

An Esselen (Re)Creation Story

Luis xago Juárez

Inspired by Louise J. Miranda Ramirez

Editor's note: This is an excerpt from the play Iya: The Ex'celen Remember, written by Luis xago Juárez and inspired by Louise Miranda Ramirez, chair of the Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation (OCEN) and older sister of Deborah Miranda. The play is based on OCEN's efforts to protect their ancestors, their burial grounds and sacred spaces, and represents the lives of tribal members surviving and resisting the genocidal amnesia of the state of California. This selection depicts the Esselen creation story, or perhaps more accurately a re-creation story, in a series of destructions and re-beginnings. After a flood destroyed the world, the first beings are devising a plan to repopulate and regenerate the earth. Coyote's usual shenanigans intervene, threatening to upend the whole project. In spite of Coyote's efforts, however—by accident, through the fleas that take up residence on his body—life nonetheless finds a way. We include this excerpt from the play in this special issue to offer greater context for the relational mode of Miranda's "tribal memoir" and as an extension of OCEN's story. We also want to blur the boundaries between the issue and the symposium on which it is based, as the play was scheduled to be performed at the symposium.

LUIS XAGO JUÁREZ works in documentary theater. His projects include the *reAlisal* series, based on interviews with residents from the Salinas Valley, and *Iya: The Ex'celen Remember* with Louise Miranda Ramirez. He cofounded the Salinas Valley Ethnic Studies team, which localizes historical curriculum for public schools with a focus on regional histories of racism and resistance. LOUISE J. MIRANDA RAMIREZ is tribal chair of the Ohlone Costanoan Esselen Nation (OCEN), the legal tribal government for more than 600 enrolled members. She is the great-granddaughter of Tomas Santos Miranda and Inez Agnez Garcia Miranda, Esselen members of the Monterey Band of Monterey at the Sur Rancheria. Her greatest responsibility is the cultural protection of OCEN ancestors.

ACT I, SCENE 1

LIGHTS UP on an empty stage. Five individuals enter the stage. A young man enters wearing a hummingbird beak; next is a young woman; right behind her is another young man wearing a coyote's nose, followed by a woman in her early seventies wearing eagle wings. From the opposite end, another young woman enters humming a song. She stops and addresses her audience.

UMU

This is the story

ALL

Of how we were created.

UMU

Curtain.

ALL

The flooding begins!

ATSIA

Eagle,

TAAPISI

Hummingbird,

MACHKAS

and Coyote

ALL

All take to the top of *Watiyi* (Pico Blanco)

ULA

Attempting to escape—

UMU

The waters that were devouring—

ALL

Everything around them!

ACT I, SCENE 2

UMU

But Hummingbird and Coyote can't keep up with Eagle, so Eagle swoops right back down, picking them both up and flying off to the peak of . . .

ALL

The *Sxe-ke-sip-sxa!* (Los Gavilanes)

UMU

Where they would remain safe. Later Eagle spoke up and told the Coyote—

EAGLE

Coyote! Go down to make sure the land is dry!

UMU

Coyote inspected the Valley as the waters receded back into the bay, coming across a beautiful young woman near a strong and thriving river.

COYOTE

Saleki atsa. (Hello.)

WOMAN

Saleki atsa.

COYOTE

I'm Coyote . . . What's your name?

WOMAN

Tanoc.

COYOTE

Loliki. (Beautiful)

(COYOTE puts his paw out to the WOMAN for her to shake. She receives it with a polite smile. He smiles and then makes his way back to EAGLE.)

ACT I, SCENE 3

UMU

Coyote returns and reports back to Eagle.

COYOTE

I met a woman.

EAGLE

Where?

COYOTE

By the river. Her name is Tanoc.

EAGLE

Good. You will make her your wife—

COYOTE

(Slightly taken aback) My wife?

EAGLE

Take this abalone shovel and begin!

COYOTE

Begin what?

EAGLE

Begin making babies and raising the people. All. Over. Again.

COYOTE How?

UMU

Eagle wanted to see Coyote answer his own question—

COYOTE

Right . . . here? *(Points to his elbow, hiding his uncertainty)* Out of my elbow?

EAGLE

No.

COYOTE

Here! *(Points to his knee)* Out of my knee . . . ?

UMU

Eagle was unamused . . . (*expressing genuine concern to the audience*) . . .
and concerned.

COYOTE

From the back of my neck then?

EAGLE

Your “neck?”

COYOTE

(*Trying to get it right*) My eyebrows?!

UMU

Coyote’s attempts caught Hummingbird’s attention . . .

HUMMINGBIRD

Your eyebrows? You’re going to make people out of your eyebrows? Ahhh, come on,
Coyote! Everybody knows the best place to make people is right here! In the belly!
(*Practically stabbing COYOTE’s belly with his finger*)

COYOTE

(*Loses his temper, snaps at HUMMINGBIRD*) Nobody’s asking you, Hummingbird!

UMU

Upset, Coyote swiped at Hummingbird with his claws, causing Eagle to raise her
wing, protecting Hummingbird—

EAGLE

Leave it alone, Coyote, and go, marry the girl!

ACT I, SCENE 4

UMU

And with that order, Coyote returned to Tanoc, shared the Eagle's call for their union, and proposed to her. She said yes, and together they would make the people who would live, love, and care for that which gives them all life and purpose . . . their Mother Earth—

ALL

Atsia Matsa. (Mother Earth.)

UMU

But before that would happen, Coyote is attacked by a mob of *wo-xe-xa-wi* (fleas).

ALL

Fleas!

COYOTE

(In a rising panic, scratching and biting off the fleas, literally chasing his tail) Tanoc! Tanoc! Oh, please, Tanoc, get these fleas off me!

WOMAN

(Sharing his panic) There are so many of them, and they're so small!

COYOTE

Well then just—just—just eat them!

WOMAN

(In anticipation) Eat them?

ALL

Am-pa la-chi? (Eat them?)

COYOTE

(Suffering from all the fleas attacking him) Yes!

(Not knowing what else to do, TANOC starts attacking the fleas all over COYOTE.)

UMU

Right then and there, Tanoc leaps onto Coyote and begins eating the fleas right off his back!

(COYOTE convulses into a fetal position.)

ACT I, SCENE 5

UMU

Days after Tanoc saves the Coyote, she discovers that the eating of the *wo-xe-xa-wi* has made her pregnant!

ALL

Salamaki? (Pregnant?)

(Surprised and humbled by this blessing, COYOTE gently places his paw on her stomach.)

UMU

When the birth of their child finally takes place, Coyote joyously celebrates their newborn.

COYOTE

Eagle! Hummingbird! Look! Our baby!

ALL

Pana! (Baby!)

HUMMINGBIRD

(With supportive acknowledgement) Congratulations, Tanoc, Coyote!

EAGLE

(With pride and gratitude) Loliki.

ACT I, SCENE 6

UMU

The birth of the child brought new life, but then suddenly Tanoc was overcome with an incredible fear—

WOMAN

I . . .

(An emergent feeling of dread takes over; she starts hyperventilating, trying to remain calm.)

I— I— I—

(COYOTE carefully takes the baby from her arms)

COYOTE

What? What is it?

WOMAN

I— I— I'm a— *(breathing fast)* I'm a— I'm afraid—

ALL

Eni kia'elpa. (I'm afraid.)

COYOTE

Afraid? Afraid of what?

WOMAN

I— I— I— No-no-noooo! *(Bolting before breaking down in front of COYOTE)*

UMU

Tanoc's fear was so strong, it drove her to run directly into a field of thorn bushes!

UMU/COYOTE/EAGLE/HUMMINGBIRD

Yapumin!

UMU

Coyote ran after her, crying out at the top of his lungs—

COYOTE

Don't pass through that brush!

UMU

Coyote immediately runs after her, fast enough to catch up to but still unable to stop her—

UMU/COYOTE/EAGLE/HUMMINGBIRD/WOMAN

She kept running!

UMU

So Coyote ran even faster so he'd be able to at least clear the road ahead of her enough so she may pass through, only to declare—

WOMAN

I'm not used to taking roads!

UMU

Now Coyote increases his speed even more, so as to quickly collect flowers and place them on both sides of the road so she'd be able to stop and pick them up. But instead she cries out that she's—

UMU/COYOTE/EAGLE/HUMMINGBIRD/WOMAN

—Not used to walking between flowers!

UMU

Coyote became so frustrated he yelled out—

COYOTE

There are no remedies, no medicine—

UMU/COYOTE/EAGLE/HUMMINGBIRD/WOMAN

To keep her from leaving!

UMU

Coyote kept chasing after her.

COYOTE

(To the audience) And when he finally got close—

WOMAN

(To the audience) She threw herself into the ocean.

UMU/COYOTE/EAGLE/HUMMINGBIRD/WOMAN

Imila! (Ocean!)

UMU

Coyote desperately reached out to pull her back onto the land, as a great wave came crashing between them both. The tide's forces were too strong for Coyote to withstand as Tanoc surrendered her body to the world of the salt waters, transforming into—

UMU/COYOTE/EAGLE/HUMMINGBIRD/WOMAN

The *Hakau!*