



Chapter Three
The Mother of the Tropic:
Rafaela and Magical/Real Metamorphoses

Rafaela Cortes spent the morning barefoot, sweeping both dead and living things from over and under beds ...As for the scorpion, it was always dead, but the snake was always alive. On some days, it seemed to twirl before her broom communicating a kind of dance that seemed to send a visceral massage up the broom to her fingertips. There was no explanation for any of it.

(Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 1997: 3)

... this morning, sweeping the house as usual of its entourage of insects and animals, [Rafaela] remembered feeling her body twist as the snake curled first to the right, then to the left.

(Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 1997: 63)

But Rafaela was only concerned about one tree in particular. It was a rather sorry tree, yellowing perhaps from lack of some nutrient or another, but for some reason, she had been watching it every day. It was the only citrus in the garden that had a fruit on it. . . The tree was a sorry one, and so was the orange. Rafaela knew it was an orange that should not have been. It was much too early . . . this aberrant orange--not to be picked, not expected, and probably not very sweet.

(Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange*, 1997: 11)

I. Literary Review

Current criticism of Rafaela focuses on her role as mother and symbol of Mexican motherland based on her relation to Aztlán, the Chicano homeland, and her metamorphosis into the snake, which is a symbol of the guardian angel of the Aztec. Rafaela is thus defined as the representation of Aztec nativism. Hisao-ching Li (2004) investigates the maternity narrative in *Tropic of Orange* as evinced in the role of Rafaela. The characterization and the incidents of Rafaela, the only mother figure in the novel, constitute the maternity narrative of *Tropic of Orange*. Arguing that the motherhood of Rafaela as both the biological and the imaginary motherland, Li attempts to explore the politics of maternity narrative in relation to nationalism in a transnational arena. Her analysis of the maternity narrative of the novel concentrates on Rafaela's incarnation of the reinvention of the Aztec myth. Li therefore attempts to demonstrate how the maternity narrative of *Tropic of Orange* sheds a light on the politics and poetics of transnationality.

The elevation of Rafaela as a mother figure to her motherland, Mexico, is achieved in the narrative through the interweaving of Rafaela's personal experiences and Mexican colonial history. The fertility shared by Mexican motherland and Rafaela's mother figure suggests the symbolic connection between Rafaela and her motherland. The image of the serpent, which Rafaela is transformed into toward the end of the novel, affirms Rafaela's inextricable relation with Aztec myth, in which a serpent stands for the Aztec deity of Quetzalcoatl. Li asserts that a discursive solution of maternity narrative is made in the novel by the marriage and reunion of a Mesoamerican mother, Rafaela, an Asian father, Bobby, and their mixedblood son, Sol.

Julie Sze in "Not by Politics Alone": Gender and Environmental Justice in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*" takes the novel as "a case study in first, how to 'read' environmental justice perspectives on immigration and labor, and second, garbage and consumption within the contemporary environmental justice movement, as well as within

historical exploitation of nature and peoples” (2000: 29). By environmental justice, Sze means a movement emerged in the 1980s in the United States, which “challenges the mainstream definition of environment and nature based on a wilderness/preservationist frame in foregrounding race and labor in its definition” (2000: 29). Rather than focusing on the preservation of wilderness and endangered species, the main concern of environmental justice is public health and human pollution, particularly affecting communities of color. In other words, environmental justice posits that people, especially *racialized communities*, and *urban spaces* are at the center of what constitutes environment and nature. Sze asserts that it is *Tropic of Orange*’s emphasis on labor and transportation that makes it as an environmental justice text (2000: 37). Focusing on the two female characters, Rafaela Cortes, a Mexican American service worker, and Emi Sakai, a Japanese American television producer, Sze argues that both characters can be read together through the formation as women as color, as important players in the new global economy (2000: 36). *Tropic of Orange*’s heavy attention paid to *work*, argues Sze, resonates with the definition of “environment” in environmental justice as the spaces in which *people live, work, and play*. In this sense, Sze asserts that Yamashita redefines what shapes Los Angeles is labor (related to race and class) and transportation, and this redefinition of the city of L.A. is opposed to be a traditional ideology of L.A. as a “natural” and utopic escape from the problems of urbanization and humanity that plague the older cities of the eastern and midwestern United States (2000: 35-6). Dwelling on this redefinition of Los Angeles, Sze affirms that *Tropic of Orange*’s “emphasis on labor and transportation recalls the environmental justice movement’s centering of people and their labor as central to the narrative of nature and, in particular, the centrality of female immigrant labor and women’s activism for occupational and environmental justice to the narrative of Los Angeles” (2000: 35).

Shi-wen Liao (2004) in her discussion about *Tropic of Orange* deals little with Rafaela

from the perspective of Christianity. Liao points out that Rafaela as a name is a homonym of Raphael, the message-angel in the Bible. She posits that the allusion to angel justifies Rafaela's border-crossing along the U.S.-Mexican border based on her role of a messenger. I argue that Rafaela should be read along with Arcangle, who's not only an angel in the biblical sense, but also one for the City of Angels. With the transgression of border by Bobby, Gabriel, and Rafaela, Liao claims that they are able to mix the culture of Los Angeles with that of Mexico, presenting a Thirdspace, where border of ethnicity, nation, and race are dissolved and integrated (2004: 60).

As aforementioned, the current discussions of Rafaela seem to center on the maternal narrative as presented through Rafaela's mother figure; the implications of environmental justice in the context of North-South imbalance; and the issue of border-crossing in a global context, in which the border of race and nation are integrated and dissolved through Rafaela's transgression of the U.S.-Mexican border. Rafaela is considered as the metaphoric mother of Mexico based on her relations with the Aztec symbols. In the following, I will discuss the mother figure of Rafaela from the location of the house in Mazatlán, where Rafaela works as a housekeeper; her connections with the snake imagery; and her final metamorphosis to the snake. It is my argument that more than being the biological mother of Sol and the symbolic mother of Aztec, Rafaela also serves as the mother figure of the Tropic of Orange, the magical/real spaces of metamorphosis, where the boundaries between the North and the South are mobilized and challenged. As a result, her metamorphosis into the snake should be taken as a counterpart to Arcangel's to El Gran Mojado. While both are representatives of Mexican nativism, they are manifestations of the creation of Sojan Thirdspaces through metamorphosis.

II. Rafaela and Metamorphosis

Yamashita's treatment of Rafaela's metamorphosis to the serpent receives little attention in current criticisms of *Tropic of Orange*. Nevertheless, Rafaela's metamorphosis is of significance in many ways. More than conforming to the tradition of shape-shifting, Yamashita's employment of metamorphosis in the context of alternative geography exhibits the characteristics of mutability and multiplicity. My reading therefore differs from Li's reading of the maternal narrative that is tied to Aztec nativism.

Focusing on the implication of the tradition of metamorphosis, I argue that Rafaela's metamorphosis exhibits an alternative mother figure. While embodying the Aztec spirit, particularly evinced through her metamorphosis into the snake, Rafaela is the only person who witnesses the birth (happening) of the Tropic of Orange and, along with Arcangle, takes part with the geographical metamorphosis of the Americas, especially in the city of L.A. In other words, Rafaela's mother figure is not confined to Aztec symbolism, but also testifies to a re-invention of the archaic Aztec myth that challenges present controversy over the U.S.-Mexican border. In the following, I will begin by way of a study of the literary tradition of metamorphosis.

III. Review of Metamorphosis in Literature

Before delving into Rafaela's metamorphosis to the serpent, a brief review of metamorphosis in literature and of the metamorphic process would help understand the characteristic of mutability as embedded in the tradition of metamorphosis.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is widely considered as the originator and cornerstone of the tradition of metamorphosis in Western literary history. Sarah Annes Brown, in her exploration of the significance and influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on later author, points out that each tale in *Metamorphoses* "contains a transformation of some kind, whether a god assumes a disguise in order to seduce a beautiful nymph, or a mortal turns into some plant or

animal, perhaps as a punishment for wrongdoing, perhaps as a means of escape from a still more dreadful mate” (1999: 1). Besides, Brown maintains that metamorphosis is not limited in physical transformations, but concerned with a *metamorphic process*, “slipping out of one genre or mood into another” (1999: 2). Ovid’s influence on English literature is most obviously apparent in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance. At that time, direct retellings of his work flourished and allusions to his poems became a pervasive literary presence (1999: 2).

Due to the importance of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Brown lists literary productions that are either influenced or inspired by Ovid, such as Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, Andrew Marvell’s poem, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and numerous modern works by Eliot, Joyce, H.D., and most conspicuously, Woolf’s *Orlando*. Marina Warner in the epilogue of her book, *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self* mentions contemporary fiction which successfully deals with the metamorphic and supernatural genre: Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Paradise*.⁸

According to Warner, it is at the end of the fifteenth century when Europeans for the first time came across the metamorphic beliefs of pagans. At that time, the vision of metamorphosis was mediated through Ovid, and through Ovid’s medieval interpreters, including Dante (2002: 17). Various forms of metamorphosis led to divergent interpretations and readings of transformation in literature. Current discussions of metamorphosis center around issues of gender, migrancy, self-other relation, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial struggle. Nanct Gray Diaz in *The Radical Self: Metamorphosis to Animal*

⁸ A more up-to-dated writer that Warner names is the French writer, Marie Darieussecq. Her first book *Truismes*, translated into English as *Pig Tales*, is about a women who turns into a pig and this story is a Swiftian fable of moral and political degradation, dealing with the theme of bestial transmutation (2002: 209).

Form in Modern Latin American Narrative investigates the changes of the radical essence of the self involved in the metamorphosis to animal form. Díaz highlights:

the four aspects of the self in transformation: the body, which is the self concretized, its sign; perception, the self's mode of coming to know, reflect, and judge; will, which is motivation, power and its limits, and action; and finally, the self's own mode of living time, its memory, presence, and projection toward the future. (Díaz, 1988: 100)

While Diaz accents the aspect of the self in transformation, I will discuss the features of Ovidan metamorphosis in the following.

IV. Features of Metamorphosis

a. The Point of Departure: at Transitional Spaces/Crises

The emergence of metamorphosis usually occurs at the moment of crisis. That is to say, metamorphosis happens at a transitional space. Warner scrutinizes the process of metamorphosis based on her observation of the tradition originated from Ovid--the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Romanticism, and the Modernist, to contemporary works. According to Warner, metamorphosis usually happens at a transitional or confluent space. Here, the transitional space refers to, whether temporal, geographical, or mental, those which "are crossroads, cross-culture zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communication between culture" (2002: 17). Therefore, figures experiencing the metamorphosis are often "situated at turning points in culture and at moments of clash and conflict between one intellectual hegemony and another" (2002: 17). To conclude, Warner argues that it is characteristic of metamorphic writing to appear in transitional places and at

the confluence of traditions and civilizations” (2002: 17).

b. The Process of Metamorphosis

Metamorphoses arise in response to crisis at transitional space and end in integration. Mutability that characterizes metamorphosis narrative enables the intrusion and conflicts of “dichotomy, not as a conflict of opposites but rather by means of metamorphosis, which is transformation and combining” (Díaz, 1988: 102). In other words, mutability is innate to metamorphosis narrative and invites the encountering of dichotomy. Through transformation and combination, the intrusions and conflicts of dichotomy are dissolved and integrated at the end. Mutability, as catalytic agent of metamorphosis, informs its emergence and transforms the opposition into harmony.

Due to the significance of mutability, it is imperative for me to justify my choice of the term--mutability. Three reasons validate my choice of “mutability” in relation to the discussion of metamorphosis. First, unlike other descriptions with judgmental intentions, the use of “mutability” is neutral, which enables us to hold an impartial position, while engaging in the meaning production process of a metamorphic narrative. Second, “mutability” captures the dynamic quality of metamorphosis. The third reason is that in its implication of both startling transformations and of the illusoriness of reality, the concept of mutability permits the examination of metamorphosis in term of myth and magic” (Díaz, 1988: 99). Díaz’s observation of the characteristic of mutability can be applied to the exploration of Rafaela’s metamorphosis on ground of its inextricable relation to the Aztec legend concerning the deity in the symbolism of a serpent.

In addition to Warner’s analysis of the transitional feature as presented in metamorphosis, Díaz foregrounds mutability as the major feature of metamorphosis and points out the unstable dynamic and polyphonic nature of metamorphosis narratives:

Metamorphosis is a phenomenon to be examined within another phenomenon, the narrative. The novel or story creates its own world in words, in rhetorical devices, in narrated events, and in symbols.

Metamorphosis as literary event transcends plot, however, and informs all levels of meaning in the narrative . . . it is integral to the *polyphonic structure of the narrative*. It is involved in value systems and also may be relevant to anthropological, ethical, social, and psychological, as well as existential, concerns. As it happens, a narrative world in which a metamorphosis can take place is usually highly *unstable and dynamic*, a world characterized by *unpredictable and unsettling mutability*.

(Diáz, 1988: 4; *my emphasis*)

I argue that *Tropic of Orange*, as a whole, can be read in light of Diáz's discussion of metamorphosis narratives. The novel creates its own world in fictive events, such as the substitution of Tropic of Cancer by Tropic of Orange, whose northward movement causes both geographical metamorphosis and disorder to the city of L.A. Despite the seeming turbulence caused by the mutability in metamorphosis narrative, the vitality and dynamic quality embedded in its trait of mutability are released through metamorphosis as well. Symbols such as the death of crab for the death Tropic of Cancer, the orange for the magical, mobile Tropic of Orange, Arcangel as the personification of ancient Aztec culture, and the serpent that Rafaela transforms into as the revival of Aztec spirit.

Diáz's definition of mutability comes from one of the original characterizations of Baroque art by Heinrich Wölfflin: "the apprehension of the world as a shifting semblance" (1988: 4). Diáz appropriates this definition to the reading of literature, and explains that "apprehension" is related to the organizing vision of the reader; "shifting" refers to the types of rhetorical devices and events in a narrative that represents the changes in forms in

unexpected and irrational ways; “semblance” is about that other order of Baroque ethos, which concerns the interplay of illusion and reality (Díaz, 1988: 4).

Drawing on the inextricable relation between the neo-Baroque tendencies and the recourse to mutability and metamorphosis, Díaz makes a further explanation of the construction of a mutability narrative:

for the creation of a mutable narrative world depends both on the continual narration of episodes of transformation and on stylistic devices that convey the sense of *a world unstable and in process*. Furthermore, the Baroque obsession with the exchange between illusion and reality comes into being through such rhetorical devices as *paradox*, *ambiguity*, and *hyperbole* and through the creation of elaborate image systems that operate in patterns of repetition and reflection .

(Díaz, 1988: 12. *my emphasis*)

c. Metamorphosis as Disruption of Border

This transitional quality induces the happening of metamorphosis signifies an attempt of disrupting and dissolving the border. The transgression of border through metamorphosis is demonstrated not only the outward bodily transformation such as human/animal, man/woman, but also the integration, confluence of civilization and race embedded in metamorphosis. Díaz, by quoting David Algranoich, discusses several recursive themes in Cortázar’s stories, and reiterates her conception of mutability as intrusion:

[metamorphosis is]...a contrast between the world of daily reality and another world which intrudes on the first. This intrusion implies the acceptance of the frailty of logic, of the other world as normal. The “order” of the real world is substituted by an inexplicable “other” order.

Second, the limits between human and animal are explored. The intuition exists that reality is a continuum that challenges the categories of occidental logic. Third, the idea of the double is actively explored. It not only duplicates but also frustrates and inverts the action of the I. Fourth, the categories of space and time are distorted. Time, instead of being linear, is simultaneous or displaced, so that different planes can touch. Space, instead of being discrete, may become continuous, susceptible of being traversed or nullified by an intuition close to music. (Díaz, 1988: 72-73)

Metamorphosis not only presents a contrast between daily reality world and another world but arouses the intrusion of another world. This intrusion reveals the frailty of logic, and distorts the categories of space and time. The linearity of time is disrupted by admitting the simultaneity of times, allowing the contacts and confluence of different histories and civilizations while space encompasses, no more fragmentary memory, but a continuous presentation of history.

d. Metamorphosis as Integration/ Occurring as a Function of Myth

Rafaela's metamorphosis to the serpent in *Tropic of Orange* is congruent with Díaz's observation of the metamorphosis to animal forms. Both metamorphoses involve with mythic element and enables the integration (or simultaneous existence) of past and present, and confluence of Aztec and the hegemonic civilization. Díaz concludes her exploration of the metamorphosis, which is primarily based⁹ on myth and legend from India and Maya, to

⁹ The word "nagual" belongs to the Nahuatl language and it is the counterpart of "tonal." Nahuatl was the language spoken by the people of Tehotihuacan, the Toltecs, Aztecs and many other indigenous groups of the past and present in Mexico and even some regions of Central America. Together, tonal and nagual are the two sides of the duality always present in the vision of the world of many indigenous peoples of Mexico. To say it plainly, it is half of the reality in which we live and half of our own nature.

animal form in García's¹⁰ work by explicating how these metamorphosis and the subject of metamorphosis, with their participation in, and re-presentation of myths or legends, fashions a bodily space where integration of past, present, and future, and that of metaphysical, natural, and human realm is attained. She states,

. . . animals in Maya/Quiché mythology are both inferior beings and gods. By fully accomplishing the split between the nagual and the human self, *the character comes to participate in the truths of past, present, and future and to embody the metaphysical, natural, and human realms.* This second kind of metamorphosis is complete integration on all levels of reality, and it contributes to the task of collective regeneration.

(Diáz, 1988: 50; *my emphasis*)

While the mutability of metamorphosis initiates the process of metamorphosis, the process begins with a reaction to crisis at a transitional space, going through conflicts between oppositions, two worlds or orders, and ends in the combination and integration which provides a third form and an alternative. In the epilogue of Warner's work, she reminds readers of the sheer enjoyment that metamorphosis brings to readers. Besides, Warner pinpoints the unlimited possibility and alternatives that metamorphosis potentially encompasses: "It would be stupid to suggest stories invariably enlighten; but *stories do offer a way of imagining alternatives, mapping possibilities, exciting hope, warding of danger by*

(<http://www.toltecas.com/Shamanism.htm>.)

¹⁰ Diáz, in one chapter entitled "Metamorphosis as Integration: *Hombres de maíz*," studies the metamorphosis to animal form in Emilio F. García's work. Diáz claims that the interpretation of the meaning of metamorphosis to animal form is the key to an understanding of the metamorphosis of Nicho Auino, which is the climactic event of the story.

forestalling it, casting spells of order on the unknown ahead” (Warner, 2002: 212; *my emphasis*).

Diáz however distinguishes metamorphosis from magical realism. She finds that metamorphosis appears in works that precede the movement of magical realism. However, Diáz posits that both metamorphosis and magical realism, due to their intimacy with indigenous folklore and cultures, have more to offer us than their quaint, exotic, picturesque appearances for they “*to delve into and to reveal the modes of constructing and perceiving the world that belong to non-Western mentalities*” (Diáz, 1988: 102; *my emphasis*).

V. Metamorphosis and Identity

When delving into the relation between metamorphosis and identity, Caroline Walker Bynum (2001) suggests that “identity is what we find in these tales from Ovid, from Marie, from Angela Carter: the shape (or visible body) that carries story”(2001: 180). Bynum’s notions of shape and story is equal to body and narrative, which are commonly employed in contemporary theory. To avoid the implications of structures, essences, ontologies often carried by these terms, Bynum explicates her choice of simpler words “shape” and “story” (2001: 180). In Bynum’s definition, story means real change. “Story spreads out through time the behaviors or bodies--the shapes--a self has been or will be, each replacing the one before. Hence story has before and after, gain and loss. It goes somewhere . . . story has sequence” (2001: 180). As for shape, Bynum claims that shape is crucial to story for “it carries story; it makes story visible. . . Shape (or visible body) is in space what story is in time” and it “encapsulates graphically and simultaneously the sequence, the before and after, of a self ” (2001: 181). Bynum’s accentuation of the significance of shape again justifies

my focal attention to Rafaela's metamorphosis into the serpent, which is a bodily transformation, or in Bynum's words, a shape that carries story:

As the literary critic Leonard Barkan says, shape matters; it matters too much to be only allegory or symbol. Without it, there is no story, and hence no self. For myself is my story, known only in my shape, in the marks and visible behaviors I manifest – whether generic or personal. I am my skin and scars, my gender and pigment, my height and bearing, all forever changing.

(Bynum, 2001: 181)

Bynum's emphasis on shape and story reminds us of the importance of metamorphosis for it involves with not only an external and bodily change, but manifests an ever-changing and dynamic process of identification. Therefore, Rafaela's metamorphosis into the serpent, with its relation to the Aztec myth of serpent, is engraved with Aztec history and spirit. However, since metamorphosis is a process underway, Rafaela's metamorphosis exhibits a Mexican identity in process as well. In other words, based on Bynum's claim that the shape carries story, Rafaela's metamorphosis into the serpent can be treated as shape which carries both the stories of the past Aztec civilization and an ongoing, keep-transforming Mexican identity in the present.

When distinguishing metamorphosis from hybrid, Bynum suggests that "hybrid and metamorphosis are fundamentally different images and occur in different culture contexts. They express different rhetorical strategies and different ontological visions" (2001: 29). While the hybrid expresses a world of natures, essences, or substances, metamorphosis expresses a labile world of flux and transformation, encountered through story (2001: 30). Namely, compared to the hybrid, metamorphosis is a process. However, to some extent, the concept of metamorphosis and the hybrid does similar work for "each can be understood both

to destabilize and reveal the world” (2001: 30). On the one hand, they are revelations for both are ways of suggesting that the reality they image is what the world really is. On the other hand, both suggest that the world is disordered and fluid, with the horror and wonder of uncontrolled potency or violated boundaries (2001: 31). Nonetheless, Bynum asserts that hybrid and metamorphosis reveal or violate categories in different ways. According to her, while hybrid reveals a world of difference, a world that *is* and is multiple, metamorphosis reveals a world of stories, of things under way. She concludes: “Metamorphosis breaks down categories by breaching them; hybrid forces contradictory or incompatible categories to coexist and serve as commentary each on the other” (Bynum, 2001: 31). In the following, I will turn to textual analysis of the process of Rafaela’s bodily metamorphosis by highlighting the aspects of mutability, intrusion, disruption, and hybridization.

VI. Textual Analysis

In the following, I will demonstrate how Rafaela’s process of metamorphosis, which is related with her bodily transformation to a serpent, her intimate relation to the Tropic of Orange, and the spatial metamorphosis across the U.S.–Mexican borders, not only manifests the mutability of *Tropic of Orange*’s narrative but also rewrites the characteristics of mother figure. The mutability that characterizes Rafaela’s metamorphosis and her relation to other symbols of metamorphosis contributes to the reinvention of mother figure. Rafaela, as a mother figure, is not confined to the ancient Aztec civilization. Instead, Rafaela exhibits a new mother figure, who is more than an embodiment of Mexico motherland imprisoned and self-indulgent with the glorious past of Aztec civilization. Rafaela’s metamorphosis and relation to symbols of metamorphosis informs her the mutability, empowering her forces to disturb, displace, and thus challenge the injustice and inequality along of the U.S.-Mexican border.

Metamorphosis originates from crisis, causing disruptions and intrusion, and finally

ends in integration. Warner, when contemplating on the encountering of cultures and the transformations and turbulence it arouses, states that “the encounter with the Americas seems to me one of the most transformative experiences of history, and not only on the original people there, whose lives were utterly altered--and in so many ways shattered and destroyed” (2002: 19). Similarly, in *Tropic of Orange*, Rafaela’s northbound journey across the U.S.-Mexican border can be taken as another cultural encounter between the Americans and the Mexicans. This encountering launched by the northward travel of Arcangel, Rafaela, and Sol initiates and exerts transformative experiences on the United through their approach of the city of L.A.

VII. Metamorphosis and the Snake Imagery

Rafaela’s connections with the Aztec culture are implied early in the beginning scene in *Tropic of Orange* such as her career as housekeeper of Gabriel’s house in Mazatlán, her origin of Culiacán, and the snake which was always alive every time when Rafaela swept away various insects and animals from the house in the morning. Her connection with snake is evident: “...but the snake was always alive. On some days, it seemed to twirl before her broom communicating a kind of dance that seemed to send a visceral message up the broom to her fingertips. There was no explanation for any of it” (Yamashita, 1997: 3). The survival of the snake, which is a sacred imagery¹¹ of Aztec civilization, signifies the

¹¹ The following information is taken from <http://www.ancientspiral.com/dragon.htm>.

The most reverential of cultures towards snakes were the Aztecs of pre-Columbia. One of their principal gods was the Feathered Serpent, Quetzalcoatl. One of the most enigmatic and fascinating figures in ancient religion and mythology, Quetzalcoatl was most often portrayed as a green serpent with a feather-crested head, similar in many ways to the Chinese dragon. He came to represent water, rain, the wind, human sustenance, penitent, self-sacrifice, re-birth, the morning star of Venus and butterflies. Unlike most other Aztec deities, Quetzalcoatl was said to oppose all forms of sacrifice apart from self-bleeding. However, his brother Tezcatlipoca was jealous of the god's purity and goodness, and cast an evil spell to transform Quetzalcoatl into a pale-skinned, bearded human. Shortly afterward, Quetzalcoatl sacrificed himself in order to return again, with the bones from the Underworld which would be made into human beings. Quetzalcoatl taught his creation all he knew, and bestowed gifts of fire and maize. He could also heal the sick. Once satisfied, Quetzalcoatl was said to have

revival of Aztec spirit. In the morning, Rafaela chats with Rodriguez, an old brick-layer working for Gabriel's house, about the strange, curved wall. Again, the intimate connection between Rafaela and the imagery of serpent appears when Rafaela confusedly recalls what happened this morning when she "[was] sweeping the house as usual of its entourage of insects and animals, she remembered feeling her body twist as the snake curled first to the right, then to the left" (Yamashita, 1997: 63).

It is noteworthy that Rafaela's relation to the symbols of metamorphosis which are embedded with mutability and transitional elements, such the summer solstice: "If Rafaela had bothered to look at the calendar, she would have noticed that it was *Monday, June 22*. She might have also noticed the lunar signs in the corner of the calendar and the small prints that said *summer solstice*" (Yamashita, 1997: 13; *emphasis mine*). The summer solstice is a transitional time, in which the sun is just above the Tropic of Cancer. Coincidentally Gabriel's house where Rafaela works as housekeeper ". . . was marked exactly by a sign on the highway shoulder beyond the house: Tropic of Cancer. In Gabriel's mind the Tropic ran through his place like a good metaphor" (Yamashita, 1997: 5). Besides, Rafaela's is the first person who discovers the orange and the line embraced by it, which later transforms into the Tropic of Orange: "Just where its tiny bud had broken through the tree's branch, Rafaela noticed a line--finer than the thread of a spiderweb--pulled with delicate tautness. . . . But she always senses its presence . . . In fact, she sensed that it continued farther in both directions, east and west, east across the highway and west toward the ocean and beyond" (Yamashita, 1997: 12)

These transitional elements such as summer solstice and the emerging of Tropic of Orange add dynamic energies and suggest possibilities of further metamorphoses. Toward the end of the first chapter, a delicate relation between Sol, the son of Rafaela and Bobby, and

sailed into the West on a raft of serpents, with the promise that he would one day return.

Tropic of Orange is suggested. In one scene, Rafaela notices that Sol seems to trace “the path of a very thin but distinct shadow stretched in a perfectly straight line along the dirt and sand” and Rafaela discovers that the shadow comes from the sun, since the single orange is “the only possible and yet entirely impossible thing that could obstruct the intensity of the sun’s light at this hour, slicing the heavy atmosphere with cruel precision. Indeed the sun was a great ball of fire directly above the orange tree. It seemed even to point at the tree, at the strange line, at the orange itself” (Yamashita, 1997: 13).

At the moment, an interrelationship is established among Rafaela, Sol, and the Orange. I argue that in addition to being a biological mother of Sol, Rafaela serves metaphorically the mother figure to the Tropic of Orange. Her motherhood, instead of being nativistic, is one capable of integrating diverse civilizations and filled with possibilities of metamorphoses. Therefore, the interrelationships among Rafaela, Sol, and the Orange serves as prologue of the geographical metamorphosis of the Tropic of Cancer. The orange falls in the end and initiates a series of metamorphosis such as the Tropic of Cancer’s northbound migration, inducing the metamorphosis of the America’s geography and the shrinking of the city of L.A. The first chapter ends as following:

. . . from the corner of her [Rafaela’s] eye, she thought she saw the line’s razor shadow dip away, south. Rafaela felt a dizzy nausea. She did not realize that the orange had fallen irresistibly from a height of two meters, rolling in dusty turbulence down a small slope, under the barbed-wire fence, and just beyond the frontiers of Gabriel’s property to a neutral place between ownership and the highway. (Yamashita, 1997: 13)

The bus stops at Pemex station for its passengers to rest and have lunch. Rafaela, again, looks back anxiously for the black Jaguar with villains in it still follow them though they seem to be blocked by an invisible line hundred yards away. However, when they are ready

to go back to the bus, Rafaela finds Sol skipping aimlessly south towards those villains. “She ran after him, but Sol thought it was a chasing game and zigzagged happily around and around the trunk of a sweeping palo verde . The villain of the Jaguar watches for his chance to snatch the boy. Fortunately, Sol stops in his tracks, drawn by Arcangel’s performance of juggling the ears of corn, the orange, and various sizes of colored balls. Fascinated by the flying items from the old man’s hands, Sol runs back north: “But Rafaela had missed catching the boy in her frantic chase, skidding perilously south. The strong hand of the villain reached out and clutched her arm, covered her screams, pulled her away” (Yamashita, 1997: 186). The kidnapping of Rafaela is followed by Rafaela’s metamorphosis into the serpent when fighting with the villain:

He[the villain] jammed her into the leather cavern of the black Jaguar....spring upon her writhing body, he clawed her throat and pawed her breasts, tearing her soft skin. Her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent --- sinuous and suddenly powerful. She trashed at him with vicious fangs --- ripping his ears, gouging his neck, drawing blood. He screamed but returned snarling, pounced, eyes bloody with terror, claws and teeth, flashing knives, ripped into the armored scales of her tensile body. Her mouth gaped a torch of fire, scorching his black fur. Two tremendous beasts wailed and groaned, momentarily stunned by their transformations, yet poised of war. (Yamashita, 1997: 220)

Rafaela’s metamorphosis happens at moment of crisis in a transitional space, that is, the U.S.-Mexican border. The moment of crisis in a transitional space operates in both individual and communal domains. In the individual level, the crisis refers to the kidnap of Rafaela and her separation from Sol. In terms of the communal reading of Rafaela’s metamorphosis, since the serpent and the feline respectively are image of Mexico and the

United States, Rafaela's metamorphosis to the serpent is a response to the tension and conflict between the two countries. While the villain, who deals with global smuggling of organ transplant, is involved in and benefits from the system of global economy, Rafaela, being a Mexican immigrant laborer in the United States, is a victim, exploited by global economy. Hence, Rafaela's metamorphosis to the serpent epitomizes a reassertion and fight back of Aztec spirit concerning the economic evasion of the United States. The transitional space where Rafaela's metamorphosis takes place is shown through the emergence of Tropic of Orange and its incessant influence on the changing landscape.

The mutability that characterizes metamorphosis enables Rafaela to participate in the past and present by her metamorphosis into the serpent, an animal imagery which represents Aztec deity. The Aztecs consider themselves the chosen people of the sun and war god Huitzilopochtli. After coming upon an eagle perched on a cactus devouring a snake, a sign foretold in ancient tribal prophecy, the Aztecs founded Tenochtitlan, their capital, on an island in Lake Texcoco. When Rafaela and the villain have completed their transformations into the serpent and the feline and get ready for war, the narrative then inserts a record of battles in history, which starts with the sentence: "Battles passed as memories." The narrative depicts tragic history of human massacre and also gives attention to the massacre of nature in history:

But that was only the human massacre; what of the ravages thousands of birds once cultivated to garnish the trees of a plumed potentate, the bleeding silver treasure of Cerro Rico de Potosi, the exhausted gold of Ouro Preto, the scorched land that followed the sweet stuff called white gold and the crude stuff called black gold, and the coffee, cacao and bananas, and the human slavery that dug and slashed and pushed and jammed it all out and away, forever. (Yamashita, 1997: 221)

Sze, in her analysis of the environmental justice concern in *Tropic of Orange*, points out that this passage “explores the environmental cost of colonialism--the extraction of environmental resources, the maldistribution of land, the spread of disease that massacred the indigenous people--so aptly documented by colonial environmental history“ (2000: 39). Therefore, Rafaela’s metamorphosis, the climactic event of the novel, with mutability which empowers her participation in the truths of past and present, and her involvement in metaphysical, natural, and human realms, illustrates a complete integration on all levels of reality, and also contributes to the task of collective regeneration. The narrative’s description of the fight shows a possibility of regeneration through metamorphosis: As night fell, they [Rafaela and the villain] began their horrific dance with death, gutting and searing the tissue of their existence, *copulating in rage, destroying and creating at once*--the apocalyptic fulfillment of a prophecy--blood and semen commingling among shredded serpent and feline remains (Yamashita, 1997: 221. My emphasis). The fight in the form of metamorphosis implies a regeneration and rebirth of Mexico through the coexistence of “copulating in rage, destroying and creating at once . . . blood and semen commingling” (Yamashita, 1997: 221). At the moment of fight, Rafaela, being the embodiment of Aztec spirit in her metamorphosis into the serpent, attains a collective rebirth and regeneration.

a. Rafaela as Mother Figure to the Tropic of Orange

In addition to be the biological mother of Sol, Rafaela’s relation to the Tropic of Orange contributes to an alternative mother figure. I argue that a mother-child relation and intimacy is built between Rafaela and the Tropic of Orange through Sol. Being the first person who observes the growth of the orange, and senses the presence of the Tropic of Orange, Rafaela is a witness to the birth of the Tropic of Orange. It is in this sense that the relation between Rafaela and the Tropic of Orange is defined as mother-child organism: “as

time went on, she found herself watching the orange, wandering out to the tree everyday even in the rain, feeling great contentment in the transition of its small growing globe [the orange], first from green and then to its slow golden burnish (Yamashita, 1997: 12).

On her stay in Doña Maria's place to have a phone call with Gabriel, Rafaela overhears Hernando's (son of Doña Maria) conversation on the phone about the dealing of illegal organ transplant. Rafaela snatches a blue and white container, which has a baby heart in it, from the refrigerator and runs out of Doña Maria's house breathlessly. From the time on, Rafaela and Sol are involved in the smuggling of baby organs and this incident prefigures the villain's kidnapping Rafaela in order to get the baby heart back. Encircling Sol in her arm, Rafaela takes Sol to run all the way back to Gabriel's house. It is at this moment that the encountering of Rafaela and Arcangel takes place:

. . . an old man squatted against an old fig tree slept at the side of the road.

He was leaning into a large suitcase and snoring . . . A snake coiled itself like a cat at his side. It was a peaceful sleep. Rafaela stared at him for a moment and noticed that he seemed strangely tangled in the wisp of a thread. It was indeed the same thread, the same line that she had noticed before running tautly across Gabriel's property and through the only ripening orange in the grove . . . The strands wound about him gracefully, tenderly, like strands of silk hair. (Yamashita, 1997: 150)

The encountering of Arcangel, Rafaela, the Tropic of Orange (the thread), and the snake implies the union of the Aztec spirit. Besides, the gathering of these images of metamorphosis, such as Arcangel's role as shape-shifter, and the Tropic of Orange with its potency of geographical metamorphosis, endows Rafaela's mother figure and the snake as image of Aztec history with mobile and dynamic energies. It is also at this encountering moment of ancient (Arcangel and the snake image) and the metamorphosis forces (the Tropic

of Orange) that a Mexican identity has begun its transformation. Rafaela then decides to take the bus with Arcangel to the border. Following Arcangel up to the bus, Rafaela surprisingly recognizes the orange in the old man's suitcase, and again the mother-child intimacy between Rafaela and the Tropic of Orange is highlighted:

Rafaela knew the orange as she knew the face of her child. The strands of the line extended from two ends of the orange, reaching out of the suitcase, tangling about Arcangel and slipping across the bus, through the windows, and across the land. On the other side of the bus, the landscape was continually familiar to Rafaela, as if they were moving but not moving. To the left, Gabriel's land and the unfinished wall stretched and slid along, never leaving the bus to its northern destination, *like a child clinging to its mother's skirt.* *The Tropic of Orange*, she whispered to herself, tentatively touching the delicate strand protruding innocently from the suitcase. (Yamashita, 1997: 153. *my emphasis*)

Another scene that connotes Rafaela as a new epitome of mother figure and Mexico identity is when Arcangel, being the wrestler, El Gran Mojado, is seriously injured and dying in the ring, Rafaela, like a caring mother, feeds Arcangel with the pulp of the orange:

She's peeling the orange and feeding the pieces to the enmascarado. Like it's gonna help. Like she's a soccer mom at half-time. Like it's the last rites. Enmascarado chews and smiles. It's all over. Crowds rushing in. Picking him up. Taking him away with orange peels scattered on his chest, stink of orange on his lips . . . Gonna take him home. Home where mi casa es su casa. Bury him under an orange tree. Plant him at the very edge of the sun's shadow. Maybe grow another line right there. Mark the place. Tag it good. (Yamashita, 1997: 267)

Rafaela's caring of the dying Arcangel signifies more than an act of maternity. Rafaela's mother figure is a site of confluence and she can be taken as the successor of Arcangel, endowed with the responsibility of questing for a new Mexican identity. On the one hand, the death of Arcangel indicates that the nativism that he embodies is antiquated and thus cannot survive. On the other hand, to survive, Rafaela exemplifies a Mexican identity that embraces both the Aztec past and integrates with other races and civilizations such as her cross-ethnic marriage with Bobby and having a mixblood son, Sol.

b. Rafaela's awareness of the spatial metamorphosis in *Tropic of Orange*

In *Tropic of Orange*, Rafaela's relation to the spatial metamorphosis constitutes an alternative mother figure. Her sensitivity to and perception of the spatial metamorphosis connects her with the feature of mutability. Being the embodiment of Aztec spirit through her origin of Culiacán and relation to the snake, Rafaela's association with the spatial metamorphosis through her conjunction with the Tropic of Orange suggests a tradition opening to the dynamic and ever-changing forces that characterize the metamorphic process.

The spatial metamorphosis in *Tropic of Orange* is initiated by the orange's falling off on the day of summer solstice. When running after Sol into the shadows of the house, there is a sudden gust of tepid wind:

[Rafaela] saw the lines's razor shadow dip away, south. *Rafaela felt a dizzy nausea.* She did not realize that the orange had fallen irresistibly from a height of two meters, *rolling in dusty turbulence down a small slope*, under the barbed-wire fence, and just beyond the frontiers of Gabriel's property to a neutral place between ownership and the highway. (Yamashita, 1997: 13; emphasis mine)

Happening at the same moment, Rafaela's nausea and the orange's turbulent rolling down the slope is not a coincidence but an implication of the innate association and mental telepathy

between Rafaela and the Tropic of Orange. This incident also anticipates the following spatial metamorphosis throughout the narrative. In the next morning, Rafaela suddenly notices the unusual geographical transformation on her way home from Doña Maria's place. As usual, Rafaela looks for the landmarks when approaching the house: the orange tree, Rodriguez's brick work, and the new fence:

Perhaps it was the rain –*a thick wet lens through which she perceived this wet world*. She was not sure, but the fence was somehow curved, or maybe longer, or stretched. That was it. The fence stretched south in a funny way, like those *concave mirrors* in drug stores and 7-11s in the States . . . Rafaela looked through the starched lace curtains at a *hazy visage of the world* and remembered. The orange. That orange. It was not there.

(Yamashita, 1997:70; *emphasis mine*)

At this point, Rafaela perceives the world in transformation. Like the reflection from the “concave mirrors,” the world is twisted, curved, and distorted while the orange launching the metamorphosis has disappeared:

She[Rafaela] had com home to Mexico to be by herself, to be somewhere familiar. Everything as she had always known it to be and yet nothing was. Had she never noticed? *This elasticity of the land and of the time*. This sensation of timelessness, of yawning distances, of haunting fear, of danger. Perhaps it was just here, just as Rodriguze had noted, just at Gabriel's place. And *ever since the orange—that orange—had disappeared*.

(Yamashita, 1997: 149; *emphasis mine*)

The disappearing of the orange arouses the spatial metamorphosis from the land of Mexico to the city of L.A.. The “elasticity” of the tropical time reveals the mutability integral to the land and time of Mexico, which makes the spatial metamorphosis possible. This innate

mutability or “elasticity” of Mexican space/land and time not only indicates the change of the earth’s surface but signals the internal openness, and receptiveness. Hence, the Mexico motherland and its representative, Rafaela, in *Tropic of Orange* displays an alternative mother figure which engraved with both past memories and history and innate mutability that not only conscious of and even responds and challenges the present controversies along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The most evident example of Rafaela’s perception of the spatial metamorphosis is when she, Sol, and Arcangel are setting for their destination, the U.S.-Mexican border on the bus, Rafaela realizes that:

On the either side of the bus, the landscape was continually familiar to Rafaela, as if they were moving but not moving. To the left, Gabriel’s land and the unfinished wall stretched and slide along, never leaving the bus to its northern destination, like a child clinging to its mother’s skirt. *The Tropic of Orange*, she whispered to herself, tentatively touching the delicate strand protruding innocently from the suitcase. (Yamashita, 1997: 153)

Once querying Gabriel about what the Tropic of Cancer is, Rafaela’s response indicates not only her understanding of the Tropic of Orange’s substitution for the Tropic of Cancer, but an assertion of a changing latitude that induces the alternative cartography, spatial metamorphosis in the fictional city of Los Angeles. Without making any effort, Rafaela recognizes the Tropic of Orange as she knows her own child. At the moment, the mother-child relation between Rafaela and the Tropic of Orange, the link between a mother figure of ancient Aztec, Mexican motherland, and the mutable and subversive line gives Rafaela’s mother figure the qualities of dynamics, possibilities, and mutability.

Going northbound, Sol and Arcangel arrived at their destination, the Pacific Rim Auditorium at the great border of U.S.-Mexico for the wrestle match. Meanwhile, Rafaela

walks out from Dona Maria's place after awakening from her serious injury in the metamorphosis fight with the villain and leaves for the wrestle match. It is in the Pacific Rim Auditorium where Arcangel, the Tropic of Orange, and the family of Bobby, Rafaela, and Sol finally encounter and are reunited. The last scene in *Tropic of Orange* focuses on Bobby, who cuts the orange with a knife. Bobby immediately discerns the Tropic of Orange enclosed in the orange, trying to hold the two ends of it, but eventually lets it go. In the concluding chapter, I will examine first the significance of taking Bobby as focal character in the final scene while his wife, Rafaela, appears as the lead character in the opening chapter of *Tropic of Orange*. Second Bobby's act of letting go the Tropic of Orange reveals Yamashita's intention embedded in *Tropic of Orange*.