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## Wonder, Refuge, Promise: Explorations and Discoveries of America in Maria Irene Fornes' Final Plays

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On the occasion of the quincentennial of the “discovery”<sup>1</sup> of America, John Brushwood published an article commemorating the first voyage by Christopher Columbus, proposing that in much American literature the vision of the continent was reflected in three concepts roughly connected to historical development: wonder, promise, and refuge. Wonder captures the feeling of elation in the age of discoveries; refuge embodies protection from persecution for political or religious reasons; and promise stresses the possibilities of a new beginning and an escape from poverty. Brushwood refers to Alfonso Reyes’ *Visión de Anahuac* (1917) to underscore this transatlantic vision: “we experience first the European discovery of America, and then the discovery of America—or a new awareness of it—by the American writer” (836). This statement identifies the contradictory effects and the tensions inherent in the literary account. On the one hand, literature opens up and incorporates a new vision of the world from a European perspective, while on the other it closes the possibilities of a pristine, original discovery. The received version of the story imposes itself in the new awareness expressed by the American writer, which is precluded and mediated by the European vision.

Maria Irene Fornes was commissioned to write *Terra Incognita* for the celebrations of 1992. In this work, she presents three young Americans on a trip to Palos de la Frontera (Spain), which was precisely the port of departure for the three caravels. One of her last three plays, it was published in a volume with *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* and *Letters from Cuba*. *Terra Incognita* questions the notion of wonder that the new land implied for the European imagination in the XV century through the somber encounter of

the innocent travelers with the deranged preaching of two Spanish fools who appropriate the discourses of Columbus and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas—both key players in the discovery. *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, linked to the 1994-1996 Cuban Rafter Crisis, represents the perilous crossing from the Cuban shore to the Florida Keys of a group of *balseros* who leave the island in search of refuge. Finally, the promise of a better life, of escaping poverty and scarcity, is the driving force of *Letters from Cuba*, a reflection based on decades of correspondence between Fornes and her brother. This connection through letters emphasizes the ability of art to overcome distance and unite lives despite physical frontiers. The three plays explore the meaning of America (or the Americas, to be more accurate) across the Atlantic—from the United States to Spain and from Cuba to Florida and New York—, thus providing a critical revision of the inherited narrative of the discovery.

The three images —paradise, promise, and refuge— reflect the feelings and expectations experienced by those on a journey of discovery. On the level of semantics, the three terms share positive connotations: marvelous expectations of the unknown—the yet-to-be-discovered *terra incognita*; attainments to be materialized at a future time in a different land; protection and shelter offered by a new geography to those forced to leave their homeland. In all cases, there is hope, a belief in the future—paradise, promise, and refuge conjuring up the imaginative power of the human mind. However, when dreams are realized, when they shift from the hypothetical to the indicative, when the journey starts, reality may confront the traveler with unexpected turns and unforeseen worries, burdens, and troubles. The wonder of the unknown, for example, can quickly transform paradise into hell. In early maps, unexplored seas and lands were often adorned with images of vivid monsters or with expressions indicating perils, such as “here be dragons.” In sum, promises may not be upheld, wishful thinking might materialize, the transit to the place of refuge may prove deadly, and the adaptation to a new place may be too high of a price to pay.

Just as the mariners in the Early Modern Age explored distant corners of the earth in search of undiscovered, pristine lands thanks to sailing technologies, Fornes’ plays abound in textual and dramatic instruments that facilitate exploration of the idea of America. In fact, the appropriation and combination of diverse voices and texts result in the multilayered and polyphonic quality that characterizes her theatre. Through borrowings or palimpsests, Fornes produces a dramatic trilogy that reveals the complexities of displacement, not belonging, and exile. Taking as a starting point Brushwood’s concepts

of wonder, promise, and refuge as possible representations of America, this article explores how Maria Irene Fornes uses different textual and theatrical strategies in each play to present her vision of the continent at the end of the twentieth century. Palimpsest subverts the idea of wonder in *Terra Incognita*, *Manual for a Desperate Crossing* uses hybridity to represent the crossing of the Caribbean Sea in search of refuge for the Cuban *balseros*, and the promise of a better life is enhanced by simultaneity in *Letters from Cuba*.

Cuban-born Maria Irene Fornes (1930-2018) left Cuba for the United States at the age of fifteen in pursuit of economic betterment. There she experienced the life of an immigrant in a new land, language, and culture. She started writing at the end of the 1950s and found her place in the creative milieu of the 1960s Off-Broadway scene, a vibrant moment for artistic explorations and alternative visions. She never left the alternative scene, a place where she felt she belonged, for the remaining years of her theatrical career. As an outsider, her interest in experimenting with a language that was not her own surfaces in her plays and illustrates a life devoted to a profession always on the fringe of the commercial: "Although widely admired in professional and academic circles, Fornes has never fared well in the mainstream" (Cummings, "Letters" 563).

These plays correspond to the later stage of her long, fruitful career. Although they have received much less critical attention than other pieces of her dramatic writing, they continue to be extremely relevant cultural comments almost three decades after their premieres. Their relevance is connected to the numerous immigration and refugee crises throughout the world as frontiers are closed down while vast numbers of emigrants knock on the doors of the richer economies in search of refuge.<sup>2</sup> Fornes presents, through her subtle and sensitive theatre, a profound and sophisticated vision of immigration and intercultural encounters.

### **Paradise Lost: From wonder to nightmare in *Terra Incognita***

The overwhelming variety of documents in *Terra Incognita* includes maps, newspapers, travel brochures, magazines, dictionaries, and a technical manual for sailing. Adding to this textual abundance, two characters, Burt and Steve, act as ventriloquists for "Christopher Columbus' experiences" and "Bartolomé de las Casas's *History of the Indies, 1512*" (37), two of the best-known inaugural accounts of the discovery of America. The profusion of texts and documents provokes a sense of confusion and extra thickness that challenges the role of the spectator.

Palimpsest, which is literally the reusing of sheets of paper by writing on top of previously written texts, is the predominant textual strategy used in *Terra Incognita*, and also a keystone of postdramatic theatre:

Such palimpsestuous intertextuality and intratextuality are a significant quality of much postdramatic theatre. The quality of a palimpsest, of going over or writing over the same terrain, in one respect is often simply the product of the devising and rehearsal process, of companies using and reusing the materials left on stage or found in the rehearsal room or recycling material from previous shows in new contexts. (Lehmann 8)

Genette chose the word palimpsest as the title of his study on the appropriation and interconnection of literary texts, proposing textual genetic lineage as the basis of poetics:

El objeto de la poética [...] no es el texto considerado en su singularidad [...] sino el *architexto* o, si se prefiere, la architextualidad del texto [...], es decir, el conjunto de categorías generales o trascendentes—tipos de discurso, modos de enunciación, géneros literarios, etc.—del que depende cada texto singular. (9)

He uses the term transtextuality—instead of the more frequent intertextuality—to refer to “todo lo que pone al texto en relación, manifiesta o secreta, con otros textos” (9-10). In the different types of transtextual relations, the paratext includes titles and subtitles as well as preface, illustrations, or even drafts (11-12).

Two particular uses of the palimpsest in *Terra Incognita* stand out: the paratextual context present in the title and headings of each section and the textual discourses borrowed from Columbus and de las Casas. *Terra Incognita* was a common term used in ancient cartography to illustrate unknown land, often populated with imagined dangers, a fertile space in which to let the imagination run wild. In the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, Prince Henry of Portugal led a distinguished group of scientists, sailors, technicians, and cartographers to explore the seas and seek new routes to distant territories. “Prince Henry” is precisely the title chosen for the opening section of the play. The nautical instruments invented or improved in the fifteenth century enabled explorers to venture into the uncharted territories and provided the impulse for the enterprise undertaken by the community Prince Henry had established in Sagres, the village Amalia suggests visiting: “Let’s go to the cliffs where he thought of ships to sail the ocean sea” (38). The reference to this historical feat is expanded and detailed in the play: “He gathered men of knowledge—navigators from the East, from Greece, Syria,

Egypt round him. Engineers, shipbuilders, instrument-makers. Inventors came to him, worked for him, from Greece, from Syria, from Egypt” (39).

“Amerigo,” “The Indies,” and “In perpetuity” are other headings that refer to different instances of the Spanish endeavor to find a new route to the West in their competition with Portugal. Columbus’ successful first expedition was in fact an attempt to reach the islands of spices and that is why he named the new territory The Indies (60). Later, another name was given by Amerigo to the newfound land: “A German mapmaker engraved a map of the New World where Amerigo’s discoveries were outlined. On it was engraved Amerigo’s name. From that Amerigo’s map. From that America” (48). “In perpetuity” alludes to the rewards that Isabel La Católica—who had funded Columbus’ trip—promised him: “They owe me ten percent of all the profits from all the lands I own and still own and will own in perpetuity, by contract which I hold” (77). The paratext unequivocally expresses the cosmivision of the discovery of America.

Palimpsest is stretched to the limit by Burt and Steve, who signify the transition from silent word scripted on paper to the embodiment of the text in human voice: the written account of the New World is now pronounced to be heard. Both Columbus and de las Casas present different versions of the New World. Columbus’ diaries show a sense of wonder at the sight of a surprising new paradisiacal land and the naive character of its inhabitants: “Esta isla es bien grande y muy llana y de árboles muy verdes, y muchas aguas, y una laguna en medio muy grande, sin ninguna montaña, y toda ella verde, ques placer de mirarla; y esta gente farto mansa” (26). Nonetheless, his speech in the play emphasizes his greed and his claim to ownership, thus erasing the innocence and beauty of the first impressions of the newfound territory and the people there encountered. Columbus’ vision is also countered by the contiguous accusing speech by Bartolomé de las Casas:

Let it be known that because of the Spaniards’ insatiable greed and ambition and their desire for riches and for gold and their desire to improve their position in disproportion to their worth, and because the Indians were so humble, patient, and easily subdued; because the Spaniards did not deign to treat them even as they would treat beasts (would that they had treated them as beasts instead of as dung in the public square) because of this, hundreds of thousands died without pity and without faith or holy sacrament. (77)

The transformation of a lofty endeavor into a base, abusive deed is thus denounced. The play presents the catastrophic consequences of the conquest even after five centuries: “Intolerance, greed, and self-centredness create an

atmosphere of catastrophe [...]. With its implications of continuity, *Terra Incognita* seems to suggest that terror will pervade into the future” (Vangöli 68). A review of the 1997 performance clearly states the contrast between Columbus, “the voice of big business,” and de las Casas, “the voice of conscience” (Frank 98). De las Casas was determined to report to the authorities in Spain the need for a system of interaction and exchange that considered the souls of the inhabitants of the Indies. His demands provoked debates within the Church and in the political realm but, as a result of his defense, several laws were passed in 1542 to limit the abuses of the Spanish *encomenderos* in the Americas.

The wondrous, fascinating descriptions in Columbus’ account underline the character of the inhabitants: “Crean Vuestras Altezas que en el mundo todo no puede haber mejor gente ni más mansa [...] Todos de muy singularísimo trato, amorosos y habla dulce” (13). Fifty years after Columbus’ diaries were written, de las Casas carefully reads and annotates the diaries: “The most valuable transcription of the Diary of Christopher Columbus’ First Voyage to America is the one realized by Bartolomé de Las Casas. And yet the fidelity of that transcription is a very controversial question” (Ruhstaller 615). The diaries we have received through de las Casas is not a literal copy, but a summary, as he details in the introduction: “Este es el primer viaje y las derrotas y camino que hizo el Almirante don Cristóbal Colón quando descubrió las Indias, puesto sumariamente” (Ruhstaller 616). However, we should also note de Las Casas only has access not to the original but to a copy, which has been manipulated and changed. The reasons for these changes may be due to errors of the copyists and also to the instructions issued by Queen Isabel for political reasons.<sup>3</sup> De las Casas’ comments and impressions will be expanded in his *Historia de las Indias*, where he argues, as has been mentioned in the preceding paragraph, for the defense of the natives and presents his moral scorn for the violent, repressive attitudes of the Spanish towards the original inhabitants in the American territory. Hence the account of the journey, written by Columbus in his diaries, is received fifty years later, with some changes and suppressions, by de Las Casas, who would build on his own annotations in a new text describing the historical development of the Indies in the first few decades of the presence of Spain in the discovered territory:

¿Para qué añadiría Las Casas estas apostillas a su transcripción del *Diario* colombino? La respuesta a esta pregunta la obtendremos comparando el *Diario* con la obra *Historia de las Indias de Las Casas*. Esta comparación nos muestra inequívocamente cómo las apostillas

constituyen el punto de partida para la posterior reelaboración de la materia del descubrimiento de América en forma de la extensa *Historia*. Las Casas apuntaría durante una lectura posterior estos comentarios en el margen de su copia para marcar pasajes para él claves, que pensaba desarrollar más tarde. Así, muchas veces corresponde a una simple apostilla en el *Diario* un largo pasaje en la *Historia de las Indias*. (Ruhstaller 617)

The vicissitudes of these two inaugural texts together with the intervention of de Las Casas in the version of the diaries that we have received complicate the notion of authorship and add layers to the written account, superimposing the transcription and edition of the story to its original writing.

The palimpsest in *Terra Incognita* is further entangled by the characters who speak those texts from the past: both are deranged, marginal characters whose absurd and bizarre actions undermine their speech. The pronouncement of these speeches, inscribed in a play that was commissioned to commemorate the 1492 discovery, presents a contradictory, controversial reading of that encounter. The three characters who in 1992 return from America to Palos de la Frontera are faced with the voices of the Spanish colonial actors in the bodies of two madmen who end up violently throwing them out of the cafe. In the last scene of the play, Rob, one of the three tourists, wonders in anguish about the end of the world and is then dragged out of the cafe by his sister as he desperately cries “Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” (81) in response to Steve’s gruesome account of the painful torture and death of the Indians at the hands of the Spaniards. In this scene, “Rob’s statement describes the current state of the world as apocalyptic, indicating the extinction of life with a particular emphasis on the extinction of human compassion and tolerance for difference” (Vangölü 65). The young tourists escape while *saetas*, popular songs about the Passion of Christ, are heard in the distance; their journey of discovery is doomed to failure. The original idea of wonder is transformed in the play into a nightmare with the optical effect of a *mise-en-abyme*. We see through the eyes of those who first landed in the new territory, yet this vision, which gives us access to the unknown, simultaneously distances us from the real referent. The endless manipulation of that first text in the hands of other tellers is also what makes it impossible to grasp and come to terms with the original. The accounts and descriptions of the territory by the fifteenth-century Spanish discoverers and settlers mediate and condition any later discovery. Can we truly know the land or does the *Terra* remain *incognita*?



### Refuge in the present tense: Hybridity in *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*

In 1994, the decades-long confrontation between Cuba and the United States experienced a traumatic episode wherein thousands of children, women, and men left the island to look for a fresh start away from political restraint. This exodus, the Cuban Raft Crisis, did not end until two years later with the “wet feet, dry feet” policy.<sup>4</sup> Images, videos, and stories about the *balseros*’ perilous transit in makeshift rafts flooded the news and occupied the front pages of the media, allowing for a variety of perspectives. As is often the case in this kind of coverage, the journalistic approach ranged from yellow, tendentious stories to more objective comments that tried to provide analysis based on political or economic arguments. Either way, in different proportions, the explanations would erase or manipulate the individual and somehow blur or dehumanize the experience of the journey, particularly as the crisis went on and the impact of the stories decreased.

Fornes’ response was *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, dedicated to those who had put their lives in peril. The power of art to convey meaning in an eerie, unique way is triggered here by hybridity, the combination of strategies deriving from very distant spheres, such as the objective focus of journalism and the poetic, stylized, abstract *mise-en-scène*. In fact, post-dramatic theatre is a privileged platform on which to investigate how art shapes and structures all that we recognize and feel:

ways of seeing, feeling, thinking, ‘ways of meaning’ [...] articulated only in and by art—so much so that we would have to admit that the real of our experiential worlds is to a large extent created by art in the first place. One only has to remember that aesthetic articulations in general [...] invent perceptive images and differentiated worlds of affects or feelings that did not exist in this way before or outside of their artistic representations in text, sound, image or scene. (Lehmann 37)

Hybridity, the mixing of techniques and the conflation of realms—the objective and the subjective, the impersonal and the poetic, the instructional and the artistic stylization of the performance space—lies at the heart of this play, which is about crossing, literally crossing the Caribbean Sea and metaphorically crossing genres and styles. The instructions for building a raft or distilling water at sea are examples of objectivity, whereas the stage design is inspired by a subjective artistic and poetic vision. Hybrid media, languages, and artistic modes capture the anguish of the crossing witnessed on stage.

The first performance took place in Miami in 1997, with a bilingual version titled *Balseros/Rafters* (Cummings, *Maria* 150). It was triggered

by conversations with twenty-six Cubans, whose names are all listed in the published text (84). The highly stylized, sober treatment of the journey and the accounts of the *balseros* that inspire the words of the characters reclaim their dignity and provide authenticity. Bilingualism, an ever-present feature in Latinx writing, is used for the sake of truthfulness and reality. Both the published play and the performance are bilingual; in the premiere, the Spanish text was projected on a screen. The bilingual, and bicultural, experience seems an obvious, natural choice that also bridges the distance and resounds with immediacy since it stresses the present tense, the voyage itself, the transit on board from one land to another.

Furthermore, bilingualism reproduces the voice of the playwright, whose life experience was marked by the straddling of two cultures. Fornes has “the modesty of a writer for whom English is a learned language” (Marranca 49) and her writing stems from this particular position and perspective: “Although the language in which she became a writer was English, not Spanish [. . .] she is unmistakably a writer of bicultural inspiration: one very American way of being a writer” (Sontag 43). The combination of two languages is truthful to the experience of the *balseros* and to the experience of Maria Irene Fornes as an immigrant. At the same time, it reinforces the transit, the “presentness” of the escape, as a process that takes place in the sea, in the fluidity of the water, in contrast to the solid, compact territory they are trying to reach.

Another instance of hybridity is the audiovisual material used on the stage; a combination of media such as stop-and-go film frames and images were projected to underscore the feeling of the *balseros* out at sea, sometimes changing the perspective as if corresponding to different positions on the raft and suggesting the continuous movement of the waves. Some of those images included just the sea and the sky, a storm, or oars, so that the audience could participate in the experience through different simultaneous channels. The back and side walls of the stage were covered with a scrim for the different projections and on the corners front and back there were “*giant papier-mâché waves that resemble Japanese engravings in style*” (85). This apparently dissonant mixture of technology and traditional art is a reflection of the paradoxical effect of media on performance. Electronic images function as a form of relief in a theater where mimetic representation is not its most fundamental aspect. The tension of accommodating the representational character inherent to images and words projected on stage stretches the notion of theatre:

Theatre is first of all anthropological, the name of a *behaviour* (playing, showing oneself, playing roles, gathering, spectating as a virtual

or real form of participation, secondly it is a *situation*, and only then, last of all, is it *representation*. Media images are—in the first and in the last place—nothing but representation) [. . .] the body in theater is a signifier (not the object) of desire. The electronic image, by contrast, is pure foreground. It evokes a fulfilled, superficially fulfilled kind of seeing. (Lehmann 71)

In this play we also find the appropriation of different texts: the real stories of Cubans that inspired the lyrics and the instructions for building a raft—the “manual” in the title—and distilling sea water. As if to stress the instructional quality of the manual, the text explains the onomatopoeic term *bin-ban* (95) and different parts of the raft are shown on film while a *balseiro* “uses a pointer to indicate the figures as they appear on the screen” (97).

Subjectivity and the poetic are evident in a very simple stage design that consists of two platforms. The upper stage oscillates at different rhythms to represent the changing conditions of the ocean and the movements of the raft. It has an opening in the middle for the keel and several oars that can only be seen when raised; the number of oars corresponds to the number of *balseiros* except for one, thereby symbolically representing the character who dies in the crossing.

The characters are identified by numbers or letters instead of names, their age is expressed in relation to the rest, and their specific features are connected to their skills, personal traits, or family situation in a style resembling the classified ad section of a newspaper: “Capable, well built, experienced in rafts and sailing” (85). This impersonal characterization presents them not as isolated characters but in connection to each other, as a collective, as members of a community, a Brechtian group protagonist. The presence of a chorus underscores the communal emphasis of the play. There is a sole exception, *Balseiro 2*, Horacio, who is given a name only after he has died from drinking sea water: “You thought water is water and it’ll quench your thirst. Horacio... Horacio... That’s how you died” (131-32). *Balseiro 1*’s lament, “Of all those on the raft Horacio was my best friend. He was of all my best friend” (135-36), allows all of us—onstage and onlookers—to share a moment of mourning for the dead. In this poignant turning point, the simple act of the *balseiro* becoming known as Horacio bridges the distance from the abstract to the concrete.

Another element of style that draws us into the desperation of the experience at sea is the personification of the raft. An essential part of the process of distilling water is the burning of wood, which is only available in the very

structure of the raft. Dramatically blending the technical speech with the seriousness of the predicament, in a moment of extreme danger, at the limit of survival and strength, the raft is humanized as a mother, as a protecting womb:

Sometimes I cry when I sink my knife in the side of our generous mother who suffers her wounds without complaint. How long... How long will she be able to sustain us...? How long... How long before she expires her last breath, and collapses, and sinks—holding us, her children, in her wounded belly—to the bottom of the sea, wounded and weak by my own blade. Each time it dug into her to cut pieces for kindle from her side I thought I heard her weep. But no. She gave her life without complaint. To carry us to safety. Mother vessel... Mother vessel... If we're not rescued, before our vessel succumbs to the fierce attack of my own knife, she will sink to the depth torn to pieces still holding her brood. We will die, either of thirst or drowned. (123-24)

A pigeon symbolizes success or failure, furnishing the journey with an epic quality and introducing a second ominous brushstroke, a magical, eerie touch. According to the woman who presents the pigeon to the *balseros* as they prepare to depart: “When you reach land, let it go. They return. They know how... to come home. It'll tell me you're safe. If not, she won't return” (103). As a delicate reminder, the last scene closes with the pigeon landing near the characters “as lights slowly fade to black” (136). Both the personification of the raft as a spiritual mother and the symbolic function of the pigeon are stylistic, formal elements that appeal to our sensitivities and invite us to feel part of the experience of the rafters seeking refuge.

This hybrid blend of artistic styles and technical strategies is indeed Fornes' signature as a playwright and director. Cummings describes the “paradoxical quality of the scenic environments created for the plays. They are abstract and realistic at the same time, or [...] abysmal and concrete” (“The Poetry” 175). Returning to the notion that art can create new meanings, theatre can also show the audience how to see differently:

Mere realism would not bite deep enough into vision to dislodge the habitual vanities and blindnesses which lurk there... The enemy is a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not. Against that, the image presents the constant surprise of things seen for the first time. Sight is taken aback to a vernal stage before it learned how to scotomize the visual field, how to screen out the unimportant and not see, but scan. (Robinson 5)

Due to the bilingual nature of text and performance, the conflation of authentic textual sources with technical, instructional discourses, mixed media, and the abstract but simple scenic design, what we as spectators see is something new and genuine. Fornes forces us to experience the journey of the *balseros* from a fresh perspective, as if we were part of the group, sharing the crossing and finding refuge in the Florida shores.

**A promise fulfilled: Transcending time and space in *Letters from Cuba***

In *Letters from Cuba*, Fornes resorts to the personal correspondence she maintained for decades with her brother Rafael (Cummings, *Maria* 165). She explores the possibility of fusing time and space through simultaneity. The letters not only give the narrative its impetus but also acquire a highly theatrical nature themselves since they are read on stage. The action of the play deals with the central character, Fran, who has left Cuba, and takes place in the New York apartment she shares with two US roommates. Her interaction with these characters in the city and the letters from her beloved brother Luis in Cuba are the two pillars on which the dramatic text and the theatrical experience are configured. The tone and style reflect the commonplace, which situates the experience of migration on a personal level; the letters abound in comments about simple things and everyday concerns such as the hot weather or the *siesta*, combined with deep reflections about love and friendship. The writing of these texts invites the recipient into the most basic, intimate, and familiar reality; while the other may not be present, letters can act as a bridge by which to share quotidian worries and desires.

Letters are part of “personal theatre,” a mode that fits some of the most specific forms of female communication on the stage. Personal dialogue is “built on mutuality and intersubjectivity, eliminating any sense of formal distance or representation” because it “is not removed from life, so it operates not by mimesis but by enactment” (Case 47). Indeed, letters correspond to a less formal style, without the hierarchical divisions and limitations imposed by a traditional form of playwriting and theater practice. This is not the first play in which Fornes used letters or personal diaries as dramatic texts: “she is strongly drawn to the preliterate: to the authority of documents, of found materials such as letters of her great-grandfather’s cousin that inspired *The Widow*” (Sontag 44). The letters set the motion of the play and they are the glue and the access to a life together even in the distance. By sharing the routine as well as the extraordinary changes one experiments in the course of

life, the experience of the correspondents is enriched; they are incorporated into the other's reality through the textual account.

These letters crossing from the Caribbean to the Atlantic shore become powerful, tangible links for two lives physically distant but emotionally together. They are written by Luis, who reads most of them aloud while he is writing. We never hear Fran's responses, so the main vision is that of the non-migrant; we keep the letters sent to us, not the ones we send. There are several references to his sister as the correspondent and to the varying frequency of letters: "Last time you wrote was in August" (22). They include various topics: the weather: "It is 8 A.M., and already the heat is intense" (14); significant family events: "Enrique Ferrara was born December 20th" (13); even poetic reflections on lofty topics such as love (22).

The letters, translated into theatrical language, magically unite sender and recipient, as in Scene 7, when the physical letter is dropped by Luis, Fran catches it on stage, and they read it at the same time. As a result of the breaking of linear chronology and the juxtaposing of letters that refer to very distant events, the rules of chronological time collapse. Together with the scenic design, the lack of temporal and spatial limits infuses the vision of migrations with delicacy, softness, and a magical quality that helps overcome the pain of being apart.

The set allows for simultaneous action by placing Luis' Cuban home on the rooftop of Fran's New York apartment, center stage: "*The dominant part of the set is an apartment in New York [...] Above the apartment is "Cuba." Cuba is a rooftop represented by a two-foot high wall extending across the stage above the apartment [...] It is also possible to cross over the wall and walk onto the ceiling over the alcove in the New York apartment*" (9). Given that both locations share the same space, there is no need for set changes in the performance. This strategy allows for fluidity, constant communication, and movement from one space to the other in front of the audience. The design underlines a poetic notion of space that characterizes Fornes' work as a playwright and director. The staging literally bridges the distance between the two worlds simultaneously present throughout the performance. In fact, it allows for moments of real contact between Fran and Luis as when they dance together or embrace in the final scene (30, 34), a representation of a promise fulfilled.

The play contains many references to art. For instance, the three characters sharing a New York apartment are all artists. In a play where art plays

such a fundamental role, Fran disseminates the idea of the artistic in everyday life and links art to a spiritual ethos. It may well be this belief of “the role that beauty plays in the political, redemptive, transformational power of art” (Kushner xxxiii) that Fornes is showing to her audience through the central character. For Fran, art cannot be separated from the religious, the supernatural. Telling an anecdote about a famous dancer, she establishes that link between art and magic:

Martha Graham said Ruth St. Denis was a deeply religious being. And she was a performer. Once, while dancing an East Indian dance, she dropped a rose. At first Martha thought it was an accident, but it was planned. Why did she decide to drop the rose ...? Martha was puzzled.

She learned that those moments in a dance can make it magic. (13-14) Fornes believes that “Art must inspire us. That is its function” (Wetzsteon 208) and her way of designing is connected with her previous training as a painter and her vision as an artist. In Cummings’ description of this last play, he highlights these artistic, poetic attributes:

*Letters from Cuba* is more a theater poem than a play. Typically, it is composed of brief, fragmentary scenes, twenty-one in all, many of them typical Fornes emotigraphs that invoke a meticulously composed stage image, imbue it with feeling, sustain for a minute or two, and then dissolve into the next crystalline moment of being. In performance, the piece lasts barely an hour. Her strategy is lyrical and not narrative. (*Maria* 166)

*Letters from Cuba* convincingly vindicates the power of art to transcend, to heal, to overcome the harshness of separation, the pain of leaving your home behind and settling in an alien place. Art is, for Fornes, linked to the spiritual and to magic and requires a specific sensitivity: “A true work of art is a magic thing. To comprehend magic we must be in a state of innocence, of credulity. If there is wisdom in the work it will come to us. But if we go after it, we become wary, watchful. We lose our ability to taste” (Fornes, “A Preface” 207). Art defies understanding and logic: “If art is to inspire us, we must not be too eager to understand. If we understand too readily, our understanding will, most likely, be meaningless. It will have no consequences. We must be patient with ourselves” (Fornes 208). In the same vein, García-Romero calls “supernatural interventions” a characteristic feature of the playwright’s production: “In her plays, Fornes often includes moments where her characters seamlessly traverse borders between the physical and spiritual realms” (8).

*Letters from Cuba* tells a story that has to do with geographical distance for relatives who have migrated and who use written messages as a bond beyond frontiers. Art, magic, and love are exemplified as the most potent healing agents to transcend migration, fighting forced separation and envisioning union through words, imagination, and love: “Nothing holds it together except for the feeling it expresses: a powerful yearning for love, for home and family, and for aesthetic beauty” (Cummings, *Maria* 166). In short, Fornes’ last recipe to transcend migration through simultaneity.

### **Chartering the discoveries: mapping out new territories across the Atlantic**

In the Age of Discovery, the explorations across the ocean rendered a mapping of new, virgin territories. These three plays explore new, added meanings of what being an American may imply at the turn of the millennium. Portions of America and Europe, of the New and the Old Worlds, of the Spanish-speaking island in the Caribbean or the Anglophone metropolis on the Atlantic shore, and of the crossing by water to a Florida beach, all these locations not only serve as signposts in a map of discoveries for the characters, but also provide the audience with new dimensions of meaning. Thus, what spectators face beyond the geographical metaphor is actually a cultural quest, a mission that involves individuals coming into contact with unfamiliar realities and different worldviews. Their transit and explorations across the ocean are not simply nautical voyages but cultural and linguistic journeys in search of identity. In the historical times of the discovery of America, in the passage from the medieval to the modern age, exploration was always linked to its visual representation and to the rendering into image of the world encountered. Maps included a description of the territory and the sea with varying conventions according to perspective, an image that is, above all, an interpretation; the experience of the territory is mediated by the ability of the cartographer and by the conventions of the time. The telling of the story and the drawing of the map are both operations that imply a distancing from reality and, to some extent, embody a contradiction; they are useful registers of the experience, but by becoming fixed as text or image, they make it impossible for the reader and spectator to enjoy the original experience, to view with fresh eyes.

*Terra Incognita* uses the palimpsest to trigger the exploration of meaning across the Atlantic and as a metaphor for building knowledge on the already



written — and forgotten — text. The play makes explicit references to cartography, such as Erathosthenes, who made the first, and surprisingly exact calculations of the dimensions of the world, and the German mapmaker who “engraved a map of the New World” (48). The words uttered by characters who, in the final stretch of the twentieth century, give voice to two protagonists of the discovery of the American territory, incorporated into the Spanish empire five centuries prior to the play, provoke a sense of inadequacy and distance that alienates the young Americans. Their inaugural texts are also the frontiers to experience. As critics on postcolonial narratives have clearly stated, “the text creates the reality of the Other in the guise of describing it” (Ashcroft 59). What Fornes proposes here, in direct contradiction to the process of postcolonial literatures, is that received history cannot be rewritten or tampered with (Ashcroft 34). It becomes impossible to find any connection or rootedness in Palos, although this is the land of their ancestors and the port of departure for Columbus’ voyage. The original wonder is transformed into an apocalyptic nightmare when the three Americans leave Palos, depressed and unable to understand or communicate with the two characters who recite Columbus’ and de Las Casas’ accounts, detailing the horrors of the conquest and the violence inflicted on the native Americans.

*Manual for a Desperate Crossing* is a hybrid text that concentrates on the present of the Cuban *balseros*. The sea journey functions as a trial with different stages that emphasize the insignificance of human lives in comparison to the extraordinary powers of nature. Although they finally arrive at the beach in Key West and find refuge, the play details the hardships of what has been an indeed a desperate crossing. The hardships are not limited to the rough weather and the storms at sea, but also include the disregard and neglect from sixty ships that pass by and never stop. The crisis that led to the dramatic exodus of thousands of Cubans in the 1990s and inspired this play mirrors the global context of forced migration for millions of people around the world. Fornes vigorously knocks on our conscience as we witness the devastating humanitarian tragedy of thousands of refugees wandering across the land, dying by the thousands at sea, secluded in camps, and incapable of crossing walls hastily built on formerly fluid frontiers.

The cartography of discovery in *Letters from Cuba* is not of a textual nature but a spiritual one and functions as a reminder of the curative, magical powers of art. It redeems, opens up, and fuses time and space in a reality governed by sentiment. The heart of this play transcends the textual quality of letters by using them as a bridge that allows for the intertwining of

the everyday lives of two siblings, separated by the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, miraculously unifying them over and above their different milieus. Early in her career, Fornes described the curative function of art in the following terms:

The play is there as a lesson, because I feel that art ultimately is a teacher. You may not look at Cezanne and say, “I know what I have to do.” But it gives you something, a charge of some understanding, some knowledge that you have in your heart. And if art doesn’t do that, I am not interested in it. (Savran 56)

Taking Brushwood’s concepts of paradise, refuge, and promise as a starting point, I have pinpointed Fornes’ means of exploration: palimpsest, hybridity, simultaneity. Those three instruments serve the purpose of rediscovering worlds that are somehow fixed in the plays like maps. In the revisions of the notions of America here explored, always triggered and facilitated by the Atlantic, Fornes points at different versions: in *Terra Incognita*, the impossibility of knowledge for the young Americans in search of their ancestors turns the pristine idea of discovering paradise into an apocalypse of incommunication and incomprehension; in *Manual for a Desperate Crossing*, the urgency of the present and the epic crossing result in refuge, despite painful losses; in *Letters from Cuba*, transcendence occurs through art and love, in a fulfilling and fulfilled promise. That the last of her plays is also a declaration of her love for the theatre, a testament of the spiritual in art, and a statement of her lasting, profound belief in the transformative, spiritual and revolutionary ability of art to transcend, could not be a better farewell to her life in the theatre.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Despite the contested use of the word, I have chosen discovery as the most appropriate term in line with the traditional Spanish historical account.

<sup>2</sup> As this part of the article is being rewritten, in March 2022, Ukraine has been invaded by Putin’s Russia and more than two million refugees have left the country in 15 days to find shelter in neighboring European countries, particularly Poland. Furthermore, two years have passed since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has affected the population worldwide and provoked a lock-down of frontiers not only between but also within countries, taking the idea of seclusion, separation, distance, and isolation to unprecedented levels of meaning.

<sup>3</sup> In his article about the annotations of de las Casas in the Diary, Ruhstaller (20-22) gives two examples of these possible reasons for the changes. In the case of errors by the copyist, in a section where the text refers to the astrological position of the planets, the annotated comment says “Por aquí parece qu’el Almirante sabia algo de astrología, aunque estos planetas parece que no están bien puestos, por falta del

mal escrivano que los trasladó" (21). In a second comment, referring to a description of the geographical position, de las Casas writes "Esto es imposible" (21); this is an example of the possible political reasons behind the error in the text: Ruhstaller argues that precisely the real position could have been a breach in the Treaty of Alcobaças that divided the world into two separate spheres of influence for the Crowns of Castille and Portugal, and the falsification of the position could have been ordered by Queen Isabel (22).

<sup>4</sup>It was a new interpretation of immigration laws during the Presidency of Clinton in 1996. It meant that those Cubans caught on water would be sent back home whereas those who reached the shore, and thereby had their feet "dry" would be accepted and could claim citizenship in the US.

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Grupo Makuyeika Colectivo Teatral (de México) lleva a cabo la puesta en escena *Andares* en Virginia Tech. 12 de octubre del 2022. Director: Héctor Flores Komatsu. Fotógrafo: Lucas Kane.