment within adolescence, which is a thetic stage of psychic development.

The stories in Rodoreda's next collection, *La meva Cristina i altres contes* (1967), blend the psychological realism of the earlier work with elements of the fantastic. Typical of this mixture is "El riu i la barca," which narrates the transformation of the unnamed monologist into the fish he has always been at heart. Like the diarist in "Tarda al cinema," the narrator is incommunicado, though he is not, like her, immobilized within the thetic; he (the narrator's gender is not revealed until near the end of the story) finds crossing deep into himself as painful as crossing the threshold into human speech or into fixed adult identity. Unlike "Tarda al cinema," however, "El riu i la barca" suggests the joyful possibility of recrossing the thetic boundary, into a freer, preverbal existence. In telling his story, the narrator makes it known that he has now changed back into human form, presumably so that he can articulate the experience, the culmination of a lifelong erotic attraction

[6] My translations, with the help of Nancy Vosburg.

to water. The particular episode he describes begins with a secret early morning foray down the river in a row-boat at the country house of some friends. The narrator's metamorphosis and the parallel narrowing of the river are at first almost imperceptible, so that by the time he realizes what is happening, he would have to leave the boat, "i els meus amics em preguntarien què n'havia fet i els hauria d'explicar que el riu s'estrenyia, que els arbres anaven fent una paret... (255) " (and my friends would have asked me what I'd done with it, and I'd have had to explain that the river had narrowed and the trees made a wall... [88]).[7] The thought ends in mid sentence, the ellipsis indicating the thetic moment, the meaning which cannot be expressed in words. Next, the boat begins to melt, and the changes in the narrator's body become excruciating, as the thetic moment, the movement between the symbolic and the semiotic realm, always is. But at last the metamorphosis is complete: "Innocent, vaig començar a nedar. Tot era fresc i fàcil. Diví. M'havia tornat peix. I ho vaig ser durant molts anys" (256). (Innocent, I started to swim. Divine. I'd become a fish. And I stayed one for many years. [89]) The key moment in this transformation seems to be the narrator's realization that if he returns to the human condition, he must explain: to avoid the difficulties of explanation, he accepts the risk of the unpredictable, and he is rewarded by regression into semiotic freedom. Even though later he re-enters human form, he still does not feel compelled to account for the inexplicable, and is not bullied by the demands of the symbolic order.

Like Rodoreda's contes, Cisneros's stories also contain both psychological realism and elements of the fantastic; her characters experience the pain of entering the symbolic order and the freedom of transgressing against it. Cisneros's first story collection, *The House on Mango Street* (1984), is a cycle of forty-four short diary-like monologues written by a young girl with the suggestive name of Esperanza. In "Red Clowns," a monologue barely over a page long, positioned near the end of the cycle, Esperanza tries to cope with the rape she has experienced while waiting for her friend Sally by the red clowns at the carnival –the jollity of the image in painful contrast to the experience she narrates. For the first time in the book (and perhaps in her life), Esperanza struggles to avoid verbal clarity rather than expressing herself: "I don't remember. It was dark. I don't remember. I don't remember. Please don't make me tell it all" (93). This child writer has always loved words, but now she has lost faith in words because she fears that language will compound the pain instead of healing it; Esperanza's loss of innocence is thus doubled. And yet the

[7] Translations by Rosenthal, My Christina and Other Stories (85-89).

pain does leak out, by indirection, in broken sentences. Even more than Caterina in "Tarda al cinema," Esperanza feels confused and betrayed by the discrepancy between life and art, real-life sexual assault and the images in the movies: "Sally, you lied," she begins. "It wasn't what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn't want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it's supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me?" (93). In the final sentences of the monologue, Esperanza gropes toward an understanding that her identity has been over-simplified by the rape and by the rapist's equation of her Chicana self with the Spanish language: "Only his dirty fingernails. Only his sour smell again... . He wouldn't let me go. He said I love you, I love you, Spanish girl" (94 my ellipsis). The thetic moment for Esperanza is doubled: her rough transition to the pain of adulthood is marked by a simultaneous impulse toward and away from articulation, which is almost as painful as the experience which provoked it.

"Woman Hollering Creek," the title story of Cisneros' next collection (1991), also tells of lost innocence. This story, one of the longest in the collection, is one of the few narrated in the third person, although the lack of quotation marks visually merges thoughts, dialogue, and narration so that the effect is still one of an interior monologue, shifting among several perspectives. Seduced by *telenovelas*, romance novels, and "the tinkle of money" (45) (and this, by now, is a familiar theme in the stories of both Rodoreda and Cisneros), a young Mexican woman marries a Texan she barely knows, only to find herself impoverished, abused, burdened with a child she cannot care for and a pregnancy which she fears. She is emotionally and culturally isolated in Seguin, about two hundred miles north of the Texas-Mexico border. (The town's pride and joy is a bronze statue of a giant pecan at the main downtown intersection.) In spite of her continuing addiction to romantic images, Cleófilas begins to contemplate the meaning of "Woman Hollering," the name of the arroyo that winds behind her house on the outskirts of town. A reference, perhaps, to the legend (and very popular folksong) of La Llorona, the madwoman who kills her children for the sake of her lover, and whose ghostly cries pierce the night, the name is too close to Cleófilas' own situation for comfort. Although she tries to cover her emotional and physical bruises, a nurse at the clinic sees the marks and persuades her to flee with her baby back across the border.

Cleófilas is surprised to see that her rescuer Felice drives a new pickup truck –a man's vehicle, she thinks. She is even more surprised when they cross the arroyo and Felice stops on the bridge to "let out a yell as loud as any mariachi" (55). Cleófilas discovers to her relief that she who cries out her own freedom, La Gritona, is the opposite of La

Llorona; at first unconscious of what she is doing, she joins Felice's cry of joy: "It was gurgling out of her own throat, a long ribbon of laughter, like water" (56). She has escaped the twisted symbolic order of her husband's rules, returning to her home in Mexico, to safety and freedom. This psychic border is paralleled by two literal borders, the arroyo which symbolizes her psychological regression from symbolic order to semiotic freedom (like the river in Rodoreda's story), and farther along, the Rio Grande, which doubles the significance of Woman Hollering Creek. In retrospect, Cléofilas tries to explain the experience, but all she can express is her surprise about the pickup truck –the thetic moment is inexplicable, even when liberating, because it takes place outside language. This story is one of the few in either of Cisneros' collections to break out of the monologue form, but Rodoreda's influence is felt here in a different way: the yell of joy on the bridge is an echo of Natàlia's liberating scream at the end of *La plaça del Diamant*, Cecília's wild laughter at the end of *El carrer de les Camèlies*.

The stresses of living in two worlds, two languages, is a frequent theme in literature by Latino writers and in the criticism of Latino and exile literature. The headnote to this article, from an essay by Cherríe Moraga, expresses this idea succinctly, and the works of Cisneros and Rodoreda, seen through the lens supplied by Julia Kristeva, add a new dimension to the thinking about linguistic borderlands. A position on the frontier between languages may be the source of insight into the nature of language itself –its origin in the depths of human nature, its tendency to fix and regulate human experience, and the excruciating moment of joy and loss when energy is trapped in words, or when the seam between words and experience unravels. Again and again in these stories, we are forced to relive those moments, which ultimately cannot be accounted for in words.

For these two writers, language is not so much a part of identity as a testing ground for the formation of an identity, which must remain always in transition, in process, on trial. When Rodoreda was jolted out of her language, when Cisneros came to terms with living between languages, they were able to write stories which reveal the disjunction between language and experience at moments of crisis.

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