

## Beyond Caliban's Curses: The Decolonial Feminist Literacy of Sycorax

By Irene Lara

The fear of the unknown, the fear of Sycorax, both because she is female and dark as in both being unknown and dark-skinned is what still holds this piece of land... in thrall to Europe and Prospero. While being articulate in Caliban's and so Prospero's tongues, we are still dumb in the language of Sycorax, whatever that might be. We await the Ceremony of the Souls.

--M. NourbeSe Philip, "A Piece of Land Surrounded"

... This damned witch, Sycorax / For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries [too] terrible / To enter human hearing, from Algiers, / Thou know'st, was banished. /...

--Shakespeare, "The Tempest"

### Abstract

Working from the perspective of decolonial feminism, this essay critiques works that view Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) as a symbol of resistance to eurocentrism, as represented in the character of Prospero. I focus on the literary figure Sycorax, the racialized, sexualized and witched mother of Caliban, because the celebration of Caliban as a symbol of subaltern resistance in Latin American/Latino studies has led to her discursive erasure or marginalization. I critically trace appropriations of Caliban, as well as Miranda (Prospero's daughter), that silence Sycorax. Fundamentally urging the construction of a "literacy of Sycorax," this essay explores the eurocentric reluctance of writers and critics to seriously address issues of spirituality—particularly "feminine" and racialized spirituality—that are negatively coded as magic or superstition within the western modern-colonial imagination. I challenge Latin American/Latino, American, Women's, and Literary studies to consider what it means to position oneself alongside Sycorax—or the racialized, sexualized, spiritually powerful woman of color *other* that she represents—in order to learn from her occluded tongue. As I argue, the literacy of Sycorax speaks to a third space beyond the oppositional cursing tongues of Caliban and Prospero. Here lies the prospect of healing internalized fear and loathing about "feminine" and racialized spirituality within ourselves and others.

*Keywords:* Decolonial feminism, Sycorax, Caliban, women of color, spirituality, cultural studies

### Introduction: The Absent Presence of Sycorax

This essay explores the figure of Sycorax, first presented in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), to analyze gendered and racialized (de)colonizing discourses about spirituality and sexuality in the Americas. As attested to by innumerable references in creative and scholarly writings, *The Tempest's* many contested characters persist as "root metaphors" that inform and are informed by dominant western cultures as well as by cultures of resistance (Brown 123).<sup>1</sup> Two figures in particular have become the models of colonizer and colonized par excellence: Prospero, an usurped duke who is cast away and

takes over an island, and Caliban, his enslaved native who is depicted as “savage” and “deformed” in Shakespeare’s cast of characters (3). Influenced by early modern English ideas about *others* circulating in the midst of European imperialism in Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Americas, Shakespeare’s play is a complex staging of the struggle between “the cannibal” and “the oppressor” (close anagrams of Caliban and Prospero respectively). Since the nationalist struggles of the mid-twentieth century, “revisionary histories of colonialism... frequently evoke the figure of Caliban as a symbol of resistance to colonial [and imperial] regimes” represented by Prospero (Singh 191). Indeed, Caliban continues to be invoked as a way to challenge eurocentric and patriarchal power.

Sycorax, Caliban’s North African witch-mother, however, is marginalized or absent in most engagements with the allegory. It is as if her story of banishment in the text sets Sycorax on a path to future discursive banishment, marking the continuity of dominant cultures’ refusal or inability to see and listen to Sycorax, a symbol of “the” dark female, the banished woman, and the feared racialized and sexualized witch/healer.<sup>2</sup> Making Sycorax’s absence *present* in our imaginations breaks with dominant patriarchal and nationalist discourses that pit “the relation between Prospero and Caliban as an endless and inevitable Hegelian struggle between the [male] master and the [male] slave” (Singh 193).<sup>3</sup> In describing my aim to make Sycorax’s absence *present*, I am evoking cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s reference to the “presence/absence” of Africa in the Caribbean that suggests the active impact of something or someone in spite of its socially marginalized, erased, or hybrid status (231). In the case of Sycorax, although she is dead and thus physically absent in the play, she is firmly present in the memories of Caliban and Prospero who repeatedly invoke her to forward their practical and ideological aims. Therefore, as I show, Sycorax’s absent *presence* impacts Shakespeare’s narrative, as well as has a signifying life beyond Shakespeare.

Akin to other interdisciplinary re-presentations of western canonic texts and figures, this essay bridges scholarship and activism. Sycorax is a construction of the literary imagination reflecting the historical biases of the time that, consistent with widely spread patterns of social power, is only spoken about, and then in very pejorative terms. Yet, she is also a symbol of actual women of color whose historical agency has been negated, and thus an appropriate sign for developing what historian Emma Pérez has called “the decolonial imaginary.” I join Pérez and other scholar-activist writers who, desiring to construct this “third space,” consciously re-imagine literary figures—in addition to actual figures—from politically and historically informed perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when I call for a literacy of Sycorax, for us to learn to listen, speak, write, and read through Sycorax, I am evoking her as a metaphor of the actual racialized, sexualized women of color witch/healers largely made *absent* in discourse. Such literacy includes researching the voices and experiences of women who are similar to the fictional Sycorax. Absolute accuracy of representation may not be possible, nor is it necessarily the goal. My humble aim is to encourage us, at the very least, to imagine the possibilities of “her” missing or distorted subjectivity in the modern-colonial imaginary and the ways that making “her” *present* may help us to better understand the unjust legacies of similar underrepresented and misrepresented subjects.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, exploring Sycorax’s specifically *female* absent presence in largely male-centered nationalist and even some female-centered postcolonial discourses furthers a decolonial feminist politics of solidarity. As also suggested by critic Jyotsna Singh,

such a politics complicates the focus on relations between Caliban and Prospero, as well as relations between Caliban and Miranda, the white daughter who is subjected to the law of the patriarchal father Prospero, yet who is complicit in the enslavement of Caliban.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, centering Sycorax challenges such limited discourses that persistently erase women of color. As an embodiment of a third transformative space that disrupts as well as bridges such binaries, Sycorax is also instrumental in exploring the continual processes of negotiation and healing that all of these struggles necessitate.

The historical, though problematic, significance of Caliban's rebellious, deconstructive voice has been thoroughly analyzed by many scholars (e.g. Retamar). There have also been some investigations into the complexity of Miranda as oppressed and oppressor (e.g. Leininger). Springboarding from the Sycorax resurrection work of several Caribbean writers, what I am primarily interested in investigating here is the absent *presence* of Sycorax in Shakespeare and most Calibanic decolonial and even feminist discourse in the Americas.<sup>7</sup> Because, like the writer M. NourbeSe Philip asserts, "we are still dumb in the language of Sycorax" (167). But not only have decolonial and feminist thinkers in the Americas found it challenging to speak about and through Sycorax, as I argue, we are also *deaf* in her language. This essay, then, explores the very need for a literacy of Sycorax and calls on all of us to develop our ability to listen to what she might have to say and be open to transforming our actions accordingly.

Positioned as a racialized, sexualized, and witched subaltern woman without a voice in the original play and most adaptations, what might a decolonized Sycorax speak? What does Sycorax's language sound like? And, just as importantly, can we listen to it and will we be transformed by it? Repeatedly depicted as a "foul witch," "damned witch," old "hag," and "wicked dam [mother]," what might Sycorax—a powerful representation of the European colonial imaginary that Shakespeare unleashes in our imaginations—teach us about the relationship between spirituality, sexuality, and the gendered and raced politics of language, history, and representation (Shakespeare 1.2.256, 264, 269, 320)? How can we better engage Sycorax in order to rebuke historical amnesia regarding the persecution of witches, exile, slavery, rape, and colonialism and to develop tools against neocolonial forms of the same? All of these questions traverse my thinking as I re-center the perpetually "ex-centrici[zed]" witch Sycorax to help us to understand how she is a symbol of the ways the spiritual and sexual power of racialized women has been demonized and/or repressed in the west (Purkiss 251).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this essay forwards a decolonial feminist practice by calling on us to ally ourselves with Sycorax. Developing solidarity with the Sycorax within and without will be strengthened by learning about the complex transformation of female healers into witches, a process exacerbated in the (neo)colonial New World as suggested by Philip.<sup>9</sup> My work builds on Philip, as well as Singh, by more directly and holistically imagining a whole literacy of Sycorax. For example, learning such a literacy also entails reflecting on the ways that one may have internalized a fear, distrust, and even loathing of "the" dark female witch/healer and her spiritual knowledges and ways of knowing. Furthermore, I propose that the literacy of Sycorax is the literacy of healing such discursive distortions and fears of the interrelated racialized concepts of the female sex, spirituality, and sexuality so that we can create relations with ourselves and others beyond the oppositional relations signified by Caliban's language of cursing.

## De/Colonial Sycorax: Hagging Memories and Claiming “the” Dark Female as Ancestor

Before launching into my critique of contemporary texts, in order to better understand how Sycorax is represented in *The Tempest* and thus how her de/colonial meanings may circulate in our imaginations, it is important to address what readers are told about Sycorax and the ideological contexts in which Shakespeare’s other characters invoke her. First of all, as several critics propose, “Sycorax” is partially derived from the Latin *corax*, which means raven, a black “oracular bird in Greek divination, a familiar of witches... and often a portent of death” (Warner 2000, 100-01). Although Sycorax’s allusion as an oracle can be perceived as positive, it is the negative connotations of ravens as witch’s assistants and bad omens that dominate the story. Even Caliban alludes to such associations when he describes Sycorax using a “raven’s feather” (1.2.322) for witchcraft. Moreover, as an ultimate union between Sycorax and death, Shakespeare represents her as deceased.

In spite of being physically absent in the play, Sycorax persists as a powerful memory, a witchy specter very much alive in the consciousness of Prospero and Caliban. However, everything that we know about Sycorax is through the lens of Caliban and Prospero, and through Prospero’s retelling of his enslaved spirit Ariel’s experience with Sycorax, a ventriloquism of sorts that we cannot fully trust. Indeed, Prospero’s insistence on repeatedly narrating the “damned witch” (1.2.264) Sycorax’s story exemplifies the power of the storyteller to narrate the past in ways that justify the present and shape the future. In alliance with feminist, subaltern, decolonial, queer, and other “minority” studies, a language of Sycorax challenges this type of monolingualism practiced by dominant groups who have the power to narrate *official* history. Sycorax’s silence in the play is particularly infuriating to “postpatriarchal” audiences; her side of the story is never told (Zabus 5). As critic Chantal Zabus—drawing on Jacques Derrida—suggests, Sycorax’s symbolic work can be described by the French word *hantise*, that “designates both haunting and the idea of obsession, a constant fear, a fixed idea, or a nagging memory” (5). As I explore, Sycorax specifically presents a racialized *hagging* memory, haunting some of her fellow characters as well as many of *The Tempest*’s readers with partially detailed, partially left to the imagination stories about her magical and “earthy” powers and “terrible” behaviors, including coupling with the devil (1.2.273, 264, 319-20). Such stories elicit fear, repugnance, and a justification for the oppression of Sycorax and Caliban, as her “hag-seed,” “demi-devil / ... bastard” son (1.2.364; 5.1.272-73).

We first learn about Sycorax when Prospero manipulates her memory to maintain power over Ariel, whom he uses to perform his magical will. When Ariel questions Prospero’s continual demands, Prospero angrily reminds him, “Dost thou forget / From what a torment I did free thee?” (1.2.250-1) and adamantly recounts how he rescued Ariel from Sycorax, who he describes as an old, envious, hunch-backed “foul witch” (1.2.258). Representing Sycorax as “foul” powerfully evokes a sense of her as “grossly offensive to the senses,” “physically loathsome,” “dirty-coloured, discoloured,” “morally or spiritually polluted,” “detestable,” “wicked,” “filthy, obscene,” and “unclean”(“foul”). In keeping with the tenets of Neoplatonism common in early modern England, “foul” precisely links Sycorax’s physical foulness with her moral/spiritual foulness, in stark opposition to the manner in which Miranda’s “external beauty mirror[s] her inward virtue” (Leininger:147-48).<sup>10</sup> Shakespeare integrates knowledge about Sycorax’s origins

in North Africa into this dialogue, associating her evil-doing with her racialized cultural alterity: When Prospero asks, “Where was she born?” and demands, “Speak; tell me,” Ariel replies, “Sir, in Algiers” (1.2. 260-61). Fashioning himself as the benevolent authoritarian historian and racializing Sycorax yet again by reestablishing her African origins, Prospero asserts: “...I must / Once in a month recount what thou hast been, / Which thou forget’st. This damned witch Sycorax, / For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries [too] terrible / To enter human hearing, from Algiers, / Thou know’st, was banished...” (1.2.262-66).

Obsessively establishing the vileness of Sycorax, Prospero insists he cannot describe the specificities of her evil behavior that occasioned banishment because they are too many and too terrible. This inability and/or unwillingness to allow “to enter human hearing” (1.2.265) Sycorax’s presumably monstrous story is my critical aperture into centering Sycorax as a subject. Prospero’s refusal implicates those of us schooled in Caliban’s and Prospero’s distinct yet related cultural sensibilities and thus “articulate in Caliban’s and so Prospero’s tongues” (Philip167), calling us to try to imagine her story. Imagining this space as one of potential agency and enunciation is akin to what Pérez theorizes as a “third space feminist practice” (33). Such a decolonial feminist practice proposes a method of listening to the silences that require the creation of the social conditions necessary for listening and indeed discerning for our selves how, in this instance, “terrible”—if at all—Sycorax’s stories are.

In step with medieval and early modern associations between women’s transgressive spiritual *witchy* knowledge and transgressive sexual behavior, Prospero further implies that Sycorax’s horridness is connected to her obscene sexuality. Continuing to tell Ariel’s story, Prospero relates: “And for thou was a spirit too delicate / To act her earthy and abhorred commands, / Refusing her grand hests, she did confine thee” (1.2.272-74). By describing Sycorax’s supposed orders as “earthy”—“grossly material,” “coarse,” and “unrefined”—Prospero establishes Sycorax in binary opposition to “heavenly” (“earthy.”) Moreover, such allusions to crudeness connote a sense of Sycorax’s “natural or raw state” as one that is “vulgar, particularly about sex or bodily functions” and obscene, “offensive to conventional standards of decency, especially by being sexually explicit” (“crude” and “obscene”).

Hinting at Sycorax’s power as a healer-witch that also betrays Prospero’s anxiety toward a female realm of knowledge and power, Prospero describes Sycorax as “...a witch, and one so strong / That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs, / And deal in her [the moon’s] command without her power” (5.1.269-71). Such a description links Sycorax to a female genealogy of learned healers, midwives, sorceresses, and priestesses; spiritually powerful and horticulturally knowledgable “wise women” who knew how to speak with and listen to the elements, who knew about women’s reproductive cycles, who bled but did not die. As documented by feminist scholars, many were constructed as witches whose knowledges were demonized.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, several contemporary postcolonial and/or postpatriarchal revisions of Sycorax have reclaimed her healer knowledges. For example, as represented in Marina Warner’s novel *Indigo*, Sycorax “join[s] the ranks of midwives and healers who, like women accused of abortion and infanticide, were also accused of witchcraft because ‘they were ever-present reminders of the power that resides in women’s life-giving and life-maintaining roles’” (Zabus 150, quoting Karlsen xi).

In this lengthy first speech, Caliban also invokes Sycorax to accuse Prospero of

theft and righteously claim his freedom: “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me...” (I.ii.331-2). As suggested in the ambiguity of Caliban’s statement, Prospero’s taking of the island goes hand in hand with his taking of Sycorax. Within the colonial *modus operandi*, Sycorax could very well have been raped and/or murdered, as many native women were literally taken from their children by the colonizers. The implication is that Prospero’s success in colonizing the land depends on also *taking* Sycorax: her soul, culture, knowledge, history, literacy. Though initially critical of Prospero’s colonization of his land and his body, claiming matrilineality fails Caliban. The colonial refusal to recognize matrilineality and female property rights, and native sovereignty in general, sets Caliban and the Calibans thereafter on a path away from the indigenous, racialized mother, perhaps unconsciously associating her lack of economic, political power with her knowledge made defunct. Indeed, by the end of the play, when Shakespeare stages a pathetic Caliban’s failed conspiracy against Prospero, “Caliban repudiates his claims *of his own volition*” (Hulme 248). As critic Peter Hulme describes, “The violence of slavery is abolished at a stroke and Caliban becomes just another feudal retainer whom Prospero can ‘acknowledge mine’ (5.1.276). This is the wish-fulfillment of the European colonist: his natural superiority voluntarily recognized” (248). Remembering Caliban’s accusation that Prospero *took* Sycorax reminds us that it is important to understand how women have specifically embodied the violence of slavery and colonization. However, Caliban himself is not able to understand and be empowered by Sycorax’s legacy. Perhaps another colonial wish-fulfillment, Caliban ultimately internalizes his oppression and turns the curses against himself.

Caliban first mentions Sycorax when he invokes his mother’s presumably *wicked* witchcraft to curse Prospero and Miranda for enslaving him (1.2.321). The curse fails and instead Caliban suffers Prospero’s effective curses. Sycorax is repeatedly represented as weak in comparison to Prospero, whose power to punish and harm Caliban fears. Within this framework, Caliban is encouraged to reject his mother, including her “dark female” knowledge and spiritual epistemologies (Philip 167). He laments that Prospero’s magical power is stronger than Sycorax’s: “I must obey. His art is of such pow’r / It would control my dam’s god, Setebos” (1.2.371-72). Threading through Shakespeare’s representations of Sycorax is Caliban’s ambivalence toward his mother: he calls upon her to curse his oppressors yet reluctantly recognizes that his oppressor’s *art*—the civilizing magic of European early modernity perhaps—is more powerful than the *art* he inherited from his mother. Indeed, even Sycorax has a “god” who she seemingly turned to, while Prospero is fashioned as godly for apparently being capable of controlling Sycorax’s “god.” With the help of Ariel, Prospero’s spell distorts Caliban’s ability to see reality, leading him to believe that a jester and a drunkard are gods who will help him overthrow Prospero. Once he realizes his foolishness, Caliban becomes resigned to his oppressed condition.

Few elaborations have been made on the relationship between the colonization of language, the colonization of spirit, and the colonization of flesh. For if Prospero and Miranda teach Caliban language that oppresses him, they also teach him to distrust, fear, and/or reject the *foul* tongues of Sycorax, not only indigenous linguistic mother tongues, but also the multiplicity of ways “She” speaks, including through her spiritual, sexual, and *magical* knowledges. As Philip states, “Sycorax continues to terrify us with her witchcraft and obeah” (173).<sup>12</sup> Such fright potentially destroys our ability not only to sustain these knowledges as legitimate and valuable, but also to use them in resistance to

Prospero's neocolonial *white magic*. In fact, Prospero is figured as a magician in the original play. Not only have decolonial and feminist intellectuals, as the heirs of colonialism, learned to speak the master's languages— including English, Spanish, academic, and other forms of legitimized writing—many of us have also inherited the master's fear, loathing, and suppression of the spirit and the body, especially the racialized and feminized spirit and body.<sup>13</sup> In recovering and proving the reasoning faculty and intellectual tradition of women as well as of people of color—"yes, we have minds, theories and rational abilities"—many become unwittingly complicit in the ordering of thought that subordinates knowledge from the spirit and body and privileges the mind. Moreover, the historical impact of colonization gets privileged over the impact of patriarchy in the majority of postcolonial and anti-racist discourse, and vice versa in the majority of eurocentric feminist discourse.

Therefore, in the next section, I focus on the absent *presence* of the racialized and sexualized witch-mother Sycorax to explore the marginalization of women, gender, and the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in decolonial yet masculinist interpretations of Caliban by two canonical writers, Roberto Fernández Retamar (b.1930) and Aimé Césaire (b. 1913). Retamar is a Cuban writer and president of the international cultural and research center "Casa de las Américas" in Havana, and Aimé Césaire is a Martinique-born writer and politician who co-founded the "Négritude" cultural movement that forwarded a decolonial Black consciousness throughout the African diaspora. Arguing for the need to create and recognize ways of speaking beyond resistance and the master's tongue(s), I then trace some decolonizing feminist writings that critique the heterosexist and androcentric limits of a Caliban positionality, yet continue to marginalize Sycorax. As I assert, working from the standpoint of decolonial feminism to reclaim Sycorax, Shakespeare's name for the racialized, sexualized, and demonized female in the "New World," theorizes oppression and healing in a way that is not only oppositional—as offered by Caliban—but works to transform relations of power as well. Making Sycorax visible, listening to Sycorax, and learning to speak through Sycorax's witchy tongue can lead to more holistic social transformation that includes the banished.

### **Racialized Positionalities of Resistance: Caliban's Cursing Tongue**

Language is a significant aspect of Latino and Latin American identification with Caliban, who tells Prospero and Miranda: "You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!" (Shakespeare 1.2.362-364). These lines have been a point of departure for many thinkers in "the School of Caliban" who are grappling with an effective way to critique and transform eurocentric society and U.S. imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Caliban learns language from his oppressors and in turn uses it to curse them. Retamar, for example, interprets Caliban's curses as a means of resisting his colonial condition, an important oppositional practice.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it is also possible that when a Caliban (or "the" native, subaltern, or other) speaks, as Gayatri Spivak suggests, her or his subjectivity is contained and mediated within the limits of the colonizer's tongues as well as the social structures that enforce hegemonic discourses.<sup>16</sup> Barbadian writer, George Lamming asserts that Prospero is counting on this: "Language... is the very prison in which Caliban's achievements will be realized and restricted" (qtd. in Retamar "Caliban: Notes" 13). Indeed, Shakespeare represents

Miranda as a compassionate person who “pitied” the “brutish” Caliban and “took pains to make [him] speak,” yet was dismayed that teaching him language failed at socializing his “vile race” (1.2.353-57). Moreover, Miranda suggests that it is his supposed evil nature that justifies his very enslavement by Prospero. Miranda tells Caliban that although he learned to speak, he still had “that in’t which good natures / Could not abide to be with. Therefore wast thou / Deservedly confined into this rock, who hadst/ Deserved more than a prison” (1.2.358-61). Caliban’s imprisonment in a rock structure resonates with his confinement by the colonizer’s language structure.

Aimé Césaire’s “*A Tempest: Based on Shakespeare’s The Tempest, Adaptation for a Black Theater*” (1969) is a critical intervention challenging the master’s colonial tongue that nonetheless perpetuates a masculinist tongue. In the play, Césaire transforms Caliban from an ambiguous and monstrous hybrid into a revolutionary black slave. Césaire also challenges Shakespeare’s colonial imaginary by casting positively valued African *orishas*, “spirits” or natural forces: the Yoruban *orishas* Shango, representing the natural force of lightning and depicted as a warrior, and Eshu, described as a trickster “devil-god” (xi). Although Caliban’s subjectivity is centralized in this narrative, interestingly, Miranda’s role is diminished. In Césaire’s play, Miranda is no longer the one who teaches language to Caliban; only Prospero is named as teacher. This produces an androcentric dramatization of the antagonistic relationship between the male colonizer and male colonized. Miranda does play an active role in seeking out the story of how she and her father came to live on the island; however, after Ferdinand’s arrival, marriage becomes her sole preoccupation. Miranda’s curious *wonder* about the world and her history disappears as she begins to spend all of her energy on gushingly *mirando* (looking) into Ferdinand’s eyes.<sup>17</sup> Feminist Shakespearean scholar Lorie Jerrel Leininger points out that simplifying characterizations such as these reproduce the dichotomy between anti-racist praxis and anti-patriarchy praxis that keeps “whites” (specifically feminists) and people of color from collaboratively working to “set each other free” (154). Her analysis leads us to reflect on difficult questions. If Césaire’s Caliban calls for “Uhuru,” freedom in Swahili, we must ask: Uhuru by whom and for whom (“uhuru”)?

Like Retamar, in Césaire’s decolonial binary configuration of Caliban against Prospero, the voices and bodies of other non-male “rebels” are lost or marginalized. This masculinist perspective has long-been critiqued and even Retamar acknowledges the limitations of his Caliban narrative. In his final essay on the topic, he states, “given the excessive male presence in the original essay (better said: given the excessive absence of women therein, that revealed my sad male chauvinistic original position), in speaking of the history, culture of *Calibán*, I here include several of their names” (“Adiós” 79).<sup>18</sup> Symptomatic of practices that try to retrospectively include women and gender issues into analysis rather than make them a central part of the (re)theorization, Retamar cites these “excessively absent” women mostly in footnotes rather than in the body of his essay (fn. 6, “Adiós” 94). The erasure of the subaltern material woman is also made visible when we deconstruct the way in which Retamar genders the land, “our mestiza America,” as feminine and the “lands of Calibán” become the symbolic mother (“Adiós” 71). How might this configuration of Caliban as the new symbolic patriarch and the land as symbolic mother erase the women whose bodies have historically been sites of sexual and physical violence in wars and revolutionary struggles, within both colonial and decolonial struggles?<sup>19</sup> In representing Sycorax as “Mother. Serpent, rain, lightning,” as

Earth that never dies, Césaire is also participating in the nationalist discourse that idealizes women as only spiritual mothers and the source of their sons' (or lovers') strength and legitimacy, at the cost of not recognizing their complex materiality, sexuality, and subjectivity (Césaire 12). As Jyotsna G. Singh argues, "Sycorax, figures in the play as a *symbolic* Earth Mother embodied in the natural elements of the island," thereby "displac[ing] the sexual, maternal identity of the 'native' woman, Sycorax, onto the idealized abstraction of the Earth as Mother" (196, 207).

Instead of developing Sycorax as a complex character, Césaire focuses on Eshu whom he represents as a sexual spirit that torments Prospero, the other white males, Miranda, and their white goddesses by crashing the wedding ceremony. The trickster replaces the good-wishes of the Roman deities of maternal fertility, "logic, beauty, [and] harmony" (representative of Prospero's early modern ideals) with his own flagrantly libidinous tales of sexual exhibitionism, deception, and infidelity (Césaire 46). Eshu further scandalizes the wedding party when he concludes his song by repeating "he can whip you with his dick... with his dick. He can whip you, whip you..." (48-49). Within the context of colonialism, such a brazen performance of sexuality may elicit fear in the colonialists caused by a culturally different expression of sexuality, as well as the threatening presence of overt Black male sexuality. Césaire is poking fun at this racist, irrational fear through exaggeration. He is also suggesting that although the colonizers can brandish the physical whip to control and maintain power, the colonized retain, express, or are given power through the fear their body and sexuality engenders. These fears also include colonial anxiety about the potential *spoiling* of white virgin maidens, and therefore a decrease in their property value, as well as the fear of miscegenation. Prospero clearly exemplifies such apprehension in guarding his daughter, setting the pure and beautiful dutiful Miranda in opposition to the horrid and transgressive Sycorax.

However, if this is a case of counter-hegemonic power it is a male sexual power that can be exerted against women of color, in addition to male and female colonizers. Whether or not the whipping-dick of the misogynist replaces the whip of the slave driver, women are subjected to violence in either configuration. This sexual threat, whereby both men and women are at risk of violent retribution, is shocking to the colonizers. This resembles what U.S. Latina activist Elizabeth Martínez describes as the "chingón politics" of the nationalistic construction of masculinity found throughout the Americas, a sexism that some rationalize as an excusable response to oppression (123).<sup>20</sup> Caliban's cursing and Eshu's sexual threats are laden with violence. While this language of violence aims to invert the hierarchy, it is not holistic social transformation.

Indeed, making Sycorax visible, listening to Sycorax, and learning to speak Sycorax's language of healing, can potentially lead to more holistic social transformation for several reasons. For one, it insists on the participation of women of color and other *others*. Moreover, if we imagine Sycorax as a healer who was demonized into a witch because of her spiritual and sexual alterity, as many women in the early modern/colonial period were and continue to be, we can better understand the ways this legacy impacts our relationships with Sycorax, within and without, thus potentially changing the ways we relate to our selves and one another. This decolonial feminist approach of healing internalizations insists on challenging colonialism, sexism, and other oppressions without replicating the same problematic structures of power. Through the characterization of Eshu, the orisha of destiny, change, and opportunity, is Césaire perhaps warning his

audience against the potential destiny faced by all masculinist nationalist social movements that would brandish a whipping-dick? As women of color writers have explored, there are other ways of speaking and transforming society that include the sexual body and spirit. For example, some define the erotic as a power that enables, as empowerment, not power over as symbolized by Eshu's whipping-dick.<sup>21</sup>

While it is significant that Césaire resurrects Sycorax as a spiritually powerful woman of color protagonist, it is important to consider the difference between representations of male-gendered spiritual forces and female-gendered ones. A sexist and racist double standard is exemplified in the juxtaposition of Prospero's "white magic" to Sycorax's "black magic" by Shakespeare, and in the manner in which Césaire represents Eshu invoking an ambivalent fear/fascination, while everyone, except for Caliban, hates the "ghoul... witch" Sycorax (12). In Césaire's play, Eshu in effect replaces Sycorax as a more potent and hence appropriate match against Prospero's magic. At best, this representational erasure locks the racialized and sexualized women for whom Sycorax is a sign into an inferior, secondary realm of spiritual or symbolic powers, and, at worst, completely erases them and their multiple concerns in the struggle to create their own identities and participate in revolutions that are also their own.

### **Gendered and Racialized Positionalities of Resistance: Miranda's and Calibana's Tongues**

Curiously, some women of color scholars have chosen to ally themselves with Miranda, Prospero's white daughter, or feminize Caliban's patrilineal genealogy, instead of claiming an alliance with the matriarch Sycorax. For example, in "El Diario de Miranda/Miranda's Diary" (1995), Afro-Latina cultural critic and performance artist, Coco Fusco offers a gendered alternative to identification with Caliban. As a "child of the [Cuban] diaspora" living in the United States for most of her life, she chooses to identify with Miranda who was also obliged to move from her home at a young age (5).<sup>22</sup> Given that Miranda is an Anglo-European woman, why does Fusco feel more affinity towards her, the sexualized other, than to the negatively racialized and sexualized other, Sycorax? Fusco's chosen identification may speak to the alienation she feels from her own sexist literal or "symbolic fathers" (7). Indeed, she names several Latin American and Caribbean intellectuals who have androcentrically focused on Caliban and ignored Miranda as a symbol of the women who also make up the Americas. In choosing to identify with Miranda, whom Fusco characterizes as "a young woman whose arrival to the island marks the beginning of a process of self-discovery," she joins other defiant daughters in journeying away "from the fictions of identity imparted to us by our symbolic fathers" (6, 7).

For example, in previous literary texts, the sexualized Miranda is often only discussed in reference to "Caliban's attempt to seduce her;" she is not treated as a subject, but as the constructed object of Caliban's lust (Fusco 6). Fusco notes how psychoanalytic writer Octave Mannoni's notion of the "Prospero's Complex" (1950) explains the psychology "of the colonial patriarch whose racism is manifested in his obsessive fear that his daughter's virginity is threatened, especially by the hypersexualized New World Man" (Fusco 6). Indeed, the construction of this powerful stereotype of a savage Caliban used to justify colonial and racial violence diverts attention away from the widespread raping and hypersexualization of black, native, mestiza, and mulatta women throughout

the history of slavery, conquest, colonialism, and present-day projects of empire. While this is a valid critique of Shakespeare's representation vindicating the oppression of the sexualized and racialized male other (Caliban) by the seemingly more rational, controlled, and civilized male (Prospero), the critique does not engage the fact that the former is sometimes also a perpetrator of violence against women (whether "white" or from their own racial/ethnic group). Fusco's identification with the racialized "white" Miranda, then, may be her attempt to disidentify with the Latin Americanists who celebrate Caliban and the male resistance fighter he symbolizes, yet does not recognize that "he" may also be perpetuating physical and/or discursive violence towards women. Because she does not articulate it as such, Fusco's identification with Miranda may be read as a move to be associated with the protected white womanhood that she symbolizes, characterized as the "Miranda Complex" (Donaldson 13). Given Fusco's powerful oeuvre of decolonial feminist work in which women of color issues are central, her alliance with Miranda in lieu of Sycorax in this essay suggests a strategic engagement with the Latin American discourses that at least recognize Miranda. Ultimately, however, in naming and appropriating Miranda as "*The Tempest's* only significant female character," Fusco misses an opportunity to shift the *master* discourses by making Sycorax visible and audible (6).

Instead of identifying with Miranda, other feminists have chosen to feminize Caliban's genealogy. However, this genealogy remains patrilineal and racially identified. The introduction of the anthology *Daughters of Caliban: Caribbean Women in the Twentieth Century* (1997), for example, self-consciously names and reinserts women as agents in narratives about "our América," yet still fails to see and reclaim Sycorax: "Although 'Caliban' has been viewed largely as a male construct, we appropriate his legacy of struggle cognizant that identity is never fixed, but fluid. We add to this image a new dimension...that we are daughters, reweaving our mothers' stories into our own as we challenge convention" (Lopez Springfield xii). If it is so important to tell and rewrite our mothers' stories, why not position ourselves as "Daughters of Sycorax"?<sup>23</sup>

The pull toward taking up a Caliban(a) positionality, instead of positioning oneself with Sycorax, is unwittingly problematic. After all, Caliban speaks the "colonizer's" tongue, and because his voice is potentially intelligible within dominant society, he is seen as a viable counter-hegemonic voice. There is discomfort and perhaps fear in taking on a symbol that is documented as voiceless, speechless. Indeed, one may not even *see* Sycorax. By staking a position alongside Caliban, one is more likely to be "recognized" and therefore interpellated into a patriarchal nation-state framework that promises certain opportunities and privileges to its abiding citizens, including protection. Remembering Sycorax, a woman without an audible voice, an exile without a nation, and an accused witch to top it off, is a threat to the patriarchal social imaginary. Ironically, despite the attempt to render her intelligible through her demonization in Shakespeare's text, it is her resounding silence that creates an alternative counter-hegemonic positionality for social change. In this positionality one will not uncritically take up "the master's tools" (be it language, the pen, the gun, or other "tools") in an attempt to "dismantle the master's house" (Lorde "The Master's Tools" 110). The silence of and around Sycorax points to something else. It signals the existence of a powerful epistemology that lives alongside of, yet reaches beyond, the disenchanting secular modern nation. Sycorax's resounding silence exemplifies the power of Prospero's magic

to quell opposition. As Philip suggests, there is a need to confront and move beyond the fear of Sycorax's "witchcraft and Obeah" (173) if we, heirs of racist colonialism and sexism in the Americas, are to heal ourselves and transform the structures that discipline us into not asking questions about our dark female ancestors and selves. These questions are seeds, "hag-seed[s]" if you will, that powerfully, even if quietly, germinate (Shakespeare 1.2.364).

### **Conclusion: Creating Spaces to Listen and Speak the Language of Sycorax**

Listening to the silences about Sycorax teaches us. Although many women of color writers do not directly identify with Sycorax, also exiled from her home and ostensibly sharing more in common with many U.S. Latina women than Caliban, they also do not disidentify with her. In fact, Sycorax's absent *presence* resonates in most if not all the writings that thematize this issue, decolonial and feminist alike. Regardless, engagement with Sycorax is hardly sustained. Why is this so? Philip suggests that the unarticulated reason for disengagement with Sycorax is that we have inherited Prospero's androcentric European culture's fear of the *other*, "because she is female and dark as in both being unknown and dark-skinned" (167). Similarly, as Norma Alarcón, following Gloria Anzaldúa, says about Chicanas, the reason is the fear of the dark woman inside of us as well as outside, in culture. Indeed, Sycorax, as a sign for "the" native or dark woman, is mistakenly perceived as too ambivalent of a symbol when the case is that it is we who are ambivalent in identifying or disidentifying with her. In claiming Caliban as "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine," Prospero is not only commenting about enslaving Caliban, he is also suggesting that *masters* who have internalized the colonial imaginary can claim their dark male other (5.1.275-276). Apparently, however, they cannot go as far as claiming their dark female other. From a colonial and patriarchal perspective, the dark, markedly feminine, spirituality of Sycorax within and outside one's self engenders too much fear and, thus, loathing.

Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, two feminist writers, have conjectured that "[t]he original witch was undoubtedly black, bisexual, a warrior, a wise and strong woman, also a midwife, also a leader of her tribe" (210). Be this as it may, and if powerfully different ways of living and knowing were not cause enough to subordinate women across cultures, then the fact of the power of their speech was. The secret words uttered by witches were and are considered to literally embody power.<sup>24</sup> Like Caliban who curses his colonizer, many women of color who use their tongues to "talk back" to patriarchal power were and continue to be socially punished.<sup>25</sup> Regardless, as I explore elsewhere, they continue to enunciate their opposition, while simultaneously forging transformative decolonizing and feminist visions (Lara, "Decolonizing"). Examining the colonial and patriarchal projections embedded in the character of Sycorax that were shaped by and shaped European discourse, namely the fear of women of color's *dark* power as figured in witchcraft, is a first step toward understanding that decolonial feminist discourses need to address how the spiritual and sexual power of women in general, and women of color in particular, continue to be represented in oppressive ways. Women's studies, Latino/Latin American studies, other Ethnic and American studies, and additional disciplines invested in forwarding decolonial feminist social change would do well to engage the figure of Sycorax and the radical questions that she poses for imagining and

creating a culture of “Our America” that legitimizes spiritual epistemologies grounded in the worldviews of women of color.

More so than speaking *about* the fictional Sycorax, I have aimed to speak *through* Sycorax. Unlike those who create a theoretical positionality and speak from the metaphorical space of the son Caliban, I suggest the need to imagine and speak in our own tongues, not as daughters of a reappropriated Sycorax *per se*, but as self-defined *relatives* of the racialized, sexualized, and witched women in the Americas and beyond. I turned to the colonial clash of cultures and usurpation of land in the Americas allegorized in *The Tempest* to renarrate Sycorax and imagine the healing literacy of a third transformative space that she represents. This approach is important because it addresses the ways that the colonizer and colonized have internalized their identities and methods of oppressing and resisting each other without necessarily transforming the structures of power that keep them locked in battle. Listening to the language of Sycorax goes hand in hand with the critical practice of addressing oppression and privilege beyond perpetual cursing, toward healing the colonizer/colonized oppositional binary, and with an awareness of the ways the colonized may have internalized oppression and “curse” themselves.

Such a call can be embodied in various ways. For example, in the feminist classroom or workshop space, the complex histories of privileged and oppressed positions can be approached from such a reimagined Sycoraxian prism that attends to what M. Jacqui Alexander calls “pedagogies of the sacred” and Gloria Anzaldúa calls “spiritual activism” in other contexts. That is, Sycorax’s reimagined story, as the story of the spiritually knowledgeable, racialized and sexualized healer who has been subjugated in the western colonial-modern imagination both because she is a woman of color and because she offers culturally different, possibly subversive ways of being, foregrounds the spiritual as a politically significant, potentially decolonizing practice.<sup>26</sup>

Those of us committed to decolonial feminist social transformation in the Americas and beyond would also do well to (re)listen to and (re)narrate the story of Sycorax while participating in creating non-binary third literacies for the stories of the racialized, sexualized, and witched women who she represents to be spoken and heard. Primarily, this entails a newly sensitized way of reading or understanding the world that includes considering “Sycorax” and “her” ways of being and knowing when analyzing, constructing, and teaching history, literature, and other humanities, as well as social sciences. Fostering such a literacy also involves the creation of more artistic and theoretical works that focus on “Sycorax”—as a revised character or as a sign of actual women—as a subject. My scholarship on Sycorax inspired such a creative piece; a poem entitled “Ceremony of Sycorax’s Soul” that envisions the complex subjectivity of the banished witch/healer resourcefully surviving in the “New World.” As this Sycorax reflects on the ways that she negotiated her many experiences as a woman, a mother, a healer, and a sexual being in patriarchal and colonial contexts, we see that there is nothing essentially *feminine* about her. Like all historical actors, she thinks, feels, and makes decisions—some of which she questions. She does curse—her oppressors, her son, her situation, even herself—but she ultimately draws on her spiritual knowledges to transform her rage and grief, a transformation that is partially interdependent on our collective participation. Sycorax concludes by imploring, “Will you listen to the me in you? / The “hagseed” you’ve been taught to shun?... / We must listen to each other /

Determining for ourselves how we can participate / In setting each other free / Both as subjects *and* objects of liberation... / In resistance to the structures that occasion the cursing” (Lara, “Ceremony”).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown defines "root metaphor" as "the unarticulated yet deeply formative images that direct the flow of thought and action in any given culture" (123).

<sup>2</sup> When I place "the" in quotes questioning essentialist and monolithic representations of indigenous women, I am drawing on Norma Alarcón's description of Chicana feminist

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“effort[s] to pluralize the racialized body by redefining part of their experience through the appropriation of ‘the’ native woman” (375).

<sup>3</sup> Hall’s discussion of “presence/absence” borrows from Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. These Black writers, cultural theorists, and politicians were educated in France where they were among the founders of “Négritude.” Launched in the 1930s, the Négritude movement desired to make the *presence* of Africa felt throughout the diaspora as a cultural politics against the psychological dissociation and self-loathing endemic to colonization that was later astutely articulated by Frantz Fanon.

<sup>4</sup> Emma Pérez uses the phrase “the decolonial imaginary” as a strategy through which today’s writers can render audible the historical agency of subjugated “women’s voices” (33). Theorists Michel Foucault, Homi Bhabha, and Chela Sandoval inform Pérez’s notion of the related “third space” (xvi-xvii; 142).

<sup>5</sup> Revisioning Shakespeare, the western “cultural gold standard of literature and literary value,” as critic Rob Nixon has sardonically remarked (qtd. in Saldívar 124), is a strategy with limitations, including the reification of Shakespeare’s canonical status. Nevertheless, *Tempest* revisionists are acting on the recognition that the process of revision exerts symbolic power because engaging the familiar in new ways can lead to critical questions and fresh perspectives. While some *Tempest* revisionists may simply be unable to “see” Sycorax and her symbolic power for the reasons I have mentioned, arguably, others may have strategically chosen to focus on Caliban or Miranda—who as well-known characters presumably hold more symbolic weight—in order to more effectively challenge assumptions and invert power relations. A limit to such an approach is that it automatically dismisses the “minor” character Sycorax because of her marginal visibility and presumable lack of symbolic power. The limitation of such revisionism in general is that it confines writers to the existing canon and patterns of representation. However, I join several other *Tempest* revisionists who find it valuable to challenge such dominant frameworks by looking to the margins of the text as politically significant sites of information and potential transformation. In the case of *The Tempest*, we have literally found the “ex-centrici[z]ed” Sycorax (Purkiss 251).

<sup>6</sup> For example, see Lorie Jerrell Leininger’s essay about “the Miranda Trap.”

<sup>7</sup> In addition to Philip, see, for example, the work of Maryse Condé, Abena P.A. Busia, Myriam J. A. Chancy, Lilas Desquiron, Simone Schwarz Bart, Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid, Gloria Naylor, and Kamau Brathwaite. Also see the work by the only U.S. Latina/o writers who I know of that resurrect Sycorax: Saldívar, Ricardo Bracho, Cherríe Moraga, and Eliana Ortega.

<sup>8</sup> Witch historian Diane Purkiss discusses the physical (in the play) and literary (in criticism) “ex-centricity” of Sycorax in relation to the European historical social condition of witches in general. Women who were deemed witches usually lived in the periphery of communities; a trope that is also represented in fairy tales (251). On witches in the early modern English imaginary in relation to the construction of Sycorax, also see Sachdev and Warner.

<sup>9</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully explore the historical transformation of healers into witches and its legacy, but on this topic see, for example, Barstow, Purkiss, and Lara (“Bruja”).

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<sup>10</sup> Leininger convincingly discusses the ways that Miranda's chastity "symbolizes all human virtue... while Caliban's lust symbolizes all human vice" within the Neoplatonic schema (151). However, she does not address the ways that Sycorax is also negatively represented.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, footnote 9.

<sup>12</sup> As Karla Frye suggests, Obeah is "a system of beliefs grounded in spirituality and an acknowledgement of the supernatural and involving aspects of witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing" (qtd. in Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 6). Influenced by slaves from the African Gold Coast, "the practice of Obeah involves the 'putting on' and 'taking off' of... ghosts or spirits of the dead... for either good or evil purposes" (6).

<sup>13</sup> For particularly appropriate discussions on the limits of the master's language, see women of color writers Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" and Gloria Anzaldúa's "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers." On the value of addressing the spirit and "spiritual epistemologies" see M. Jacqui Alexander's "Pedagogies of the Sacred."

<sup>14</sup> See Saldívar's discussion of what he coined "The School of Caliban."

<sup>15</sup> Retamar's "Caliban: Notes Toward a Discussion of Culture in Our America" launched a discussion on Caliban from within the Spanish-speaking Americas. For Retamar's more recent engagements with Caliban, see his *Todo Calibán*.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the "subaltern" see Gayatri Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Also see Busia's essay "Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the

Unvoiced Female" that, as noted by Zabus, specifically questions the construction of African women's subalternity.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to connoting *to look*, "Miranda's name literally means 'wonder'" (Fusco 6).

<sup>18</sup> All translations of Retamar's "Adiós a Calibán" are mine.

<sup>19</sup> On the feminization of the Americas and the gendered histories of war and conquest in the Americas, see Wood.

<sup>20</sup> *Chingón* is Mexican Spanish vernacular for someone who does something impressively well and can be loosely translated as a "bad-ass" in American English vernacular. *Chingón* literally refers to the active male "fucker," as opposed to the passive female "fucked," the *chingada*.

<sup>21</sup> On such elaborations of the erotic, see Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." Also see Alexander.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, although Chancy also explores similar concepts of exile, she identifies with Sycorax. Other critics who have also addressed Miranda's significations include: Donaldson, Leininger, Sachdev, Singh, Warner, Wynter, and Zabus.

<sup>23</sup> Fenwick's edited anthology *Sisters of Caliban: Contemporary Women Poets of the Caribbean* is another of several examples of a gendered and racialized position of resistance that neglects Sycorax. These writers take on a Caliban(a) critical positionality against the publishing industry and educational system that has historically only legitimized "writers whose expressions most successfully imitated the styles and subjects set by European intellectuals" (xviii), yet do not name Sycorax. Moreover, in her introduction to an anthology on "multicultural feminism," critic Ella Shohat also refers to the political necessity of "not simply... using Prospero's language to curse him [as

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suggested by Césaire], but also... of hearing the voice of the absent dark woman.” Again, I am puzzled that Shohat represents this dark woman as “the missing ‘Calibana’” rather than as Sycorax (13). Although she does not elaborate, Ortega does signal the limit of Caliban as a metaphor of resistance because he “signifies only a half liberation” for Latin American women. She writes, “as long as the mother figure (Sycorax) remains forgotten, as long as women continue to be silenced, there can be no liberation for an entire people” (125).

<sup>24</sup> For an example focused on colonial New England, see Kamensky.

<sup>25</sup> I am referencing Black feminist bell hooks’ classic *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, but there are many other examples. Also see Anzaldúa.

<sup>26</sup> I elaborate on such “spiritual activism” in my “Bruja Positionalities: Toward a Chicana/Latina Spiritual Activism.”