

Defying Wretchedness

Ophelia as representative of Latina women

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1 Introduction

„Wretched Ophelia will be no more.“¹

In the opening monologue of Caridad Svich's *12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs*, Ophelia accentuates her will to define herself anew. She strives for a new identity untangled from the remnants of her past.

Identity as an object of aspiration and inquiry goes back all the way to the Renaissance when identity was first examined more closely.² Human kind was placed in the center of the universe and became the object of analysis and glorification.³ Nowadays, identity is still a topical issue and is dealt with in numerous ways. Especially New Media such as the Internet offer various possibilities to play with one's identity and experiment with new ones.⁴ Svich employs her resurrection of the classical Shakespearean character Ophelia in order to further dwell on this notion of identity.

12 Ophelias received its professional premiere in 2008. It draws inspiration from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) and deals with the character Ophelia.⁵ Svich's concept of Ophelia finds herself in a neo-Elizabethan Appalachian America where nothing seems to be what it once was or what Ophelia longs for. The man of her affection is now the so-called 'Rude Boy' and after an array of unfortunate events she is determined to take fate into her own hands. She leaves the place, and thus her old life behind.⁶ ¹ Ophelia's act of liberation indicates that Svich uses Ophelia to address a variety of gender issues. Even more so, she interfuses these with issues relevant to women of diverse cultural background.

Svich is an US Latina playwright, songwriter, translator and editor born and raised in the US who comes from a Cuban-Argentine, Spanish-Croatian background.⁷ In 2002 she founded a Pan-American theatre alliance and press entitled NoPassport that aims at facilitating the cross-cultural diversity in the Arts and puts special emphasis on the fostering of Latin-American and US Latino/a theatre-making.⁸ *12 Ophelias* belongs to Svich's key works⁹ and reflects her cross-cultural background. In my opinion identity plays an important role in the play emphasizing both gender issues and issues faced by people of Latina/o background. This makes me theorize that Ophelia is of cross-cultural significance and that she can possibly function as an agent for people of Latina/o background. To further examine to what extent this is true I intent to answer the following question:

¹ For full synopsis see attachment.

How does Svich employ her concept of Shakespeare's character Ophelia as presented in her play '12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs' in order to represent women of Latina/o background?

In order to come to a conclusion I will focus on the character Ophelia by means of the theatre semiotics of Erika Fischer-Lichte. Subsequently, the results of said analysis will be placed in the light of Gender and Latina/o Studies. The idea of combining the figure Ophelia with Gender Studies is not very new¹⁰, but the link between this well-known Shakespearean character and Latina/o Studies is not very common. Ideally, Ophelia will be put in a new light: Ophelia as representative of Latina women.

2 A Semiotic Reading

2.1 Theatre Semiotics: An Introduction

Semiotics can be defined as the study of signs which deals with sign systems of any kind that generate meaning.¹¹ It is closely related to the field of linguistics –the study of the structure and meaning of language– within which the Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** developed his theory of language at the turn of the century according to which every word is a sign, provided that someone interprets it as such.¹² Signs are divided into two components. The *signifier* is the actual sound-image. The *signified* is the mental concept that is evoked by means of this sound-image.¹³

In the course of the twentieth century this structuralist thinking –which aims at understanding underlying patterns¹⁴– found its way into a variety of other disciplines¹⁵ such as Theatre Studies, making theatre readable as a dense sign system¹⁶. **Erika Fischer-Lichte** is one of the theatre scholars who have dealt with *theatre semiotics* in depth; theatre semiotics being the manner in which “meaning is produced on the stage by means of signs”.¹⁷ Fischer-Lichte references the American semiotician and philosopher **Charles Morris** when explaining that “Meaning arises when a sign is related by its user to something within a context of signs”¹⁸. Thus, Fischer-Lichte employs a triadic system within which she defines a *sign-vehicle*, the *designated object* and the *interpretant* of the sign.¹⁹

Referring to the American philosopher **Charles S. Peirce** Fischer-Lichte states that sign-vehicles and objects can be related to one another in three ways: Signs that function as *symbols* have an arbitrary relation to the objects they refer to that has been agreed upon by convention. Signs as *indices* have a cause-and-effect relation to their objects and signs employed as *icons* are linked to objects by likeness.²⁰

The meanings that are produced are not fixed, but shaped by history.²¹ Moreover, they are produced according to a certain set of rules which is called the basic *code*.²² An understanding of the underlying code and its context is crucial in understanding the according sign.²³ Fischer-Lichte makes a distinction between an *internal* and *external* code on the basis of which theatre can produce meaning. The first is the basis of one particular cultural system, the latter of several cultural systems.²⁴

Fischer-Lichte’s conditions for the existence of theatre are that an actor A depicts a person X in a certain manner, with a certain external appearance and in a certain space, while a spectator S watches (1983).²⁵ Hence, theatre does not exist as independent from its producers, and the production and reception of a performance always occur at the very same time and place.²⁶ These observations contrast theatre with

all other cultural systems making it possible to claim that theatre consists of its own distinct set of internal codes.²⁷

In the following this *theatrical code* will be observed on the *level of speech* which aims at understanding a specific performance or theatrical text.²⁸ Here, the focus lies on the meanings produced in Caridad Svich's *12 Ophelias* in order to get a better grasp of the character Ophelia.

2.2 Decoding Ophelia

Svich's play resurrects Shakespeare's character Ophelia and explores her fate if she were given a second chance in claiming a future of her own.²⁹ Ophelia ascends out of the water. Her 'before life' now lies in the past implying that over time her history has become 'just another story', partially forgotten. Yet, she has deemed the time right to retrieve this story and to give it another shape.³⁰ It is a modern time indicated by its richness in popsicles, sugar pops³¹ and magazines³². Svich speaks of a neo-Elizabethan Appalachian America as opposed to Shakespeare's Elsinore.³³ This new setting suggests that despite timely and spatial modifications the conditions of one's being must not have been transformed, but can easily be replicated. However, it also denotes Ophelia's preparedness to achieve change. She yearns for sweetness and love, forgiveness and redemption.³⁴

According to R and G, two androgynous guardians of memory, it is a confusing place where the "water's crooked, the trees grow wrong side up"³⁵. Nothing is what it seems. Tenderness does not exist, only deceit and pretense. Meaningless sex³⁶ is common practice and promises are not kept³⁷. The puzzling place not only reveals the underlying workings of the place, but also exemplifies Ophelia's inner confusion. Rude Boy, the man of Ophelia's affection reflects said world both in character and behavior. Caring at first he quickly turns cool, even violent. Ophelia falls for his lies over and over again unwilling to learn from her mistakes. Her belief in improvement accentuates her naivety. She would even prefer to call Rude Boy 'Hamlet' thus projecting her feelings of the past onto him.³⁸

It is her past life that guides Ophelia through this world. It is a past full of pain and regret that grows inside of her like "acid leaves"³⁹, spreading their venom and affecting every decision she makes. The past lies in ruins thus symbolizing defeat whereas the present setting has a dual function: while indicating the passing of time, it also signifies a new chance at creating a novel and innovative world, and Ophelia's newfangled hope for change.

The garland of flowers she has wrapped around her⁴⁰ functions as a signifier of her deep sorrow. It faintly echoes the flowers Ophelia gave the court members in

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* right before her untimely death as symbols of remembrance and thought, but also unfaithfulness and remorse.⁴¹ Yet, while Ophelia's past experiences have brought her grief, they have also made her stronger:

I am become bewildered,
But soon, soon, soon
A wanting taste.
Honey from trees inside my belly.
Wretched Ophelia will be no more.⁴²

Ophelia's graphic language evokes images that indicate her determination to find love and acceptance. It is interjected with remnants of Shakespearian texts⁴³ and Rude Boy's harsh tongue and foul choice of words⁴⁴. Such oppositions indicate Ophelia's emotionally charged inner state of being: full of disorder and contradiction. They also imply that unlike Ophelia's belief the new world is not so different from the world she had left behind and is a symbol of wreckage itself.

Noteworthy, the garland around Ophelia's neck is crushed.⁴⁵ It signifies her unwillingness to accept the grief of her past. Svich employs this symbol as an opposition to Shakespeare's use of the flowers. Ophelia longs for a new memory and to forget what has happened⁴⁶ by using the past as a reminder of a time in which she was content before she lost said happiness and was lured into the water.

Water is a recurring theme. At first it is described as an "ivory pitcher filled with milk"⁴⁷. Though cold inside, it bears a smooth and calming surface; vulnerable and easily to be disturbed. Again the frosty side of the place is referenced that bears a deceiving appearance of tranquility. The water is a symbol of pretense which goes hand in hand with the presentation of the world in general. It also gives an indication of the setting by hinting at the natural environment already alluded to by means of the flower garland. It stands for life. Rather than being the cause of Ophelia's death it is now the source of her rebirth. Ophelia refers to herself as a mermaid, "[a] watery figure ready to be transformed"⁴⁸. Though already a beautiful creature she anticipates a change. It takes several stabs of pain until Ophelia finally takes her fate into her own hands by simply walking away from this dreadful place. But, once this change has occurred, the water suddenly ripples.⁴⁹ It is no longer impassive and still. Rather, it signifies Ophelia's successful attempt to bring her life into motion. In a way it is her salvation.

Bearing Ophelia's previous aspiration in mind to retrieve what she had lost rather than to find something new this is not the turn of events she had intended. Nonetheless, having been under water for a while Ophelia has had the time to reflect on her life. It appears she has purified herself from her old self. She returns as a critical being that carries the voice of reason within her implying that this had not been the case before. While others regard her as a "book type"⁵⁰ whose critical thoughts one must be aware of Ophelia herself is not certain what to do with these thoughts. She believes that intellect

and individuality are important tools in life, but does not act upon this statement.⁵¹ She lets her emotions steer her. Though she is willing to transform, the contradiction of mind and body illustrate her uncertainty about the nature of her transformation. It is not until her Double appears that she can fully take hold of the reason within her.⁵² The Double urges Ophelia to “grow old and be a full woman” and not have her past determine her life.⁵³ It seems to be the voice of reason speaking; the Ophelia that has been buried under water for too long is finally coming up for air.⁵⁴

What started as a search for the past eventually turns into a quest for an identity and an action of self-liberation. The broken-hearted and naïve Ophelia who has experienced total defeat strips herself from her old life. She is a symbol of both rigidity and mobility. Eventually, Ophelia has “gained her reason”⁵⁵ both as a person and a woman.

3 A Feminist Reading

3.1 Gender Studies: An Introduction

The previous semiotic analysis has already hinted at oppositions that indicate gender-specific power relations. *Gender Studies* focuses on gender and identity roles by examining such *power relations* between and within men and women.⁵⁶ Thereby, women are often considered to be submissive in processes of domination and oppression by men.⁵⁷ This assumption goes hand in hand with the French existentialist philosopher **Simone de Beauvoir's** statement that women are the historical *Other* to the Self, which equals 'man'⁵⁸.

Thinking in *binary oppositions* where the woman is opposed to the man has always been essential in Gender Studies, but is now employed less strictly⁵⁹. For one thing, it has become essential to take the differences between and within women into account which has resulted in a variety of *feminisms*.⁶⁰ Moreover, gender is now often regarded as a *construction*;⁶¹ a performance that is constantly enacted through its "ritualized repetition of norms"⁶² as the American post-structuralist philosopher **Judith Butler** claimed.

Gender is thus a social construct and therefore a separate entity from the *biological sex*.⁶³ However, gender is often seen as linked to sex in that it elaborates on it.⁶⁴ The body therefore, plays a vital role within Gender Studies. A concept that dwells on the body is the idea of looking and *looked-at-ness*. Men are often believed to have pleasure in looking at women. While men actively project their male fantasies onto female bodies making them the site on which the male dominated society writes its sexual message, women remain in the passive state of looked-at-ness.⁶⁵ Further, these masculinist visions often reduce women to *fetishized body parts* and *stereotypes*.⁶⁶

Such representations of the female sex and the underlying ideologies are to be overthrown.⁶⁷ However, being part of a patriarchal culture, female voices are often not heard. *Standpoint theory* is a means of regarding women as a source of valuable knowledge that has the potential to change the patriarchal ideology within which women are subordinate to men.⁶⁸ Taking women's experiences and opinions into account can allow for increased objectivity in the construction of knowledge and in understanding – and potentially changing – male dominated cultures.⁶⁹ As a prerequisite, women must recognize the submissive position they are in.⁷⁰ This theory sees women as valuable subjects; *Identity* and *subjectivity* being significant entities that lie at the heart of Gender Studies⁷¹.

3.2 Emancipating Ophelia

It takes a while for Ophelia to grasp her situation. Svich introduces a character that has been defined by male dominated relationships. As Svich mentions, it was the men in her family who dominated Ophelia at first. Thereafter, she found herself dependent on her lover.⁷² Although Svich's concept of Ophelia is a separate entity from Shakespeare's the latter does appear to linger in the background. Svich did revive the Shakespearean Ophelia and her relationships to personages such as Polonius, Laertes and Hamlet come to mind. Lacking a definition outside of a relationship with a man Svich's Ophelia easily falls into the same patriarchal pattern when clinging to Rude Boy. Just like all the men before he takes from Ophelia what he desires without consideration of her needs thus denying her a sense of Self.

Repeatedly Svich has Rude Boy use Ophelia for bodily pleasure just as he has done with other women.⁷³ However, the relationship becomes more complex when Ophelia willingly offers her own flesh. She thereby affirms the male act of objectification, but does not regard it as such. She simply longs for a sweet and tender touch.⁷⁴ However, the sex with Rude Boy is violent and Ophelia soon reveals a gash in her stomach⁷⁵. It remains disputable if it truly was Rude Boy who cut Ophelia or if she did it herself in order to avoid an unwanted pregnancy.⁷⁶ Either way, the wound can be regarded as the result of patriarchal power relations. Ophelia is now both mentally and physically scarred by the men in her life; the cut marking her body as a sign of power. Both the sex and cutting of the flesh put the emphasis on the female body as an object of lust and as an entity to be dominated.

Further, Svich employs the notion of looking: Ophelia catches Rude Boy eyeing her from a distance.⁷⁷ While Rude Boy looks, it is Ophelia who is being looked at. Svich thereby puts her in the position of the weaker being, helplessly framed in his desiring gaze. Hence, the female body is being objectified and turned into a passive spectacle⁷⁸; Rude Boy being the active entity in this dichotomy.

Not only is Rude Boy presented as superior, Svich also describes him as a 'true man' of flesh, muscle and bone⁷⁹ for whom physical violence is daily practice⁸⁰. Ophelia, by contrast, is described by her fair features such as her soft hands.⁸¹ These emphasize her beautiful, yet ineffective and powerless characteristics. Such binary oppositions that suggest engaged masculinity and vulnerable femininity can be traced all the way back to Shakespearean times. Inequalities between males and females were considered to be the norm and were strictly integrated in everyday life.⁸² With this in mind, Shakespeare's characters have often been interpreted by relating the masculine to the Self and the feminine to the Other.⁸³ Notably, Svich's characters have a history in Shakespeare's tragedy.

Throughout the play Ophelia is connected to flowers which may further underscore her implied weakness: since the beginning of the twentieth century Gender Studies has been confronted with debates on the *nature/culture dichotomy* at the heart of which lies the assumption that women are more closely connected to nature, while men have a stronger link to culture.⁸⁴ In this opposition Rude Boy would stand for culture -the changes and successes brought about by productive men- while Ophelia is once again the weaker sex whose very nature puts her in an unassertive position. By wearing flower garlands Ophelia literally wraps herself in the supposedly unchangeable realm of nature. This does appear to be a very sharp contrast. Such comparisons should not be employed too rigidly, but it does give the impression that Svich intended to do so in order to emphasize them.

Rude Boy repeatedly benefits from Ophelia's fragility. What is more, he confronts Ophelia with his preposition to have her be his "wanton mistress"⁸⁵, but she refuses to be reduced to a whore, the sex toy of a rude boy who treats her without recognition that she is governed by an agency of her own. That being said, it takes a while for Ophelia to realize this herself. While the reader understands Ophelia to be a burdened being she herself requires the help of her Double that rises out of the chorus of Ophelias. It urges her to lay off the femme fragile-act and embrace herself as a strong woman in her own right.⁸⁶ Thereby, Svich uses the Double to refer to other women who have suffered from similar experiences.⁸⁷ It is Ophelia's turn to break this tradition of wronged women. She must find a voice with which to express the agony of all of these women. The chorus of Ophelias seems to echo the voices of these women. Apparently, Svich's character is of a universal nature and can echo the struggles of women in more general terms.

It is now that Ophelia understands her position in life that she is ready to find a new sense of Self outside of this world; a decision that functions as a slight reminder of Henrik Ibsen's Nora from *A Doll's House* (1879) whose liberating departure has been inspirational for both actual and fictional women.⁸⁸ Hence, female emancipation seems to be a topic that has been relevant for many centuries and still is today. Ophelia's departure marks a new beginning dominated by an unbound young woman. Svich resurrects a troubled girl who driven by independency and maturity finally finds her way; a girl whose struggles go beyond her fictional self, but can be employed to various actual women due to her universal quality.

4 A Latina/o Reading

4.1 Latina/o Studies: An Introduction

Along with departure, subjects such as culture, race, migration, residency and citizenship are relevant to *Latina/o Studies*.⁸⁹ While Ophelia can represent the struggles of women in general, the following is an attempt to relate her to Latina/o issues more specifically. As an academic discipline, Latina/o Studies can be perceived as a branch of *Cultural Studies*, an interdisciplinary field encompassing a network of practices that strive to understand a variety of topics, social institutions and structures within a given culture.⁹⁰

Latina/o Studies deal with people of Latina/o descent in particular, thus taking the vast amount of nationalities in South America into account.⁹¹ The 1990s marked the academic breakthrough of Latina/o Studies⁹², but also the moment when US Latinas/os were examined as well, thus broadening the field of inquiry to North America⁹³. Further, more academic attention was paid to second-generation US immigrant Latinas/os who are considered substantial in shaping US Latina/o culture since they are more likely to stay in the US. By contrast, first-generation US immigrants are often associated with frequent movement and migration.⁹⁴

US Latinas/os often experience disadvantages in comparison to other more privileged Americans.⁹⁵ *Subalternism* is a concept that presupposes Latinas/os to be a marginal community, an oppressed group of people even.⁹⁶ It questions the notions of agency and representation, asking how to represent the Latin American so-called subaltern in the first place.⁹⁷ This concept can be related to **Edward Said's** notion of *Otherness* which indicates that the subaltern has been deprived of subjectivity.⁹⁸ Rather, it only exists in representation of others thus denying it a voice of its own.⁹⁹

On the other hand, the Latina/o community can be viewed as a *diasporic* community; yet, as a socially defined group in its own right with its own distinct history and culture.¹⁰⁰ Generally, however, Latinas/os are often linked to their history of enslavement and migration.¹⁰¹ Questions of *cultural representation* and *identity* thus lie at the heart of Latina/o Studies.¹⁰²

Then again, Latinas/os are also regarded as people with very complex multi-layered identities, mainly because they embrace several nationalities.¹⁰³ Moreover, they can be considered to be a somewhat "*bordered*" community¹⁰⁴; belonging to two sides, but to none entirely. The borderland is an undetermined space that stands for struggle as well as safety. While Latinas/os search for an identity, they also have their own "*third place*"¹⁰⁵ that guarantees their belonging.

4.2 Bordering Ophelia

When Ophelia leaves the underwater world behind and steps onto land once again she finds herself on the border of these spaces, uncertain of where she belongs. She is stuck in-between. The remnants of her past are interfused with a modern place that she is not familiar with.¹⁰⁶ In terms of Latina/o Studies this synthesis slightly mirrors a form of *mestizaje* ('race mixing') as used by **Gloria Anzaldúa**, indicating the exchange of cultures, beliefs and norms¹⁰⁷ that are new to Ophelia. Moreover, Ophelia appears as a resurrection out of a Shakespearian tragedy¹⁰⁸ thus adding another dimension to her possibly diasporan existence. Displaced, Ophelia finds herself on the borderline of inclusion and exclusion like many –mainly second-generation– Latinas/os do.

However, the world that Ophelia steps into is not entirely unknown to her, but the place she originated from.¹⁰⁹ Her roots bring her back to it and guide her on her journey through this land. They seem to have left a mark that will never entirely fade.¹¹⁰ As Gertrude says: "you're born with who you'll be inside of you. Nothing can change that".¹¹¹ It appears that blood memory is a strong entity: the ancestral memories running through Ophelia's veins bind her to her heritage forever.

Determined to let go of the past -but incapable of doing so- Ophelia marches into a future yet to be defined. She seeks for a home; a place which is often defined by its memory, security and belonging.¹¹² She makes this search dependent on men when stating that Rude Boy is to her "what a bird is to a tree, a place to nest"¹¹³. By doing so she enforces the notion that women are often fixed in place by the patriarchal relations that account for a home.¹¹⁴ To an extent Ophelia imprisons herself in a gendered landscape. The concept of *machismo* –simply put extreme male chauvinism- puts the Latina woman in a submissive position to men.¹¹⁵ This can be reflected in Ophelia's relationship to the men in her life, including Rude Boy. Ophelia is fully dependent on these male counterparts. As mentioned before, Ophelia can be regarded as representative of women in more general terms. Here, her universality is taken to the next level. Ophelia is confronted with Latina/o issues specifically. She takes on the role of the Other, not only as a woman, but also as a traveler aspiring a home and an identity.

The world Svich has created is not a place in which having a home is common. Besides Gertrude, no one seems to have a place to call their own.¹¹⁶ Cold sex and prostitution substitute commitment and settling.¹¹⁷ It is an obfuscating place where women typically take on the role of the whore. Ophelia passes through this place like a nomad. She is always on the go, like an immigrant uncertain about her destination, but seeking for something new.

According to the other characters it is easiest to adapt to the place rather than to fight it.¹¹⁸ Correspondingly, it is society that holds the place together.¹¹⁹ Ophelia as an individual is powerless. She is expected to fit in by abandoning her individual matters,

her past and heritage. Like many Latina/os she is confronted with questions of citizenship and integration. However, Ophelia values individuality.¹²⁰ She finds herself torn between her past and possible future, and between the values and expectations she is confronted with. As is often the case with Latinas/os she is not only on a spatial and temporal borderline, but she also finds herself on the intersection of identities.

Eventually, her pursuit of an identity results in her departure, and thus liberation from her former self.¹²¹ Her past has given her strength and determination to free herself from the world she had felt so bound to and yet so detached from. Once she gained a better understanding of her environment she decides to take a new path; a path she failed to take before. This is not only an actual pathway, but also an inner journey to a renewed identity. No one expects her to return this time since she was only passing through. The aftermath of her departure remains unspecified. Yet, it appears she will never fully arrive anywhere. She has now learned to fully grasp her heritage and the patriarchal relations that have determined her fate so far and to use them in making beneficial decisions for herself.

5 Concluding Remarks

Svich's play *12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs* introduces its reader to an Ophelia who grasps an array of issues significant to women of Latina/o background and while doing so claims a new identity for herself. At this point it is sensible to recall the main question of this thesis:

How does Svich employ her concept of Shakespeare's character Ophelia as presented in her play '12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs' in order to represent women of Latina/o background?

In retrospect, it is the *theatre-semiotic* analysis through which we have come to understand Ophelia as a character who signifies the loss and regret of a past life and the desire for purification and change. In general, it has successfully made the sheer amount of signs within the text clear. Many of these signs seem to have their origin in Shakespeare's text, not all of which could be observed in detail. Partially, these links to *Hamlet* appear to be laden with criticism and the need for Svich to save Ophelia from her Shakespearian past. Therefore, it would be sensible to make a direct comparison between *Hamlet* and *12 Ophelias* in a later study in order to further dwell on this assumption. The semiotic analysis also hinted at topics that were subsequently inspected in further examinations.

The analysis by means of *Gender Studies* accentuated Ophelia as the cultural Other and as dependent on men. However, her eventual ability to emancipate forms the focal point of the play. Here, Ophelia's universality has been confirmed. She is representative of women and their struggles that go beyond the realm of the fictional. This analysis was fairly obvious. For one thing, *Hamlet* is often at the back of one's mind due to numerous cross-references, and Shakespeare's concept of Ophelia has been variously analyzed in the light of Gender Studies. On the other hand, Svich herself stated that she wished to retrieve Ophelia as a subordinate female and give her a voice of her own.¹²² However, one must also be critical about this analysis because it tends to view the play in a very black and white manner that may not always do justice to the complexity of the play. A reading of the play from a male perspective might reveal differing and more complicating outcomes.

The concepts of *Latina/o Studies* have made it obvious that Ophelia is not only on a journey to define herself as a women. Rather, her voyage through time and space indicates her loss of cultural belonging and her inner determination to find a new identity for herself. It has become clear that Ophelia has gone through a development that engages in Latina/o issues. Like a migrant she searches for a home, but is stuck in a

diasporic place whose very nature is a symbol of her quest for an identity. Due to her non-belonging she is the constructed Other; also as a woman who comes from a phallogocentric world similar to the of Latin American culture. This reading is more hidden in the text than the one based on Gender Studies, but highlights a side of Ophelia that Svich might not have intended to be so explicit. Noteworthy, it is not my intention to claim that Svich portrays Ophelia as a Latina. Rather, she creates a character that can stand in for a variety of women which belong to a 'bordered' community. The universality of the character Ophelia has proved to exceed the notion of womanhood. Rather, Ophelia is not only a character of all times, but also of all cultures. She is of cross-cultural significance and can be representative of Latina issues in particular. These do indeed intersect with questions of gender and womanhood, but put Ophelia in a new realm; the of Latina/o culture.

However, this inquiry can easily –if not employed critically– lead to the assumption that Latina women generally live unprivileged lives which they must free themselves from. This seems like an overstated generalization. For one thing, the differences between and within Latinas must be respected. Additionally, it must be taken into account that Svich's personal opinion shapes this play. She writes from her perspective as a second-generation US Latina. Furthermore, certain aspects might be overemphasized in order for Svich to bring her point across. Instead, Svich's Ophelia should be regarded as a representation of the potential Latina woman. It appears that according to Svich women are often forced into oppressing structures due to their gender and/or inheritance. In those cases, Svich calls for attention and possibly, change. Especially in this time of increasing 'latinization' of the US¹²³ more and more Latina women could possibly face similar issues demonstrated in this play and must make themselves heard.

What has not been addressed in this thesis, but could be examined at a later time, is the direct link to the current living situation of Latinas/os in the US, regarding for example job opportunities and the by now widespread AIDS problem¹²⁴. How do these relate to Svich's play? A thorough inquiry of Svich's other plays¹²⁵ and a direct comparison with *12 Ophelias* might deepen the insight into the current situation of Latinas/os and bring issues to the fore that did not find a voice in this play.

In any case, this thesis has defined Svich's Ophelia as a model for Latina women and as a motivation to discover who one is versus who one could possibly be. It was her past that had constructed Ophelia as a wretched being, along with the various scholars and artists who had classified her as a tragic figure. By linking her to Latina/o culture Svich has made it possible to view a new side of Shakespeare's character. Ophelia is not only a universal woman; she is also of cross-cultural universality.

Endnotes

- ¹ Caridad Svich, *12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs* (South Gate, CA: NoPassport Press, 2008): 39.
- ² Martin Lister et al., *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 278.
- ³ Charles G. Nauert, *Humanism and Culture of Renaissance Europe*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2006), 1.
- ⁴ Lister et al., 267.
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Original quote: "Bedeutung entsteht dann, wenn eine Zeichen von einem Zeichenbenutzer innerhalb eines Zeichenzusammenhangs auf etwas bezogen wird", Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters: Eine Einführung*, Vol. 1 (Tübingen: Narr, 1983): 8.
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- ⁴⁶ Ibidem, 143.
- ⁴⁷ Ibidem, 45.
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- ⁵¹ Ibidem, 106.
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- ⁵⁴ Ophelia herself speaks of an unborn child: "I heard my child speaking. [...] I think it was inside me" (p.128). This must not be taken too literally. The unborn child must not refer to an actual fetus. However, I do believe that this can be regarded as Svich's spin on the numerous works on the alleged pregnancy of Shakespeare's Ophelia. For further reading: Hunt, Maurice. "Impregnating Ophelia" In *Neophilologus* 89 (2005): 641-663.
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- ⁵⁸ Buikema, 14.
- ⁵⁹ Sara Mills, "Language" in *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003): 138.
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- ⁸² Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005): 27.
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Attachment:

Synopsis of *12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs* by Caridad Svich

In her play *12 Ophelias: A Play with Broken Songs* Caridad Svich gives her concept of Shakespeare's character Ophelia another chance at life.

Ophelia rises out of the water while R and G, two androgynous guardians of memory, watch her. Having lost everything she sets out to redefine herself and change her destiny. When Ophelia notices Rude Boy watching her she beckons him. The conversation that follows clarifies that Ophelia longs for a man on her side. However, after the two make love Rude Boy leaves Ophelia behind. R and G take Ophelia, who now reveals a cut in her stomach, to Gertrude, a wealthy woman who runs a brothel. She reluctantly takes care of Ophelia and offers her a place to sleep for the night.

In the meantime, Rude Boy tells his friend H about his encounter with Ophelia. While Rude Boy believes that he could possibly love once more, thus dismissing his rude behavior, H doubts this. They wrestle as they do so very often.

Ophelia meets the prostitute and H's mistress Mina who does not believe that a change such as Ophelia is seeking is possible. During tea time Gertrude expresses a similar opinion. Along with R and G she tries to warn Ophelia of the place she has returned to. According to her it is easier to adapt to it and its norms rather than to swim against the stream.

Confronted with Rude Boy, Ophelia falls for his empty promises once more. Yet, this time it is Ophelia who leaves Rude Boy behind after they have had sex. This is when Ophelia's Double appears. It tries to remind Ophelia of her horrible past that had led to sorrow and total loss, and to live an independent life of her own. By request Mina gives Ophelia breathing lessons in order to silence the voice Ophelia hears within her.

Rude Boy thinks that his head is now completely turned and has H beat him. He wants to feel the loss that Ophelia talks about. Ophelia, however, is now determined to leave her past behind and to simply walk away. Gertrude watches her do so while Rude Boy confronts her once more. He wants Ophelia to stay, but she just leaves him behind. R and G watch Ophelia depart and then go for a liberating swim.