Transforming Suffering: Insights From the Work of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa

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Transforming Suffering:
Insights from the Work of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa

A dissertation presented
By
Pearl Maria Barros
To
The Faculty of Harvard Divinity School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Theology
In the Subject of
Religion, Gender & Culture
Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 2016
Transforming Suffering:

Insights from the Work of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa

Abstract

Gloria Anzaldúa’s understanding of suffering is inextricably connected to subjectivity and spirituality. Tracing her rethinking of stories/histories involving the violent dismemberment of female religious figures, specifically Teresa of Ávila and Coyolxauhqui, I show how Anzaldúa’s critical engagement and creative reimagining of these stories/histories lead her to develop a conception of fragmentation and wholeness that resists dualistic epistemologies. For Anzaldúa, suffering emerges from dualism and the violence inherent in processes of categorization, especially as they function in identity formations. “Self,” Anzaldúa argues, cannot be neatly organized or fully understood; it is always in process. Writing, as an act of “spiritual activism,” mirrors this process of becoming because it demands critically and creatively analyzing the stories/histories that inform our understandings of self and others – of nos/otras. Writing becomes a spiritual and shamanic act capable of inviting personal and political transformation. Through her writings, I argue, Anzaldúa acts as poet-shaman, calling us toward a spirituality of transformation and inspiring visions of what it might mean to live together in nonhierarchical multiplicity.
# Table of Contents

Abstract.................................................................................................................................................. iii  
Acknowledgments.................................................................................................................................... vi  
Dedications................................................................................................................................................ x  

**Chapter 1** Introductions/Conocimientos: Tracing Suffering, Self, and Transformation ............... 1

Underlying Questions................................................................................................................................. 1

*Conocimientos*: Introductory Notes on Anzaldúa .............................................................................. 3

Anzaldúa in Conversation: Scholarly Engagements of Her Work (thus far) .......................... 6

Tracing an Argument ... Transforming Suffering through Anzaldúan Thought ................... 14

**Chapter 2** ”The Myths in Me”: Suffering in Gloria Anzaldúa's ”Holy Relics” .............................. 20

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 20

Enduring the Past.................................................................................................................................... 22

Stories We Suffer ................................................................................................................................... 27

Seeking Each Other............................................................................................................................... 44

**Chapter 3** ”What We Include": Conceiving ”Self” in Anzaldúa...................................................... 48

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 48

Reconceiving *Mestizaje* ......................................................................................................................... 50

A Third Element ....................................................................................................................................... 61

Difficult Differentiations ......................................................................................................................... 64

The Work of the Soul ............................................................................................................................... 68

Living and Traveling *Entre* (and In) Worlds...................................................................................... 73

So be it...................................................................................................................................................... 78

**Chapter 4** ”Through the Pulling of Flesh”: Writing a Spirituality of Transformation............... 81

Introduction........................................................................................................................................... 81

Writing as Shamanic: Bridging Binaries............................................................................................. 84

Transformation as Risk ... Confronting *La Coatlicue* ................................................................. 92

Sacrifices and Offerings: Difficult Differentiations .......................................................................... 96

“Something Else” ... Rethinking Flesh/Spirit..................................................................................... 99

Shaman as Healer ................................................................................................................................. 102

Anzaldúa as Shaman ... Toward a Spirituality of Transformation ............................................ 110

**Chapter 5** Closing Offerings ........................................................................................................... 120

Questions that Remain........................................................................................................................... 120
Anzaldúan Insights ......................................................................................................................... 122
A closing offering .......................................................................................................................... 127

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................................... 128
Works Cited .................................................................................................................................. 128
Works by Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa ......................................................................................... 135
Acknowledgements

In true Anzaldúa spirit, this dissertation has demanded a tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. It has been written, set aside, revised, carried from West Coast to East Coast and back again. For as many times as I ignored it – instead focusing my attention on teaching or meeting with colleagues or tending to a seemingly endless pile of laundry – it always found a way to call me back. I like to think that it was Gloria’s spirit prodding at me, reminding me that scholarship can be an expression of spiritual activism if we allow it to transform us as well as the world. “The struggle has always been inner,” she wrote, “and is played out in outer terrains.” Gracias compañera for the privilege of studying your work.

Throughout this process, I have been graced with the guidance and support of many people. In my academic circles, I am especially indebted to my dissertation committee: Professors Leila Ahmed, Amy Hollywood, and Mayra Rivera Rivera. They have accompanied me throughout my doctoral career, pushing me to think critically and creatively. As my advisor, Dr. Mayra Rivera Rivera has been a source of unceasing support and patient encouragement. I am profoundly grateful for her kindness, humor, and wisdom. I hope to follow the example of her mentorship with my own students some day. Although not on my committee, Dr. Kimberley Patton has also been a source of deep support throughout my studies, wisely reminding me that brokenness can hold the possibilities of healing and transformation. The joy of colleagues who have become friends through the years has certainly helped me deal with the moments of brokenness inevitable to the stresses of doctoral work and let’s face it: life. My heartfelt thanks to: Brad Bannon,
Mara Block, Paige Eve Chant, Jessica Coblentz, Eleanor Craig, Hannah Hofheinz, Amy Howe, Nan Hutton, Roberto Mata, Deonnie Moodie-King, Jen Owens, Jacob Quiring, Carolyn Roberts, and Iain Stanford.

If this list of acknowledgements is beginning to sound like a litany, know that I was raised Catholic. Indeed, I extend thanks to the many “nuns/sisters” who have held me in prayer and invited me into their friendship. Holy Names Sisters Joan Bourdon and Molly Neville have accompanied me since my teenage years, always nurturing my interest in theology and reminding me that people’s images of God (or the divine by another or no name) have real implications in this world. The Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan – of which I am an Associate member – also hold a special place in my heart. In particular, Sisters Evelyn Craig, Rose Ange Leddy, Mary Jo Maher, and Kate O’Brien, as well as the members of the Kairos Mission Unit, have supported me throughout the years with their love and prayers. Although Mary Jo died as this dissertation was nearing completion, I have continued to feel her strength and encouragement. I also want to especially acknowledge Sr. MaryAnn Hinsdale, IHM whose unrivaled hospitality (including legendary dinners) and unwavering kindness have sustained me more than she may ever know.

At the heart of all these circles of support, there is the initial circle from which I come: minha família, my family. Within my Azorean Argentinian heritage, it is common to refer to close friends as “family” so I mention first those cherished friends who are família to me: Katie Kuszmar and Tara Rocha have called me out of my “dissertation cave” once a week, refreshing my spirit with their conversation and humor. Unafraid of nepantla, Esther
Galindo has pulled me out of the Coatlicue state more than once, shaking me with her wisdom, encouraging me to trust in the Spirit. I am honored to call her my Comadre.

My Comadre, Adelia Barros-Parker, is my sister in spirit. She has encouraged me throughout my education, always cheering: “you can do it.” Her daughters Isabel and Victoria, and our goddaughter Kayla, have grown from insightful little girls into strong, intelligent women. Their interest in my work, thoughtful questions, and willingness to bring me lattes while I was trying to meet chapter deadlines, never failed to impress me. I know they will contribute to this world in their own beautiful ways; indeed, they already do.

My parents, Gaspar João Oliveira Barros and Antonia Lynn Furtado Barros, are amazingly generous and deeply loving people. Foregoing their own needs, they sacrificed to send me to schools we could not easily afford, instilling in me a conviction in the liberating possibilities of education. As I pursued graduate and doctoral studies, it sometimes seemed that the new worlds I was entering – worlds they fought so hard to make accessible to me – paradoxically forced us to spend most of our time away from each other. I hope they know that being away from each other did not mean that we were apart. They are, and will always be, my first and best teachers.

My partner, Rafael Zavala, Jr., has taught me to trust my own voice as a scholar and writer precisely by doing so himself. Inquiring about my project, debating theoretical concepts, and sharing his own love of history and philosophy with me, he has continually encouraged my intellectual growth. I count his love, sense of humor, and contemplative spirit among the graces in my life.
In the midst of writing this dissertation, I discovered that I was pregnant. Our daughter, Violet, has encouraged me throughout this process by chewing (quite literally) on chapter drafts and giving me strong little toddler hugs along the way. Although writing sometimes forced me to be away from her, I hope that she will someday know how profoundly she has influenced my thinking and enriched my life. She has, in more ways than one, transformed my suffering.

Lastly, I thank the Grandmothers – Maria Morais Oliveira Barros, Pearl Rose Avila Furtado, and Celeste dos Santos Morais – women who raised me and loved me and dreamt for me a future free from the injustices that so often hurt them. No longer on this earth but ever near, I have felt them holding me close to the Immaculate Heart of Mary to which they had a strong devotion. While there are many ways of interpreting Mary’s Immaculate Heart, these women showed me through their lives how traditional symbols can be re-imagined in empowering ways. Obrigada.

And always, I offer profound thanks to God – Source of Light and Love – for everything and everyone. Así sera.
Dedications

In loving memory of the Grandmothers

Maria Morais Oliveira Barros, Pearl Rose Avila Furtado, Celeste dos Santos Morais

With profound gratitude to

Gaspar and Antonia Barros  
Rafael Zavala, Jr.  
Esther Galindo  
Adelia Barros Parker

And with hope for “my girls”

Kayla Barros  
Victoria Barros Parker  
Isabel Barros Parker  
Violet Barros Zavala – my daughter
Chapter 1

Introductions/Conocimientos: Tracing Suffering, Self, and Transformation

I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. – Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include. – Gloria Anzaldúa, “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe Spaces”

For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformativ e power, they must arise from the human body – flesh and bone – and from the Earth’s body – stone, sky, liquid, soil. – Gloria Anzaldúa, “*Tlilli, Tlapalli/The Path of the Red and Black Ink*”

Underlying Questions

How does one speak of suffering? Christian feminist and liberation theologians have long critiqued the notion of “redemptive” suffering.¹ They have noted that attributing redemptive value to pain has often discouraged challenges to sexism, racism, classicism, and heterosexism, as well as other social injustices. Yet people suffer, and so the problem of speaking meaningfully about suffering remains. One continues to ask then, how does one acknowledge the inevitability of suffering

without glorifying or justifying it? Can suffering be meaningful without claims to the redemptive value of suffering? Or, is suffering rendered meaningful precisely because of its potential to initiate transformation? And what is meant by transformation?

Seeking ways to think through these questions, I analyze the work of Chicana theorist and activist Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa. In particular, I trace her rethinking of stories/histories involving the violent dismemberment of female religious figures, specifically sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Teresa of Ávila (Chapter 2) and the Aztec goddess Coyolxauhqui (Chapter 4). As this dissertation will show, Anzaldúa challenges the epistemological privileging of history over story; I thus write “stories/histories” throughout this dissertation to signal this challenge and theorization. Anzaldúa’s critical engagement and creative reimagining of Teresa’s and Coyolxauhqui’s stories/histories lead her to develop an understanding of fragmentation and wholeness that resists dualistic epistemologies. For her, dualism is the root of violence and suffering. Her processes of remythologizing can thus be understood as attempts to pull at this root. Further, in Anzaldúa’s theorizations of self, she shows how fragmentation (in terms of identity) can be a source of suffering. But she argues that this fragmentation does not have to destroy us even if it undoes us. Instead, it can lead us to critically question the adequacy of identity categories (Chapter 3). Writing, for her, becomes a way to move through these categories because it demands critically and creatively analyzing the stories/histories that
inform our understandings of self and others – of *nos/otras*. Transformation can come through this process of writing which, for Anzaldúa, is always both a spiritual and political act – an act of “spiritual activism” (Chapter 4). A writer, she argues, is “poet-shaman,” a person able to move between worlds of meaning. Suffering, self, and transformation are therefore intimately tied to writing and spirituality in Anzaldúan thought.

**Conocimientos: Introductory Notes on Anzaldúa**

The blood began to flow when Anzaldúa was three months old, “tiny pink spots appearing on [her- diaper].” By the age of seven, Anzaldúa writes, “my mother would pin onto my panties a folded piece of rag. ‘Keep your legs shut, Prieta.’ This, the deep dark secret between us, her punishment for having f*ucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born.” The blood would flow “every 24 days,” accompanied by “cramps, tonsillitis, and 105˚ fevers.” And shame. Shame for a body that other eyes saw as “strange,” “abnormal,” “QUEER” ... the result of

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2 “*Nos/otras*” means “*Us/Others.*” Pushing against dichotomous thinking that posits “us” against “them,” Anzaldúa plays with the Spanish word for “we” – *nosotros(as)* – by splitting it into “*nos/otras*” to show how any reference to ourselves always includes a reference to others. Furthermore, she uses the female form of the Spanish “we” as a way of destabilizing the androcentric tendencies of language since Spanish grammar dictates that any general use of the term “we” should always take the masculine form. In this and the following chapters, I will use *nos/otras* following Anzaldúa’s critical practice of this term in order to further problematize questions of personal/communal suffering and transformation.


5 Anzaldúa, “La Prieta,” 40.
Suffering from a rare hormonal imbalance that caused her to begin menstruating as an infant, Anzaldúa would later endure a hysterectomy and the onset of diabetes – a disease whose complications would unexpectedly take her life. Such a messy mixture of blood, religious language, and suffering in her early childhood and as her health struggles continued into her adult life undoubtedly influenced Anzaldúa’s theorizations of suffering and subjectivity.

Born in 1942 in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, Gloria Anzaldúa is best known for the concept of “borderlands” as theorized in her 1987 Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. The term “borderlands” refers to the national border between the United States and Mexico as well as to the tension of living between seemingly contradictory markers of “self.” Calling this “borderlands” “una herida abierta” (“an open wound”), Anzaldúa recognizes the pain inherent to living with conflicting markers of “self” but also points to the possibilities for transformation that can stem from “[living- sin fronteras” (“without borders”) and thus “[being- a crossroads” between seemingly disparate worlds. The theorization of borderlands

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6 Anzaldúa, “La Prieta,” 40.

7 Both literary scholar Suzanne Bost and Anzaldúan scholar AnaLouise Keating have convincingly written about the relationship between Anzaldúa’s health struggles and her work. See Suzanne Bost, Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); AnaLouise Keating, “‘Working toward Wholeness’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Struggles to Live with Diabetes and Chronic Illness,” in Speaking from the Body: Latinas on Health and Culture, eds. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian and Adela de la Torre, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008), 133-143. I draw upon their insights in Chapters 2, 4, and 5.

8 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, Second Edition, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25, 217. It is telling that Anzaldúa also compares the vulva to “una herida abierta” in her poem “La vulva es una herida abierta/The vulva is an open wound” since it suggests her awareness of the ways borders are inscribed in/on the flesh and also links them explicitly to women’s bodies. I discuss this idea of borders that are
as a space of suffering and of a potential transformation that is both personal and political grounds her understanding of writing as a “spiritual” and/or “shamanic” practice. For Anzaldúa, writing, especially writing that involves remythologizing, can become a means of transforming suffering. Suffering, for Anzaldúa, is always at once physical, psychical, and spiritual. In this dissertation, I trace Anzaldúa’s understandings of suffering, self, and transformation as they appear in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and as they are developed in Anzaldúa’s later writings.⁹

These later writings not only show how Anzaldúa continues to theorize the concepts she introduces in *Borderlands/La Frontera* as well as her development of new concepts, but they also more explicitly reveal her understanding of writing as shamanic practice and the role of spirituality in her work – as Chapter 4 of this dissertation will show.

In both *Borderlands/La Frontera* and Anzaldúa’s later writings, her writing style and structure play a crucial role in the development of her theoretical projects. Whether crossing the boundaries of genre by moving between poetry, personal narrative, and theoretical writing or switching between English, Spanish, and

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Nahuatl while refusing to fully translate, Anzaldúa’s writing exemplifies the theories of “borderlands” and other non-dualistic epistemologies that it describes. Because of her frequent use of personal narrative, Anzaldúa’s writings can sometimes be categorized as “autobiographical.” Yet, they can also be read as what Anzaldúa termed “autohistorias.” Literally meaning “self-history,” “autohistoría” highlights the collective history implicit in any account of “self.” For Anzaldúa, all “personal” accounts are also “political” accounts; they involve a “self” who is ever in relation to wider stories/histories.10 Such an understanding is integral to tracing the radicality of Anzaldúaan thought, especially as one analyzes her conceptions of suffering, self, and transformation. By moving between conventions of genre and grammar, questioning and pushing these boundaries while never permanently situating itself, Anzaldúa’s writing shows readers how to move between worlds – a movement that, for her, can be transformational.

Similar to her use of multiple genres and languages, Anzaldúa also draws on numerous fields of study to inform her work. She cites Chicana/o studies, Jungian psychoanalysis, Christian liberation theology, Mesoamerican studies, and feminist theory.11 For Anzaldúa, these fields are always in conversation with each other.

Anzaldúa in Conversation: Scholarly Engagements of Her Work (thus far)

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10 I will further analyze this term in relation to Anzaldúa’s understandings of subjectivity in Chapter 3.

11 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 114-120.
Anzaldúa’s work has also influenced a variety of fields. Here, I focus on her influence on the fields of Chicana/o Cultural Studies, Feminist Theory, Queer Theory, and philosophy. Briefly tracing the engagement of Anzaldúan thought in these fields can help us better appreciate the reach of her scholarship.

In theorizing “differential consciousness,” Chicana cultural theorist Chela Sandoval draws on Anzaldúa’s “la conciencia de la mestiza” in Methodology of the Oppressed. Sandoval’s title alludes to Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, a 1970s text that advocated the development of “conscientization” or “consciousness raising” as a means for enabling oppressed people to become aware of the ways in which their oppression is part of a larger system. In other words, their difficulties are not due to personal deficiencies (as society might have them believe) but are rather indicators of larger unjust power structures that create a variety of marginalities. With this notion of “conscientization” and “consciousness,” Sandoval argues for what she terms a “differential consciousness.” She takes the term “differential” from the name of the mechanism in a car that enables power to shift

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13 Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 76-77.


15 Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed, 60-61.
from one gear to another. Therefore, a “differential consciousness” is a technology that understands and enables a constant shifting of power especially in terms of fluctuations in meaning. Discussing Anzaldúa’s “la conciencia de la mestiza,” Sandoval compares it to what she understands as other modes of “differential consciousness,” like Jacques Derrida’s “différance” and Judith Butler’s “performativity.”

Taken together, Sandoval argues that they constitute the “methodology of the oppressed,” which has the potential to create a “coalitional consciousness” that would enable a “theory uprising” against unjust structures.

Reflecting on social transformation, feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler discusses Anzaldúa’s rejection of a “unitary subject” in “The Question of Social Transformation.” Butler writes, “[Anzaldúa- says that in order to have social transformation one must get beyond a ‘unitary’ subject.” The rejection of a “unitary subject” stems from Anzaldúa’s experience of living between identity markers that attempt to constitute her subjectivity. Or as Butler claims, “[Anzaldúa- struggles with the complex mix of cultural traditions and formations that constitute for her what she is: Chicana, Mexican, lesbian, American, academic, poor, writer, activist.” As Butler asks: “Do all of these strands come together in a unified way, or does [Anzaldúa- live their incommensurability and simultaneity as the very meaning

16 Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed, 68-69.
17 Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed, 78-79.
of her identity, an identity culturally staged and produced by the very complex historical circumstances of her life?”²¹ For Butler, Anzaldúa posits the idea of a “multiple subject,” but Butler also confesses that Anzaldúa’s “point is more radical.”²² She writes, “[Anzaldúa- is asking us to stay at the edge of what we know, to put our own epistemological certainties into question, and through that risk and openness to another way of knowing and living in the world expand our capacity to imagine the human.”²³

Philosopher María Lugones also calls on the radicality of Anzaldúa’s work as she develops her own theory of “ontological pluralism” – a concept that I engage in Chapter 3.²⁴ For Lugones, the inescapability of oppression is something that must be taken seriously in any articulations of “self.”²⁵ The “inescapability” of oppression does not mean that oppression cannot be pushed against or moved through but that it is inescapable according to the “logic” of oppression.²⁶ To move oneself into the place of oppression/resistance (the two are always simultaneous realities for Lugones) one has to first realize that all self-identities are based on “maps” that are created by and based on the “logic” of oppression.²⁷ In order to move beyond this

²¹ Butler, “The Question of Social Transformation,” 228. In Chapter 3, I make a similar assertion about the prominent role of “ambiguity” in Anzaldúa’s conception of self.


²⁵ Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 6, 8-10.

²⁶ Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 12-14.

²⁷ Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 10-16.
“logic,” one has to realize that there can be multiple “maps” because there are multiple “worlds.” 28 “Worlds” refers to the multiple contexts we inhabit, the varying aspects of our identities. For Lugones, our movement between worlds is not simply that we act differently in various situations, but that we are different people in these contexts. “Each person is many.” 29 For Lugones, Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of mestiza consciousness with its suggestion of a “plural personality” enables Lugones to theorize her own understanding of the self as plural. 30

Although speaking from different fields of scholarship, most of these thinkers similarly engage Anzaldúa’s thought in relation to the broader questions of twentieth and twenty-first century debates about subjectivity. Such questions include (but are by no means limited to) analyzing the construction and deconstruction of the “S/self,” the problematics of “agency,” and the complexities of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, and other differences, especially in relation to each other. In her 2013 “Shifting Subjectivities: Mestizas, Nepantleras, and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Legacy,” literary scholar and cultural theorist Martina Koegeler-Abdi situates Anzaldúa’s work in relation to these broader debates about subjectivity. Koegeler-Abdi’s essay “traces the shifts, similarities, and differences in Anzaldúa’s vision for a transformative subjectivity from her mestiza consciousness to her latest

28 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 57-60, 85-90.
29 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 57.
concept of becoming a nepantlera.”

Arguing against interpretations of Anzaldúa’s thought that claim it is a “standpoint” theory, Koegeler-Abdi writes, “[Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness- is not exclusive to any ethnic group, and one of its central aspects is its own relation to ethnicity; it is exactly this ethnic frame of reference Anzaldúa seeks to dissolve.”

She proceeds to claim that Anzaldúa’s movement from theorizing a *mestiza* consciousness to her later theorizations of becoming a nepantlera – a person who can walk between worlds – signals Anzaldúa’s attempt to develop more inclusive ways of exploring the complexities of subjectivity by opening them to those who do not share a cultural history of *mestizaje*.

She also compares Anzaldúa’s theorization of nepantleras, particularly the “blow-up” phase of this process where existing identity categories become unstable, to “Judith Butler’s concept of (gender) performativity.”

Here, Koegeler-Abdi refers to Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. In it, Butler argues that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”

Being “male” or “female” is

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32 Martina Koegeler-Abdi, 76.

33 Martina Koegeler-Abdi, 76-85.

34 Martina Koegeler-Abdi, 81.


produced through "the repeated stylization of the body;" gender is performative. Importantly, there can be “failures” in these performances, moments when bodies do not follow their prescribed stylizations.\textsuperscript{37} As Koegeler-Abdi notes, “failure in repeated performances of identity” is “also a key constitutive element” in Anzaldúa’s work as it is in “Butler’s view of subjectivization.”\textsuperscript{38}

Although in my view Koegeler-Abdi draws too sharp a distinction between Anzaldúa’s concepts of mestiza consciousness and nepantleras – the “ambivalence” inherent in Anzaldúa’s concept of mestiza consciousness already allows for a complex and evolving theory of subjectivity – her article demonstrates how Anzaldúan concepts continue to inform scholarly debates about subjectivity. Koegeler-Abdi concludes that, “the role of spirituality in activism is central to Anzaldúa’s legacy; more work needs to be done on the activist implications of spirituality [...].”\textsuperscript{39} The role of spirituality in Anzaldúa’s writing and writing practice – which is for her a form of activism – is central to this dissertation.

It is only recently that scholars have started to analyze the role of religion and spirituality in Anzaldúa’s writings. In \textit{Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature}, literary scholar Suzanne Bost analyzes the relationship between pain and writing in Anzaldúa’s work. She argues that although “many critics avoid Anzaldúa’s spiritual leanings, this avoidance misses the crux of

\textsuperscript{37} I further discuss Butler’s theory of gender performativity, including failures in these performances, at the end of Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{38} Martina Koegeler-Abdi, 81.

\textsuperscript{39} Martina Koegeler-Abdi, 85.
[Anzaldúa’s] thinking about bodies, identities, communities, and politics.⁴⁰ Bost also refers to the work of Chicana theorist Laura E. Pérez, arguing that “spirituality” functions in Anzaldúa’s work as an “intellectually transgressive” category aimed at challenging existing epistemologies.⁴¹ Yet, while Bost and Pérez highlight the significance of “spirituality” as an area for further analysis within Anzaldúa’s work, both scholars situate this “spirituality” almost exclusively in Anzaldúa’s use of Mesoamerican religious and mythical figures in her work. This focus is shared by historian of religion Davíd Carrasco and American Studies scholar Roberto Lint Sagarena in their essay, “The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: Borderlands/La Frontera as a Shamanic Space.”⁴² While they argue that “the heart of [Anzaldúa’s] portrayal of the borderlands is articulated, and must be understood, as a religious vision,” they, too, analyze this religious vision primarily in terms of Anzaldúa’s engagement with Mesoamerican religions and shamanic practices.⁴³ Few scholars explore Anzaldúa’s engagement with the Christian religious images that are also


operative within her texts, especially in her poem “Holy Relics,” or ask how these images might also inform her concept of spirituality.\footnote{44 Anthony Lioi’s “The Best-Loved Bones: Spirit and History in Anzaldúa’s ‘Entering into the Serpent’” also offers an intriguing analysis of Christian imagery in Anzaldúa’s work, particularly as seen in Chapter 3 of Borderlands/La Frontera. Although Lioi makes a provocative argument, I find his analysis problematic because it superimposes a “Catholic imaginary” on Anzaldúa’s work that I think narrows the broader implications of her theorizations. See Anthony Lioi’s “The Best-Loved Bones: Spirit and History in Anzaldúa’s ‘Entering into the Serpent,’” in Feminist Studies, 34, nos. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2008), 73-98.}

**Tracing an Argument ... Transforming Suffering through Anzaldúan Thought**

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that Anzaldúa’s reimagining of the relationship between fragmentation and wholeness provides a powerful hermeneutic through which to trace suffering, self, and transformation in her work. In her poem, “Holy Relics,” Anzaldúa describes the violent and somewhat eroticized dismemberment of Teresa of Ávila’s body for the sake of collecting relics. Playing on the Christian understanding of “holiness” as “wholeness” or “inviolability” (from the Latin *sanctus*), the poem ironically shows the *violation* of Teresa of Avila’s body in the name of *holiness* or *inviolability*. For Anzaldúa, this tearing apart of Teresa of Ávila’s body is symbolic of the countless violations of women’s bodies, psyches, and spirits in the name of purported “holiness” or “wholeness.” Indeed, the poem’s title “Holy Relics” also offers an important play on two seemingly contradictory concepts—“holy” refers to something that is “whole” whereas “relics” refers to “fragments,” to what “remains.”\footnote{45 Oxford English Dictionary.} “Holy Relics” shows the complex interplay between whole and part, including the critical questioning and challenging of these categories.
I begin by offering a close reading of “Holy Relics” in Chapter 2. Although the poem cannot be considered a historical account of Teresa’s exhumation and dismemberment, its imaginative engagement with these events questions the very privileging of history over story. It asks whether one can ever access or tell a whole story, or if histories and stories are always already partial. Recognizing the partiality of, and slippages between, historical, mythological, and religious accounts is a significant and recurring aspect of Anzaldúa’s work. In “Holy Relics,” Anzaldúa interrogates Christian imaginaries of female holiness by troubling existing stories that locate holiness in passivity, long-suffering, and silence. Creatively envisioning the tearing apart of Teresa’s body, Anzaldúa shows how this imaginary can lead to an objectification of women’s bodies and an attempt to manipulate their power. Further, she reveals how conceptions of wholeness/holiness already carry fragmentation within them. By re-imagining wholeness and fragmentation, Anzaldúa offers a way of re-thinking suffering, one in which our brokenness opens a space through which new identities and ways of being can emerge.

Chapter 3 examines how the re-writing of myths is intimately connected to the re-writing of selves. Suffering and transformation, as Anzaldúa conceptualizes them, are tied to each other for it is a self who suffers, a self who can be transformed. For her, suffering emerges from the violence inherent in the very processes of categorization. Critical self-reflection becomes a way to move through

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46 One of many possible examples of scholarship addressing the construction of Christian female holiness in relation to suffering and violence is John M. Beard’s Writing Holiness, Writing Violence: Suffering and the Construction of Female Sanctity (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2009). I discuss Beard’s analysis in detail in Chapter 2.
this violence, but it requires learning how to embrace seemingly conflicting aspects of one’s identity. The chapter examines Anzaldúan notions of self by looking closely at “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.” It begins with Anzaldúa’s critical rethinking of José Vasconcelos’ conception of *mestizaje* in which she traces the (ab)use of women’s bodies, psyches, and spirits in the creation of the “new race.” Recognizing the violence implicit in bringing forth *la raza cósmica*, Anzaldúa argues for “a new *mestiza* consciousness” that is “*una conciencia de mujer*.”\(^{47}\) She posits a new myth – the myth of the new *mestiza*: a person who is always “greater than the sum of [her- severed parts].”\(^{48}\) The chapter then explores the broader philosophical and theoretical implications of Anzaldúan notions of self by considering their role in the work of philosopher María Lugones. Throughout, I argue that “self,” for Anzaldúa, is a process of creation and re-creation that engages flesh and spirit.

To examine how Anzaldúa’s understandings of suffering and self contribute to her conceptualization of transformation, Chapter 4 explicitly engages Anzaldúa’s concept of “spirituality.” “Spirituality,” according to Anzaldúa, is “a source of sustenance, a way of knowing, a path of survival” that “not only transforms our perceptions of ‘ordinary’ life and our relationships with others, but also invites

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\(^{47}\) Anzaldúa, “*La conciencia de la mestiza*: Towards a New Consciousness,” in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 99.

\(^{48}\) Anzaldúa, “*La conciencia de la mestiza*: Towards a New Consciousness,” in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.
encounters with other realities, other worlds.”

Pushing us to the limits of who we are (ontology) and what and how we know (epistemology), spirituality can be transformational. In Anzaldúa’s work, spirituality and transformation are not only intimately tied to each other, but also tied to the process of writing. She considers writing to be a “shamanic” act and understands her own practice of writing to be a spiritual one. By “shamanic,” she refers to the tradition of shamanism found across multiple cultures and religions within which it is believed that certain individuals are able to travel between and inhabit different realms of being. For Anzaldúa, writing and other creative acts are components of what she terms “spiritual activism” – a concept developed in her later writings. She believes that transformation of self and world – the two are never really separated in Anzaldúaan thought – can come through practices of spiritual activism, practices that invite us to move, like a shaman, between ways of being and knowing.

I begin the chapter by analyzing Anzaldúa’s understanding of writing as shamanic act/spiritual practice by looking closely at Chapter 6 of Borderlands/La Frontera, “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink” and Anzaldúa's essay, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman.” This latter text demonstrates Anzaldúa’s continued theorization of writing as shamanic/spiritual practice after the publication of Borderlands/La Frontera and furthers insights about her belief in the transformative power of re-telling stories/histories. I then turn to two of the
last writings published before Anzaldúa’s untimely death, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process” and “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts.” I argue that these texts not only offer explicit discussions of writing as spiritual activism but can also be read as examples of spiritual activism. In them, Anzaldúa acts as a poet-shaman.

In Chapter 5, I continue this analysis of spirituality in Anzaldúaan thought by looking at Anzaldúa’s posthumously published dissertation, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. Because it was published just as I was finishing this dissertation, I cannot engage each aspect of this complex work. Instead, I reflect on how these final writings show Anzaldúa’s continued theorizations of fragmentation and wholeness. These concepts inform her understanding of spirituality – a way of being and knowing capable of eliciting transformation.

By tracing suffering, self, and transformation in Anzaldúa’s work, I seek insights that might help us speak meaningfully and critically about suffering. Although my analysis of “Holy Relics” begins by showing Anzaldúa’s critique of Christian imaginaries of female holiness, my larger argument regarding her re-imagining of fragmentation and wholeness is not restricted to Christian debates about suffering. Anzaldúa's re-imagining of fragmentation and wholeness can be read as a broader critique of dualistic epistemologies and an attempt to articulate

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alternative ones. Her call to constant critical reflection on *nos/otras* is also a call to see the possibilities of transformation present in our sufferings.
Chapter 2

“The Myths in Me”:
Suffering in Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Holy Relics”

We are the holy relics,
the scattered bones of a saint,
the best loved bones of Spain.
We seek each other.
– Gloria Anzaldúa, “Holy Relics”

[Bones- do not lend themselves to easy reduction. They are by their structure hard to burn, nearly impossible to pulverize. In myth and story, they represent the indestructible soul-spirit. We know the soul-spirit can be injured, even maimed, but it is very nearly impossible to kill. – Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype

Salvation is not outside but mixed in with suffering; it is where one would not think to find it. [...]. Salvation is not a “once and for all” solution but a solution for one time, then another time, and then a thousand times. Salvation is like the breath of the Spirit – it blows where it will and as it can.
– Ivone Gebara, Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation

Introduction

To be “holy,” the Oxford English Dictionary states, is to be “kept or regarded as inviolate,” “set apart for religious use or observance,” “consecrated.” In further tracing the etymology of “holy” the dictionary states, “The sense-development < hailoÉis not clear [...- although it is with some probability assumed to have been ‘inviolate, inviolable, that must be preserved whole or intact, that cannot be injured with impunity.’” Seemingly contrary to this etymological connection to “wholeness,” is the word “relic.” By definition, a relic is
“that which remains,” “fragments,” “remnant, residue.” It is part of something larger, more whole, than itself.

The complex interplay between whole and part, including the critical questioning and challenging of these categories, can be seen in Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem, “Holy Relics.” The poem is about Teresa of Ávila: her death and the eventual dismemberment of her body for the sake of collecting relics. But a closer analysis of the poem reveals a striking and multilayered critique of violence perpetrated against women by Christianity in the name of holiness. It notes the violation implicit in keeping women inviolate. Although it cannot be considered a historical account of Teresa’s exhumation and dismemberment, the poem’s imaginative engagement of these events questions the very privileging of history over story. It implicitly asks whether one can ever access or tell a whole story, or if histories and stories are always already partial.

Recognizing the partiality of, and slippages between, historical, mythological, and religious accounts is a significant and recurring aspect of Anzaldúa’s work.1 In “Holy Relics,” Anzaldúa interrogates imaginaries of female holiness by troubling existing stories that locate holiness in passivity, long-suffering, and silence.2 Creatively depicting the tearing apart of Teresa’s body, Anzaldúa shows how this imaginary can lead to an

1 For instance, see AnaLouise Keating’s discussion of the role of mythmaking in Anzaldúa’s work in “‘There is no arcane place for return’: Revisionist Mythmaking with a Difference,” in Transformation Now: Toward a PostOppositional Politics of Change, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 111-144.

2 One example of scholarship addressing the construction of Christian female holiness in relation to suffering and violence is John M. Beard’s Writing Holiness, Writing Violence: Suffering and the Construction of Female Sanctity (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2009). I will discuss Beard’s analysis in detail later in this chapter.
objectification of women’s bodies and an attempt to manipulate their power. Further, she reveals how conceptions of wholeness/holiness already carry fragmentation within them. For Anzaldúa, wholeness and fragmentation, story and history, past and present, individual and collectivity exist always in relation to each other. Attempting to separate them from each other results in violence and furthers pain.

Examining these relationships, I offer a close reading of “Holy Relics,” letting its structure guide the organization of my reading. Throughout this analysis, I argue that Anzaldúa re-imagines the relationship between wholeness and fragmentation, and in so doing, offers a possibility for re-thinking suffering. For if stories shape the ways we suffer, they can also shape the ways we heal.

Enduring the Past

Anzaldúa’s “Holy Relics” begins with the refrain: “We are the holy relics, / the scattered bones of a saint, / the best loved bones of Spain. / We seek each other.”3 The refrain opens and closes the poem and is also repeated twice within it for a total of four repetitions. The number of repetitions is significant since the number four is an integral part of American and Mesoamerican Indigenous religions and cultures as it represents the “Four Directions.” Within these cultures, the “Four Directions” are symbolic of the entirety of earth and cosmic energies, called forth from the North, East, South, and West. Anzaldúa also held this belief, invoking the Four Directions in her other writings.4 These Four

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3 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 176.

4 See Gloria Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts” in This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation, eds. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 575.
Directions symbolize wholeness. They offer an image of coming together, a power in union. And though they can be seen as representative of a “universal” force they are not necessarily totalizing. Each direction has its own characteristics, its own energies.

Native American artist and educator Steve Willis elaborates on and complicates this symbol in his article, “The Four Directions.”\(^5\) Willis “presents the Four Directions as a catalyst to discuss how easily cultural misinformation can be presented by a different culture.”\(^6\) He notes, “I do not believe that anyone can understand cultural nuances without significant experiences in the cultural belief system.”\(^7\) Examining “the intertribal symbol of the Four Directions” with its “visual similarities and cultural understanding found among most Native American groups,” Willis attempts to show how “the meaning of [this sign is not contained within it, but arises from interpretation.”\(^8\) Although people outside of Native cultures might develop an aesthetic appreciation of this symbol, its power is most available to those who share in an experience of it. This does not mean that one has to be Native American to engage the symbol. “Being Native American does not necessarily mean understanding Native American.”\(^9\) Instead, for Willis, understanding the Four Directions – including the “relationships between humanity and divinity” that it symbolizes – demands


\(^6\) Willis, 32.

\(^7\) Willis, 32.

\(^8\) Willis, 32, 33.

\(^9\) Willis, 32.
involvement within communities that celebrate it.\textsuperscript{10} The Four Directions, if they are to be understood outside of “a historical or anthropological view” must be experienced personally and through community.\textsuperscript{11} Willis’ analysis of this symbol is pertinent to Anzaldúa’s suggestion of the Four Directions in “Holy Relics” because Willis shows how the Four Directions model a collectivity that resists uniformity and values particularity. The unity imaged by the Four Directions echoes Christian ethicist Emilie M. Townes’ claim: “unity is only vigorous in an atmosphere that is unafraid of difference and diversity – an atmosphere that does not view difference as a barrier, but rather as the proverbial stew whose aroma is richer and whose substance provides greater sustenance for the work of justice.”\textsuperscript{12} It is this type of unity that Anzaldúa summons throughout the poem: a “we,” a

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\textsuperscript{10} Willis, 33-34. The question of whether or not one can engage the symbol of the Four Directions – or any symbol for that matter – without directly participating in communities that share in its symbolic system is complex. Willis’ argument firstly, I think, rightfully cautions against appropriations of the symbol that ignore the historical and sociocultural realities of communities that celebrate it. To use the symbol of the Four Directions without acknowledging the history of multiple oppressions faced by Native Americans, including the systematic destruction of many Native American communities in North America is, for Willis, a failure to understand the symbol. Given Anzaldúa’s critical attention to the relationships between Native American and Chicana women and her commitment to social justice work, I think her use of the symbol cannot be dismissed as an “appropriation.” An excellent resource for thinking more about the complexities of cultural appropriation, including the politics of determining “authenticity,” is Anzaldúa’s “Speaking Across the Divide,” in \textit{The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader}, Ed. AnaLouise Keating, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 282-294. In it, Anzaldúa shares her own concerns and hesitations about the appropriation of Native American and other indigenous practices, especially in relation to her conceptualization of “new tribalism.” The essay also provides an interesting lens through which to engage Davíd Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena’s critiques of Anzaldúa’s use of Aztec myths that I discuss in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{11} Willis, 39-40.

collective that does not disregard particularity and difference but grows stronger through them.

“We are the holy relics, / the scattered bones of a saint, / the best loved bones of Spain. / We seek each other.” Anzaldúa repeats this refrain four times as though invoking the varied directions to which the “holy relics” have been scattered. But who are the “we” to whom Anzaldúa refers? “We” involves the poem’s writer or narrator and a greater audience. Because a reader repeats the refrain, reading or saying “we” in specific moments throughout the poem, it also seems that this “we” tries to draw in the reader: he or she or they become part of the “we.” Paradoxically, the refrain creates connections between reader and poem even while the poem itself recounts instances of disconnection (literal and figurative).

In Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature, literary scholar Suzanne Bost suggests that the “we” in “Holy Relics” might refer to the two lesbian poets, Judy Grahn and V. Sackville-West, to whom the poem is dedicated. She writes, “Each poet embodies the relics/bones/poems of her foremothers, and each is severed to bits by the conflicting expectations and critical interpretations of sexual and cultural communities.”13 Bost continues,

Anzaldúa’s poem stretches across time and nation to gather the pieces and to highlight their dispersal. She situates herself in a genealogy of impassioned women-oriented women, from Teresa to Vita to Judy Grahn, who seek each other as allied body parts. Pain and fragmentation inspire, or demand, connection with others.14


14 Bost, Encarnación, 100, Footnote 23.
Bost’s reading beautifully depicts Anzaldúa’s attention to literary foremothers and the lineage of struggle that they share. But a broader interpretation of the “we” opens “Holy Relics” to more radical implications. It calls together an expansive group of people, perhaps those who are “inspired” or “demanded” to connect with others because of “pain and fragmentation” as suggested in Bost’s last line.

In “Holy Relics,” the refrain’s first and fourth lines are set in the present tense while the second and third lines are set in the past tense, thus embedding the past in the present. The “we” of the refrain are connected to this past. They are its “holy relics,” remnants of what has endured. Yet what is this past that has endured? To whom and/or what are “we” being connected? And when were “we” initially severed?

The poem gives us clues to this past. After the opening refrain, the poem describes the “City of Ávila” with its “88 crenellated towers crowning a low hill” and its “silent landscape” scattered “here and there [with] strange stones / like prehistoric ruins.”15 It is fitting that the land is described before Teresa is introduced, as though Anzaldúa wants to first position her within her particular geographic and cultural landscape where seeming “prehistoric ruins” are juxtaposed to this “granite city in a dour land / with a cathedral for a fortress.”16 As Anzaldúa notes, the city boasts typical medieval architecture, being surrounded by a thick crenellated wall and centered on a cathedral. There is an immediate sense of confinement conveyed in these images: this is a space where boundaries are

15 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 176.

16 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 176.
clearly demarcated and readily defended. Perhaps more interesting is that the landscape surrounding the city is described as “silent” and strewn with “strange stones / like prehistoric ruins,” echoing the poem’s overall play on whole and part, on what remains and what is scattered. These scattered stones are compared to “prehistoric ruins” alluding to a time before recorded history. Drawing on this idea of “prehistory” the poem posits the possibility of something existing outside the confines of an official record. It shows that a lack of record does not necessarily mean a lack of story.

The ideas of silence and record, of story and history, are appropriate to the historical period of Teresa of Ávila’s life. Born in 1515 and dying in 1582, she entered and left a world influenced by the (fairly) new events of the Spanish Inquisition (established 1478 CE), the Spanish “discovery” and colonization of the Americas (beginning 1492 CE), the Protestant Reformation (beginning 1517 CE), and the Council of Trent (beginning 1545 CE). As a figure historically positioned between conflicting and colliding worlds, Teresa can be seen as representative of a historical borderlands. The fact that her relics are “the best loved bones of Spain” also highlights the long-reaching legacies of colonial encounters. Playing on the historical details of Teresa’s life in the poem, Anzaldúa not only points to this “past” that Teresa represents but also to the ways this past informs the present. It is this “past” that has endured, scattering relics here and there. But how does it endure? And can its psychical, spiritual, and emotional remnants ever be healed? These are the questions to which the poem now leads us.

**Stories We Suffer**
The violence of the past endures because it lingers in the very stories we continue to tell, in the myths that shape existence. “Myth,” here, refers to histories and hagiographies, to any accounts given the power to produce meaning. Interestingly, when Anzaldúa begins discussing Teresa, she does not immediately name her but refers to her as “flesh of our bones.” The editor’s note on the bottom of the page clarifies that the “she” to whom Anzaldúa refers is “Teresa de Cepeda Dávila y Ahumada.” I think that Anzaldúa’s resistance to immediately naming Teresa in the second, third, and fourth stanzas of the poem and her initial reference to Teresa as “flesh of our bones” suggests a critical re-thinking of the second creation account in Genesis – one that imagines a different use of power.

The Book of Genesis contains two accounts of creation. In the first account, “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). As the text indicates, men and women are created simultaneously, both bearing the image of God. In the second account of creation, God creates man first and brings before him all other creatures “to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen 2:19). Then, God causes “a deep sleep to fall upon the man” and takes one of the man’s ribs, which God then makes “into a woman” (Gen 2:21-22). Like the presentation of living creatures before man to see what he might name them, God also presents woman to man, giving him once again the power of naming. In naming woman, man says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken”

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17 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 176.
18 New Revised Standard Version.
(Gen 2:22-23). Significantly, the second account of creation portrays woman as derivative of man for she is created from him and is also named by him. Her identity, like the identity of other creatures, is dependent on him. Unsurprisingly, this account of creation is the one most troubling to feminist biblical scholars since it has long been used to justify male domination over women and nature.\(^{19}\)

Anzaldúa initially refers to Teresa in “Holy Relics” as “flesh of our bones” strongly alluding to man’s naming of woman as “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” in Genesis 2. Yet Anzaldúa has not only consolidated the phrase, “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” but also, and more importantly, she has reversed and pluralized it. For Anzaldúa, Teresa is “flesh of our bones.” How does this reversal and pluralization function in relation to the poem’s critique of female holiness and the role of collectivity, of the “we,” in the poem’s refrain?

Firstly, the reversal of the phrase “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” signals Anzaldúa’s critique of the sexism inherent in many foundational Christian stories (and subsequent teachings) about women. Reversing these words not only suggests a movement away from sexism but also an attempt to revisit, re\(\textit{B}\)urn to, the “origins” of this injustice. Secondly, the pluralization of the phrase suggests a collective responsibility for these myths – a decision to continually repeat or push against them.

In the poem, the first “woman” (subsequently known as Eve) and Teresa are imaginatively fused into one and can be understood to be symbolic of all women who have

not been allowed to name themselves, to exercise power. In Genesis 2, naming symbolizes power. By calling Teresa “flesh of our bones,” Anzaldúa engages in a process of naming, alluding to and exercising a power reserved to the man in Genesis 2. Yet she also reverses his words, suggesting a re-ordering of power. Power, she implies, comes from critically and creatively re-thinking and re-telling the myths that shape one’s life (and the lives of others – recall that Anzaldúa also pluralizes the phrase). Her poem shows us how Christianity’s foundational myths – biblical texts, the writings of church fathers, and even popular stories about the saints – have often tried to usurp this power from women by locating female holiness within silence, passivity, and long-suffering. “Holy Relics” thus tries to re-tell the myth of “woman” in Christianity, exposing the violence implicit in its constructions of “female holiness.”

In Writing Holiness, Writing Violence: Suffering and the Construction of Female Sanctity, historian John M. Beard traces the construction of female holiness from early Christian accounts of martyrdom through the late Middle Ages. A brief look at his work might help in understanding some “past” conceptions of holiness against which Anzaldúa pushes. Beard argues that “the suffering of women stands out in Christian hagiography. Pain is central to the stories and the holiness of female martyrs and saints.” He continues, “In writing the lives of these women, the usually male hagiographers established a model of woman as a suffering servant that became a primary component of female sanctity.

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21 Beard, 1.
Women were said to suffer for the benefit and salvation of others.”  

Beard begins by noting that “suffering, violence, and holiness are deeply connected in Christianity” for (at least) two apparent reasons. First, he argues, “at the heart of Christianity [...] is a story of redemptive suffering,” namely the passion of Jesus of Nazareth whose “suffering and death atone for the sins of the world and redeem humanity.” Second, “early Christianity was a persecuted religion, and these persecutions gave Christians the opportunities to explore and develop ideas about the redemptive powers of suffering.” Beard notes that “[these-men and women [who- were killed, in often spectacularly gruesome ways] were “rewarded for their pain with a special status: they became the first Christian saints.” 

Sanctity, thus, becomes explicitly connected to suffering in Christianity.

Although early Christian martyrs (later named saints) included both men and women, Beard argues “the female saints would eventually become the central figures in Christian constructions of salvific suffering.” Comparing and contrasting descriptions of early Christian male martyrs like Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp with those of female martyrs like Blandina, Perpetua, and Felicitas, Beard shows that “in accounts of female martyrdom women are made to suffer much more than men.”

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22 Beard, 1.
23 Beard, 1.
24 Beard, 26.
26 Beard, 26.
27 Beard, 26.
28 Beard, 37.
from the *Martyrs of Lyon*, she is “whipped, [faces- the beasts, roasted on a griddle, and finally killed by a bull.”

Compared to the men who are martyred with her, she endures the most tortures and only dies after “[ensuring the salvation of others” through her example of courage and perseverance. This tendency to exemplify salvific suffering in and through women in early Christian martyrrologies only intensifies in later Christian hagiographical accounts. As Beard notes, “by the late Middle Ages, [... women- were represented as Christ figures, and their bodies were compared to that of Christ, who was himself often seen in feminine terms.” He continues, “this led to a connection between the female body, suffering, and redemption that was highlighted in hagiography, in female devotion to the passion, in the mystical experiences of these women, and in their own writings and reflections.” Beard concludes, “as primarily male hagiographers wrote of these women – women who often had achieved a great deal of fame and power – they attempted to fit them into accepted categories of female sanctity.” Such accounts tended to “downplay the more controversial aspects of the woman’s life as well as any hints at female power and agency that might threaten the ecclesiastical hierarchy.” Many hagiographies thus serve(d) to uphold the equation of female holiness with suffering.

[29] Beard, 40.
[31] Beard, 225.
[33] Beard, 225.
[34] Beard, 225.
Taking Beard’s historical analysis of the relationship between suffering and the construction of female sanctity into account, I think it is possible to read Anzaldúa’s “Holy Relics” as a hagiography that exposes the violence against women so often perpetuated through that very genre. Anzaldúa shows how “holiness” – being inviolate – often comes through violation, especially for women.\(^{35}\) This can be seen in Anzaldúa’s poetic descriptions of the ways in which Teresa’s body is literally torn apart, even stolen, for the sake of relics. She begins by noting how Teresa’s “daughters, the nuns of Alba, came to her daily,” tending her grave, but remaining silent about “a scent / to which they could give no name” and “a sound to which they could give no name.” The nuns, Anzaldúa suggests, do not engage in the power of naming, instead “they waited for the good father Gracian, / Teresa’s beloved confessor, / waited to tell him of that scent and of that sound.” Here, the nuns, supposed exemplars of what it means to be *good* women, wait for a male cleric to give them permission to name their experiences. With his approval, they help him unbury Teresa’s body, “[holding- the torches / while Father and friar shoveled.” Note again the passivity of their role as torch holders rather than those actually shoveling. Even when they do act, it is to “[clear- away the rubble” created by the priest and friar, cleaning up their mess.

Yet more striking is how Anzaldúa contrasts the nuns’ and priest’s interactions with Teresa’s freshly exhumed body. The nuns “gazed and gazed at their beloved” and “removed

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\(^{35}\) Although “Holy Relics” speaks explicitly about violence against women and their suffering, Anzaldúa’s many writings also recognize violence perpetuated against men and/or those who wish to identify by other or no genders. See, for instance, “Que no se nos olviden los hombres” in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 105-107. In the following chapter, I will elaborate on Anzaldúa’s critique of identity categories and their role in constituting/constraining subjectivities.
her mouldy habit, / with knives scraped away the earth clinging to her skin, / looked their fill, / then wrapped her in clean linen” while the priest “lifted her hand as if to kiss it, / placed a knife under her wrist / and from her rigid arm he severed it.” Then, Anzaldúa writes, “the father Teresa had loved stood smiling, / hugging her hand to his body.” Upon first glance, it seems that the nuns are much more reverent in their handling of Teresa’s body than is the priest who quickly (and literally) takes a piece of her body for himself, perhaps attempting to appropriate her power. But if one reads the stanza more closely, a complex picture of objectification and violation begins to emerge.

Firstly, there is the mention of the "gaze," in which the nuns, and probably the priest, engage. What exactly are they looking at? Initially, it seems that they are looking simply upon the face of “their beloved” Teresa, happy to see her once again. But then, this gaze shifts, almost pornographically, since the nuns have “removed her mouldy habit” presumably leaving Teresa naked and exposed. And then, Anzaldúa writes, only after they had “looked their fill” did they “[wrap- her in clean linen.” Here, it seems that the nuns engage in a type of voyeurism not typically expected from women who are vowed celibates. They “gaze and gaze” at Teresa, they undress her, they scrape her body with a knife, they look some more, and then they wrap her once again. Most disturbing about this episode is

that Teresa is dead, unable to speak or act for herself, unable to avoid their gazes or push away their hands. It is a type of ritual violation. And yet, the poem implies that this violation is exactly what it takes to be recognized as a “holy” woman. Indeed, it seems to be a direct commentary on the construction of female holiness, having so little to do with the woman’s agency, having everything to do with an examination of her body.

The violation of women’s bodies in the name of holiness is even more graphically seen in the interactions between Teresa’s body and male characters in the poem. Firstly, there is the erotized violence of Father Gracian severing her hand which he then “[hugs ...- to his body.” One wonders if Teresa would want to be touching him so closely, but again, she has no voice. At this point in the poem, the refrain interrupts the narrative flow: “We are the holy relics, / the scattered bones of a saint, / the best loved bones of Spain. / We seek each other.” It is as though Anzaldúa is summoning this we/us to speak for Teresa, to interrupt the violence perpetuated against her, against women, against us. “Pero para los santos no hay descanso, / [but- for saints there is no rest” and Teresa is once again tormented by “another priest [who- fell upon her tomb / to claim her holy body for Ávila.”

Here, grammatically speaking, “holy” is used adjectivally, suggesting that the “holy” (however understood) modifies Teresa’s “body,” which is the subject of this modification. The poem shows her body subjected to holiness. It also highlights the link between women’s bodies and nationalism since her “holy body” is claimed “for Ávila.”
Like the formation of nations that involves the creation and policing of borders and bodies, holiness also involves a messy politics of demarcation. Who is declared holy is also a commentary on what is declared holy. As Beard discusses, hagiography – the writing of holiness – not only “[tells- the stories of the saints, but also [...] constructs- Christian ideals of holiness and virtue and [imparts- these to other Christians.” If “Holy Relics” is functioning as a hagiographical account, how is Anzaldúa writing holiness and what ideals does she impart?

Claiming her holy body for Ávila, the second priest, “Father Gregorio de Naciancene,” cuts off one of Teresa’s arms and “flinging the arm at the nuns of Alba / as one would a bone to a dog / he detained them long enough / to mount the shroud on horseback / and gallop away.” It is worth noting the disdain with which Teresa’s arm is “flung” at the nuns who are compared to “dogs” receiving a “bone,” a scrap to chew on while this man “mounts the shroud [Teresa’s entire corpse- on horseback.” Here, her sisters have been disrespected, her arm has been severed, and her entire body has been “claimed for Ávila” and thus stolen. Again, Anzaldúa highlights the violence perpetuated against women in the name of supposed holiness, showing how their entire bodies can literally (and figuratively) be claimed for the Church and society but seldom for themselves. Again, the refrain interrupts the poem’s narrative flow: “We are the holy relics, / the scattered bones of a


38 Beard, 6. For a more detailed explanation of the genre of hagiography, including contestations of the term, see Beard, Writing Holiness, 4-12.
saint, / the best loved bones of Spain. / We seek each other.” Once again, the reader is asked to place her/himself in Teresa’s position, to be part of the “we.” This repetition is poignant not only because it calls upon a reader’s response, but also because it shows how this response can literally interrupt the problematic actions taking place. Is this an ideal Anzaldúa is imparting, namely that healing the enduring violence of the past demands interrupting stories we have been given? Does this interruption lead us to holiness? What power might be found in refusing to repeat these myths?

But “for the saints there is no rest” and thus the poem moves quickly from its interruptive refrain to its ongoing narrative. “Through the bitter winds of Ávila / Teresa raced from the grave. / She traveled at night, / and briefly during the run she stopped / to resuscitate a dying child / with the edge of her bloodstained rag, / paused to heal the fiery eyes of a shepherd.”39 Here, the poem’s narrative shifts as it describes Teresa acting on her own rather than being acted upon. She is “[racing- from the grave” and “[traveling- at night.” There is a difference between this Teresa who acts and “the shroud,” the body that is also Teresa. Such a difference reflects the greater possible dissonances between stories and histories that the poem highlights; the dissonances between alternate accounts of Teresa’s holiness and “official” Church renderings of her life. The poem favors the Teresa who acts on her own, who is not manipulated by others since it is only this Teresa who is able to work miracles. (Is this what holiness looks like?) Later in the poem, it is again the Teresa who acts on her own that is able to “cure a monk’s malaria.”40

39 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 178.
40 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 180.
When acting on her own, Teresa first stops to heal others with “the edge of her bloodstained rag.” This rag is described earlier in the poem as “the cloak of white bunting / that had staunched the flow from her mouth at her deathbed.” It is curiously “bright red as if freshly soaked” though Teresa has already been dead for two years. Already miraculous in terms of its appearance, this rag becomes a medium for healing in the poem. It is Teresa’s blood, and later her scent, that prove curative. According to archetypal psychology, blood is a common symbol of life, or the life force. Christianity also holds blood to be symbolic of life, specifically the Blood of Christ as salvific and ritually consumed during Eucharist. When pertaining to female bodies, there are two types of blood: the blood that is life force which if lost can lead to death and the blood that is part of menstruation which flows without causing death. Menstrual blood is often stigmatized as impure, or at least treated ambivalently, within many religious traditions including Christianity. Yet like Teresa’s bloodstained rag that heals, one of Jesus’ miracles specifically involves a woman, bleeding, and a cloak.

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of a hemorrhaging woman who had bled for twelve years and was healed by touching Jesus’ cloak (Mk 5:25-34). Similar to Anzaldúa’s critical re-thinking of Genesis 2, the poem implicitly alludes to a text foundational to

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Christianity and its depictions of women. In the Markan text, the woman, tired of suffering after having “endured much under many physicians,” approaches Jesus for healing (Mk 5:26). “She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well’” (Mk 5:27-28). She is instantly healed while Jesus is “immediately aware that power [has- gone forth from him” (Mk 5:30). Questioning the crowd, Jesus seeks to know who touched him. The woman, “in fear and trembling, [falls- down before him, and [tells- him the whole truth” (Mk 5:33). He says to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease” (Mk 5:34). Striking about this Gospel story is the agency exerted by the hemorrhaging woman. According to the account, she takes power from Jesus; in turn, Jesus tells her that her faith has made her well. Although the object of healing is technically Jesus' cloak, the woman – tired of suffering, having lost so much blood, so much life – is able to actively pursue and find her own healing.

Teresa’s bloodstained rag exudes a similar force. Although once used to “staunch the flow from her mouth,” which can also be read as an image of violent silencing, Teresa's bloodstained rag now “[resuscitates- a dying child” and “[heals- the fiery eyes of a shepherd.”⁴³ The poem shows that this seemingly lost life force, when used by the woman who lost it, is able to heal others. Why might this be? Is it a metaphor for the poem’s project of re-imagining Teresa and, by extension, re-imagining a conception of female holiness that reclaims women’s lost power to heal themselves and others? Indeed, this

⁴³ Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 178.
powerful source of healing ceases once the narrative shifts back to the passive “shroud riding on horseback.”

The poem continues, “Into San José convent he took her / and placed her upon a bright carpet. / A small group gathered around, / each held a flaming torch. / All were crying.” Again, Teresa is “[taken-” by a priest and “placed,” her body acted upon by others. She becomes a spectacle around which “a small group [gathers-.” Similar to the nuns of Alba and Fr. Gracian mentioned earlier in the poem, this small group also objectifies Teresa’s body. The poem gives the account of one of these people, “one witness” who “described the corpse.” According to this witness, “The body [...] can be made to stand upright, / if propped with a hand between the shoulders, / and this is the position they hold it / when it is to be dressed or undressed, / as though it were alive.” Note the manipulation of Teresa’s body, being “made to stand upright,” “propped with a hand between the shoulders.” This manipulation parallels the manipulation of history and story, the “witness’” account presumably “propping up” Christian teachings regarding female sanctity.

Further disconcerting is that “this is the position they hold [her body- when it is to be dressed and undressed.” Again, Teresa’s body is curiously stripped and clothed. The troubling gaze the nuns of Alba previously cast on the body is seen here again as the witness notes that “the colour of the body / is of the colour of dates” while “the face [is- darker.” The fact that the “witness” contrasts the color of the body with the color of the face implies that Teresa is left “undressed” long enough for this observation to be made. The account claims “the face [was- darker, / because the veil became stuck to it, / and it
was maltreated more than the rest; nevertheless, it is intact.” There is an awkward confession in these lines as the witness notes that Teresa’s face “was maltreated more than the rest” because it is an admission of overall “maltreatment.” The realization that this use of Teresa’s body is possibly abusive lingers just beneath the surface of the witness’ account as though waiting to break into consciousness. Yet according to the poem, the “witness” and other members of the “small group” do not share this consciousness since they continue their explorations of Teresa’s body noting that “the head [that- has retained all its hair” and “the eyes, [which- having lost their vital moisture, / are dried up, but the eyelids are perfectly preserved.” Indeed, most disturbing to them seems to be her mouth that “is tightly shut and cannot be opened.” It is only that which they cannot manipulate that most frustrates them.

In these lines, the poem makes some of its strongest arguments regarding the relationships between wholeness and fragmentation, history and story, specifically as seen in the construction of Christian female holiness. Firstly, there is the striking lack of the refrain “We are the holy relics …” in this part of the poem. Indeed, the refrain is only repeated once more at the very end of the poem. If, as previously mentioned, the refrain can be read as an interruption of the violations taking place and a call to action on the part of readers, then its absence from the last three pages of the poem is significant. What happens in these pages and what, if anything, do they ask of “we” who “are the holy relics”? To answer these questions, “we” must again look carefully at the poem. Returning to the “witness”’ description of Teresa’s body, there is the peculiar confession of “maltreatment” that emerges subtly and literally in one line. If one does not read the poem closely, this
detail can be easily missed, quickly covered by the witness’ insistence that this
“maltreatment” does not matter because “nevertheless, [Teresa] is intact.” Note how often
this rhetorical construction emerges in the witness’ account: “the face [...] maltreated more
than the rest; / nevertheless, it is intact”; “even the nose is undamaged”; “the eyes, having
lost their vital moisture, / are dried up, but the eyelids are perfectly preserved”; even “the
moles on her face retain their little hairs.” There is almost an obsessive quality in the need
to prove the intactness of Teresa’s body, to keep it “perfectly preserved.” What is the
relationship between this obsession with “intactness” and certain understandings of female
holiness? Indeed, what exactly is being “perfectly preserved” since the very same account
acknowledges that Teresa has already been dismembered saying, “the shoulder from which
the arm was severed / exudes a moisture that clings to the touch.” The poem shows gaps in
the “official” narrative, moments of potentially unwitting internal contradiction in this
“witness”’ account. But they can only be recognized by reading closely and sometimes
between the lines. The poem asks: what stories emerge in the midst of a given history?
Like Teresa, the “witness’ account,” the “official” history is not whole; it is partial. Perhaps,
then, it is the possibility of imagination that enables a reader to interrupt the narrative by
wondering what stories are unable to escape Teresa’s “tightly shut” mouth. Obviously the
poem cannot tell us what Teresa might say, but its imaginative engagement with Teresa’s
death and dismemberment posits a different way of looking at constructions of female
holiness. And this imagining calls forth a different type of consciousness, one that pays
critical attention to the words, the stories that are sometimes forced into our mouths and
minds.
As the poem continues, we learn that “news of [Teresa’s- disinterment spread” causing “the Duke of Alba” to “[petition- the pope for the immediate return of the body.” Again, Teresa’s body is claimed by others and “once more Teresa traveled, / traveled at night / away from the 88 towers. / Through the bitter winds of Ávila / she galloped toward her grave.” The active Teresa, as opposed to the passive shroud, appears again. “Abbots on well-fed mules turned and gaped. / Peasants stopped thrashing their corn. / They followed the mysterious smell / and saw it cure a monk’s malaria.” Yet again, the active Teresa proves to be miraculous, healing a monk through her scent. Worth noting is the contrast between the reaction of the “abbots on well-fed mules” who “[turn- and [gape-]” and the peasants “[thrashing their corn-” who actually see her scent “cure a monk’s malaria.” These marginal members of society who presumably have less than even the abbots’ “well-fed mules” are able to see the miraculous possibilities of the active Teresa whereas the privileged abbots turn and gape. Similar to the other men of privilege – the priests, duke, and pope – mentioned earlier in the poem, the abbots seem shocked by the power inherent in the Teresa who acts for herself. Unlike the shroud, her lifeless body, the Teresa who acts for herself cannot be easily controlled. She heals those she wants to heal: a dying child, a shepherd, even a monk. Ironically, the men and women (recall the nuns of Alba) who continually claim Teresa’s body want her precisely because of her power – why else would they keep taking pieces from it? – yet their constant pulling apart of Teresa’s body is what seems to yield her powerless. Note that the poem never shows miracles in relation to the pieces taken from Teresa’s body. Instead, it highlights the greed and violence inherent in the collection of these parts.
During yet another exhumation, the poem shows “a crowd gathered round, / eyes coveting her body. / Over-ardent fingers – / fingers that once had loved her – / pinched off pieces of her flesh.” More priests claim her body, one “snapping off two fingers,” another “[grasping- her right foot / and blessing her / [severing- it from her ankle.” Still, “a third fell upon her breast / and from her side / plucked three ribs.” The poem shows the bitter irony in these actions: love that covets, blessings that sever. The categories become perverted: they are contrary to themselves. Perhaps, that is why these relics cannot heal: they are not holy, at least not as the poem might imagine holiness. These are unholy relics that “lay” like “a crippled bird.”

**Seeking Each Other**

The poem problematizes the connection between female holiness and suffering by showing how suffering is inscribed in us through the myths we are told and continue to

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44 The term “crippled” here can be problematic. Anzaldúa is using it to suggest that Teresa’s relics – when misused by over-ardent fingers – are similar to a bird that cannot fly. Both have supposedly lost some of their power. Although this simile furthers the contrast that Anzaldúa creates between the Teresa who acts on her own and the lifeless shroud that is constantly manipulated, it is problematic from a critical disabilities studies perspective. Theologian Sharon Betcher’s *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) offers an engaging analysis of constructions of “normalcy” that sheds light on how terms like “cripple” uphold oppressive imaginaries of normalcy and abnormality. It is somewhat telling that even Anzaldúa, whose work is deeply committed to pushing against dualistic imaginaries, still uses “crippled” to suggest a lack of power. To be fair, Anzaldúa’s critical engagement of wholeness and fragmentation might complicate how such a term functions in her work since for Anzaldúa brokenness does not always leave us powerless. For further information about Anzaldúa and her thoughts about disability and disability studies see, “Disability & Identity: An E-mail Exchange & a Few Additional Thoughts,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, Ed. AnaLouise Keating, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 298-302.
tell. It is an attempt to move away from processes of socio-emotional conditioning that might make us see wholeness where in fact there is fragmentation. In “Holy Relics,” Anzaldúa suggests that the myth of “woman,” and more specifically of what it means to be a “holy woman,” in Christianity is tightly bound to histories and practices of violence. Calling on the image of Teresa of Ávila and creatively reimagining her death and dismemberment functions as a way of breaking this myth.

For Anzaldúa, myths are not only stories we tell – they, too, tell us, as Chapter 3 will show. We perform these myths; we embody them. Such an understanding of myth strongly resonates with philosopher Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. In it, Butler argues that gender is constituted by the stylized repetition of acts.

As theologian Mayra Rivera notes, “this is Butler’s elaboration on Simone de Beauvoir’s claim ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’” Being “female” or “male” is the repetition of acts that reflect social norms of what it means to be “female” or “male.” Most relevant for understanding the function of myth in “Holy Relics,” Butler’s understanding of performativity emphasizes that there can be slippages in these performances. Or as Rivera notes, “there is a dynamic difference between the norm and its materialization.”

45 Anzaldúa discusses this idea of reframing consciousness in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She writes, “Sometimes I put the imagination to a more rare use. I choose words, images, and body sensations and animate them to impress them on my consciousness, thereby making changes in my belief system and reprogramming my consciousness” (92). The relationship between consciousness and subjectivity, as Anzaldúa understands it, is explored in the next chapter.


48 Rivera, *Poetics*, 147.
explains that “repetitions of a given gesture, movement, or style can introduce difference” in terms of what it means to be “female” or “male.”  

Moreover, “in time, such failures might open spaces for the emergence of new identities.”  

In “Holy Relics” there is a strong contrast between the Teresa who performs the myth of “female holiness” and the Teresa who “fails” to do so by instead acting on her own. Yet, it is only the Teresa who fails to follow the myth of female holiness that works miracles. She is the holy woman. Her failures to perform female sanctity paradoxically “open spaces for the emergence of new identities,” including new understandings of what it means to be “holy.”

Holiness, Anzaldúa suggests, can emerge from our supposed failures to perform the myths in us, especially when we recognize that these myths perpetuate violence against nos/otras. These failures in performativity are akin to the gaps in “official” histories – the gaps through which different stories, alternative accounts, emerge because a space opens for them. It is in this way that fragmentation can lead to wholeness and that “relics” can heal: they open a space for something different; they offer alternatives to the norms that hurt us. Healing is not an act of restoring things to what they once were, but learning to see brokenness as a space of possibility. By showing how certain notions of holiness can lead to fragmentation, the poem simultaneously shows how certain understandings of fragmentation can potentially lead to wholeness. The “holy relics” who are summoned by the refrain are themselves fragmented, “the scattered bones of a saint,” but in seeking each

49 Rivera, Poetics, 147.

50 Rivera, Poetics, 147.
other, they begin to move toward a collective power. Together they offer a type of wholeness that serves as a new model of holiness.

In the last lines of “Holy Relics” Anzaldúa writes, “Above the high altar at Alba, / the fifth and final resting place, / lie the remains of a woman.” The “remains” are no longer explicitly named as those of Teresa, echoing my earlier argument that the poem fuses Teresa with Eve, the “original” woman. Both become symbolic of “woman.” And then, the poem concludes with the fourth repetition of the refrain: “We are the holy relics, / the scattered bones of a saint, / the best loved bones of Spain. / We seek each other.” Once again, “we,” relics of the holy, are called to action, gaining strength precisely through our brokenness. If “Holy Relics” serves as a type of alternative hagiography – if it writes holiness – it writes a holiness capacious enough to contain and celebrate its own fragmentation.
Chapter 3

“What We Include”: Conceiving “Self”

If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. – Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

One might assert that Latina theories attend to the ambivalence of the identities that emerge from colonial encounters – identities that are openly and intensely sexualized, gendered, and racialized. But one would need to add that the aim is not simply to describe the configurations of power that have affected Latina bodies, but more significantly to reconfigure them by offering alternative theorizations of embodiment. – Mayra Rivera Rivera, “Thinking Bodies: The Spirit of a Latina Incarnational Imagination”

Introduction

By questioning constructions of wholeness and fragmentation as specifically related to female holiness, Anzaldúa’s “Holy Relics” shows how suffering is embedded in and perpetuated through cultural and religious myths. These myths write us. Re-writing myths is thus connected to re-writing selves. Suffering and transformation, as Anzaldúa conceptualizes them, are inextricably connected to understandings of self. It is a “self” who suffers, a “self” who can be transformed. But what does Anzaldúa mean by “self”?

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To speak of “self” in Anzaldúa demands “a tolerance for ambiguity.”¹ Affirming the “Self” while also keeping it fluid and multiple, Anzaldúa thinks through subjectivity in ways that challenge existing philosophical, theoretical, and theological categories. For her, suffering emerges from the violence inherent in the very processes of categorization. Critical self-reflection becomes a way to move through this violence but it requires learning how to embrace seemingly conflicting aspects of one’s identity. It requires learning to live in the borderlands understood as both psychical state and sociopolitical location.

In this chapter I examine Anzaldúan notions of self by looking closely at “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness.” I begin with Anzaldúa’s critical rethinking of José Vasconcelos’ conception of mestizaje in which she traces the (ab)use of women’s bodies, psyches, and spirits in relation to the creation of the “new race.” Recognizing the violence implicit in conceiving, birthing, and nurturing la raza cósmica, Anzaldúa argues for “a new mestiza consciousness” that is “una conciencia de mujer.”² For Anzaldúa, this new consciousness enables the new mestiza to “[operate- in a pluralistic mode] where she is able to “sustain contradictions” and “[turn- the ambivalence into something else.”³ This “something else” is a mode of being in the world, a type of consciousness that is foundational to Anzaldúa’s understanding of subjectivity and spirituality.⁴ In Anzaldúan thought,

¹ Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 101, 104.
² Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 99.
³ Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 101.
⁴ I will elaborate on Anzaldúa’s definition of “consciousness” later in this chapter.
such a *mestiza* consciousness is not limited to those who identify with a specific racial, ethnic, or cultural community but is open to all people who find themselves precisely by “breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm”\(^5\) or category attempting to define them. I then explore the broader philosophical and theoretical implications of Anzaldúa’s notions of self by considering their role in the work of María Lugones. I argue that the self, for Anzaldúa, is a process of creation and re-creation that engages body and spirit. And “though [this process- is a source of intense pain,” it is only through it that we might become people who can live in nonhierarchical multiplicity.\(^6\)

**Reconceiving Mestizaje**

Mexican philosopher and politician José Vasconcelos is best known for his concept of *mestizaje* as theorized in his 1925 book, *La Raza Cósmica/The Cosmic Race*. In his Prologue to the 1948 edition of his text Vasconcelos explains that “the central thesis of this book is that the various races of the earth tend to intermix at a gradually increasing pace, and eventually will give rise to a new human type, composed of selections from each of the races already in existence.”\(^7\) Commenting on this “new human type,” Anzaldúa notes that Vasconcelos’ project envisions “a cosmic race, *la raza cósmica*, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the

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\(^5\) Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.

\(^6\) Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.

world.”\(^8\) His theory of a cosmic race, she acknowledges, can be read as an attempt to defend the legitimacy of mestizo peoples. She writes, “opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, [Vasconcelos’] theory is one of inclusivity.”\(^9\)

For Vasconcelos, it was an “abundance of love that allowed the Spaniard to create a new race with the Indian and the Black, profusely spreading white ancestry through the soldier who begat a native family.”\(^10\) Contrary to the “English [who-kept on mixing only with the whites and annihilated the natives],” Vasconcelos argues that “Spanish colonization’s” willingness to “[create- mixed races] enabled it to be at the forefront of creating the cosmic race.\(^11\) This cosmic race, “made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples,” is “for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision.”\(^12\) Mestizaje is, for Vasconcelos, a project of inclusivity; it holds the promise of a fuller humanity. He writes, “the most illustrious epochs of humanity have been, precisely, those in which several different peoples have come into contact and mixed with each other.”\(^13\)

Criticized for his “pseudo-factual or pseudo-scientific style,” Vasconcelos’ text “has traditionally been taken as a racist theory for the encouragement of a people

\(^8\) Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 99.


\(^10\) Vasconcelos, 17.

\(^11\) Vasconcelos, 17-18.

\(^12\) Vasconcelos, 20.

\(^13\) Vasconcelos, 32.
with deeply rooted feelings of inferiority.”14 Yet Anzaldúa paradoxically engages Vasconcelos’ theory in her own theorizations of *mestizaje* and *mestiza* consciousness – theories that strive against the very violence of racism and sexism to which his work seems oblivious. What does this imply for understanding *mestizaje* in her work?

Anzaldúa begins her analysis of Vasconcelos with a short though telling phrase: “*Por la mujer de mi raza / hablará el espíritu*” (“Through the woman of my race / the spirit will speak”). In her footnote to these words she writes, “this is my own ‘take off’ on José Vasconcelos’ idea.”15 Strikingly, Anzaldúa immediately positions Vasconcelos’ text in relation to gender, sexuality, and spirit. This interpretive move signals two things: first, a recognition of the importance and influence of Vasconcelos’ work in theorizing *mestizaje* and second, a critical modification of his theory. This critical modification of his theory is the inclusion of *female* gender and sexuality – it is “through the woman of [her- race]” that the “spirit will speak.” Such a modification suggests that Anzaldúa does not share Vasconcelos’ indifference to the sexual, racial, colonial violence from which *mestizo* people emerged. For Anzaldúa, the “coming into contact and mixing” between races implicit in *mestizaje* is certainly not as “inclusive” or “illustrious” as Vasconcelos argues. It is, at least initially, the product of colonial, racialized, and gendered

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violence. Thus, by claiming that his "theory is one of inclusivity" she does not ignore the racist and sexist tendencies, among others, within Vasconcelos' text. She does not look away from the sexual violence experienced by the "woman of [her- race] through whom Vasconcelos' "new human type" emerged.¹⁶

Still, Anzaldúa draws on Vasconcelos' work to theorize her own understanding of mestiza consciousness. I think her attraction to Vasconcelos' writing is not only the obvious importance of his work in tracing the intellectual history of "mestizaje," but also the religious and spiritual elements in his work. Recall that Anzaldúa begins her analysis of Vasconcelos by invoking the term "spirit." As Latin American literary scholar Didier T. Jaén notes, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu"/ "The Spirit shall speak through my race" was "the motto of the National University" in Mexico during Vasconcelos' time as Minister of Education.¹⁷

¹⁶ Sociologist María L. Amado further highlights the problematics of mestizaje in her article, "The 'New Mestiza,' the Old Mestizos: Contrasting Discourses on Mestizaje," Sociological Inquiry, Vol. 82, No. 3, (August 2012), 446-459. She writes, "the main purpose of this article is to shed light on the polysemic nature of mestizaje by analyzing the discrepant logic and rhetoric of two influential writers who theorized extensively about mestizo/mestiza consciousness and role in history" (447). Amado proceeds to note how Vasconcelos understood mestizaje biologically instead of culturally, as a center rather than a margin, fostering a dualistic rather than a pluralistic perspective. In other words, Vasconcelos' understanding of mestizaje is practically the antithesis of Anzaldúa's mestiza. Amado's article insists that this complex history of mestizaje must be taken into account whenever this concept is used in theoretical formulations. Similar to Anzaldúa, Amado argues that mestizaje cannot be understood apart from the violence it recalls and potentially perpetuates. Indeed, Amado also aims to "discuss the relevance of mestizaje beyond academic debates, by examining how this multifarious concept has translated into dominant discourse and influenced the substance of racial and ethnic relations throughout various Latin American countries" (447). For example, what happens to mestizaje when it is used to alienate and "Other" those who do not embody it as in the case of "unassimilated Indigenous communities and Afro-descendants which do not fit predominant representations of the mestizo" (455).

It is indicative of Vasconcelos’ vision of humanity’s future, one that he hoped “would be nothing less than an era of the expansion of human consciousness beyond the present limits prescribed by science and logic.”

Jaén elaborates on Vasconcelos’ mystic leanings, noting “Vasconcelos’ essay is obviously not scientific, it is *divinatory and inspirational*, and thus it should be read.” He also draws parallels between Vasconcelos and the French Jesuit philosopher and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, showing how each imagined that racial intermixing would lead human evolution towards a “universal morality.”

Jaén argues that Vasconcelos was influenced by Theosophy, having “read and [taken- copious notes on Indian philosophy, including the works of the Theosophists” during Vasconcelos’ 1910 exile to New York.

In *Longing for the Fifth Race: Esoteric Racialist Revolutionaries in Hispanic America, 1910–1935*, political scientist Marco A. Navarro-Génie similarly notes that “[Vasconcelos- also mixed the language of spiritism with the esoteric language of Oriental [sic- religion that has been absorbed by Theosophy.”

Inspired by Theosophical thought as well as other “esoteric” epistemologies, spirituality is implicit in Vasconcelos’ text. This spirituality is articulated as a belief in the human capacity for transformation and a push towards it. Anzaldúa’s use and

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critical re-phrasing of the motto (associated with Vasconcelos’ vision) to introduce her own theory regarding *mestiza* consciousness suggests that she finds a foundation in Vasconcelos’ conception of *mestizaje*, including its notions of spirituality, for her own thinking – something from which to “take off.”

Anzaldúa and Vasconcelos share the insight that *mestizaje* can lead to an alternative consciousness, one that values the coming together of seemingly disparate parts. For Vasconcelos, this consciousness is bound up in a model of subjectivity that tends to highlight the positive possibilities of *mestizaje* while refusing to look more closely at its shadows. Anzaldúa, on the other hand, shows that a *mestiza* consciousness can only be reached precisely by examining the violence from which *mestizaje* emerges. The fact that she changes the motto to include gender and sexuality, specifically *female* gender and sexuality, demonstrates her refusal to ignore the sexual violence inherent in *mestizaje*. Similar to her rethinking of myths regarding female holiness as seen in “Holy Relics,” Anzaldúa pushes against foundational myths of *mestizaje* that refuse to acknowledge their participation in, and perpetuation of, violence.

In theorizing *mestizaje*, Anzaldúa shows two ways *mestizaje* can be understood: one as a description of historical events, i.e., the Spanish colonization of the Americas and intermixing with native peoples, and the other as an orientation toward the world – *a consciousness* – that resists dualistic constructions of

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subjectivity. Although distinct, these two senses of “mestizaje” are deeply interconnected. Anzaldúa traces the historical reality of mestizaje in the very first chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She writes, “At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico and, with the help of tribes that the Aztecs had subjugated, conquered it.” Anzaldúa emphasizes the violence inherent in this history by noting that there were “twenty-five million Indian people in Mexico and the Yucatán” before “the Conquest” whereas “immediately after the Conquest, the Indian population had been reduced to under seven million.” She continues, “En 1521 nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el *mexicano* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings.” Unlike Vasconcelos’ romanticized description of the Spaniards’ “abundance of love” in their “willingness” to “create mixed races,” Anzaldúa is rather reserved and matter-of-fact in her description of the historical origins of mestizaje. Her words seem intentionally sobering, inviting a reader to imagine what atrocities led to the decimation of over eighteen million people. And then, she proceeds to tell *nos/otras*: from these atrocities, “a new race,” the “mestizo” race, emerged.

Anzaldúa argues that these violent origins create a perpetual ambivalence for “la mestiza” who “is a product of the transfer of cultural and spiritual values of one group to another.” This transfer is a sexual one and Anzaldúa acknowledges this as

25 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 27.

26 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 27.

27 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 27.
she writes, “in a state of perpetual transition, the *mestiza* faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?”

Here, the rape of the “native” or “darkskinned” woman underlying the creation of *la raza cósmica* comes to the fore. Anzaldúa offers an insight regarding the psychical and spiritual trauma embedded in this sexual violation. The “daughter of the darkskinned mother” is torn, Anzaldúa suggests, between “the clash of voices” and cultures, simultaneously vying for her allegiance.

“Inclusivity” for the *mestiza* demands including and reflecting upon the many, and often contradictory, identity categories that constitute her subjectivity. This is the second sense of “*mestizaje:*” an orientation toward the world, a *consciousness*, which pushes against dualistic modes of thinking and being.

Anzaldúa’s definition of “consciousness” fittingly shifts throughout the course of her thinking and writing. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “consciousness” signifies an “awareness” of self, others, and world(s). Such awareness comes through knowledge that is gained not only intellectually, but also spiritually, psychically, and physically (as in bodily sensations). This definition of consciousness intentionally acknowledges the “psychic experiences” and “inner senses” that Anzaldúa argues are denigrated by “white rationality” and its “consciousness of duality.”

For Anzaldúa, “consciousness” shapes, and is shaped by, experiences which can limit or expand it. In an essay based on a 1986 lecture

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28 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.

29 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.

but only published in 2009, Anzaldúa writes that “there are many modes of consciousness.”31 She continues, there are “the rational, reasoning mode, which is to me connected with the external reality, with the world that we inhabit right now; and other modes of consciousness connected with the world of imagination, the world of fantasy, and the world of images.”32 It is the work of “writers, artists, and creative scientists” to “traffic back and forth between these worlds, switching from one mode of consciousness to another.”33 In the same 1986 essay, Anzaldúa critiques “Levi-Strauss” and other “white anthropologists” who categorized certain forms of consciousness as “‘primitive,’” and as the “‘participation mystic,’” unable to reach the “‘highest’ mode of consciousness, rationality.”34 Holding “rationality” to be the highest form of consciousness disregards other ways of knowing, such as bodily sensations and spiritual experiences, both of which Anzaldúa believes also inform consciousness. In Borderlands/La Frontera and her subsequent writings, Anzaldúa not only argues for a recognition of multiple forms of consciousness, but also for forms of consciousness that resist the violence of categorization and (de)valuation.35


32 Anzaldúa, “Creativity and Switching Modes of Consciousness,” 103.

33 Anzaldúa, “Creativity and Switching Modes of Consciousness,” 103. It is interesting that this image of consciousness as a movement between worlds also emerges in Lugones’ understanding of subjectivity that I discuss later in this chapter. In Chapter 4, I analyze this movement between worlds in relation to the performance of the shaman in Anzaldúaan discussions of writing and spirituality.

34 Anzaldúa, “Creativity and Switching Modes of Consciousness,” 105-106.

As I show later in this chapter, Anzaldúa also uses “consciousness” synonymously with “soul” in “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness,” drawing spirituality into her conception of “self.”

“Mestiza consciousness” – sometimes used interchangeably with “borderlands consciousness” – is one of Anzaldúa’s earliest attempts to articulate a form of consciousness that resists dualistic ways of thinking and being. Through it, Anzaldúa shows how the experiences of mestizaje can lead to a different way of engaging the world. She argues that it is possible to develop a non-dualistic consciousness, but that coming to such a consciousness often involves suffering.

Developing a mestiza consciousness involves a painful process: “cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war.”36 The borderlands the mestiza inhabits are not only geopolitical spaces – the borders between nations – but are also the spaces between the

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thesis was an archetypal approach to literature using Jungian psychology” (93). Carl Jung, James Hillman, Erich Neumann, Friedrich Nietzsche, and David Seabury are mentioned as influential to her thinking. In her 1999 interview with Karin Ikas in the second edition of Borderlands, Anzaldúa further acknowledges the “philosophical mestizaje,” the “[taking-from all different cultures – for instance, from the cultures of Latin America, the people of color and also Europeans,” that informs her thinking. She says, “Very early on [possibly in adolescence- I started reading Nietzsche. Also I was reading Schopenhauer [sic-, Sartre, Kafka, and most of those heavy guys. Then I turned more to the women that were philosophers, like Jeffner Allen and María Lugones, the Latina philosopher” (Borderlands, 238). As cultural theorist Chela Sandoval argues in Methodology of the Oppressed, Anzaldúa’s la conciencia de la mestiza is comparable to Jacques Derrida’s “différance,” and Audre Lorde’s “erotic.” Taken together, she argues, they constitute the “methodology of the oppressed” which has the potentiality of creating a “coalitional consciousness.” This coalitional consciousness would enable a “theory uprising” which could move against hegemonic structures (Sandoval, 68). See, especially, “On Cultural Studies: An Apartheid of Theoretical Domains,” in Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 67-79.

36 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 100.
contradictory identity categories that constitute her subjectivity and mark her flesh. She is the “daughter of the darkskinned mother,” the Spanish father. Because they are inscribed on her flesh these identity categories pull at the mestiza when they pull at each other, threatening to tear the mestiza apart. Coming into mestiza consciousness thus involves “a struggle of flesh” because the mestiza not only lives in the borderlands, but also carries them within herself, in her flesh.

The process of coming into mestiza consciousness not only challenges personal self-conceptions, but also social patterns of domination that attempt to define and shape “selves” through rigid and dualistic categories. Yet, as Anzaldúa notes,

it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence.

Moving away from this “common denominator of violence,” Anzaldúa begins to reconceive mestizaje by acknowledging Vasconcelos’ early attempt to highlight the sociohistorical and spiritual significance of mestizo people. But she “takes off” from his idea by acknowledging the gendered and racialized violence implicit in it. “From this [historical- racial, ideological, cultural, and biological cross-pollinization,” she

37 “Flesh” is a complex term. See, for example, Mayra Rivera’s “A Labyrinth of Incarnations: The Social Materiality of Bodies,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, 22, (2014), 187-198. It is also a term that Anzaldúa uses throughout her writings. In Chapter 4, I elaborate on “flesh” and its relationship to “spirit” in Anzaldúan and Christian thought. For now, it suffices to say that “flesh” signals Anzaldúa’s attention to the complex interplay between the physical, psychical, and spiritual in her theorization of “self.”

38 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.
writes, “an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making – a new mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.” 39 Yet, what is the relationship between this consciousness and “self”? And what is meant by “soul”?

**A Third Element**

“Taking off” from Vasconcelos’ theorizations of mestizaje, Anzaldúa devotes the majority of “La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness,” to tracing the suffering inherent in the ambivalence from which mestiza consciousness emerges. “In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, [the new mestiza-] is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders.” 40 Living between worlds is exhausting work. She “learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures.” 41 The mestiza fights against “male hatred and fear,” against “verbal abuse and blows.” 42 Living in constant tension enables her to have “a plural personality” where “nothing is thrust out, the good the bad the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.” 43 The inclusivity characteristic of the mestizaje Anzaldúa envisions demands that nothing be rejected or abandoned. It differs from Vasconcelos’ understanding of inclusivity that presumed “the bad, the ugly” would fall away in order to leave “the good,” the

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40 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101.
41 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101.
42 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 105, 106.
43 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101.
cosmic race. She continues, “the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity.”\textsuperscript{44} Here, the word “cope” again signals that this is not a painless process. “Coping” implies struggle, resistance, and survival.

A tolerance for ambiguity can help a mestiza survive the borderlands she inhabits, but there are moments when it, too, fails. Anzaldúa writes, “[The mestiza-can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence.”\textsuperscript{45} This insight is somewhat cryptic and Anzaldúa admits, “[She’s- not sure exactly how” it happens.\textsuperscript{46} What she does know is that there is some sort of “intense and often painful” experience that involves psychical and spiritual processes; the work “takes place underground – subconsciously” and “it is work that the soul performs.”\textsuperscript{47} Her words seem to be a warning for those who might use the idea of a “mestiza” or “borderlands” consciousness too loosely, as an abstract term for living comfortably with contradiction. There is no comfort here; “ambivalence” is not a synonym for “relativity.” It is a description for being “not sure exactly how” but nevertheless knowing that something is problematic about “the unitary aspect of each new paradigm.” The use of “unitary” is important as the idea of “uniting” is used to

\textsuperscript{44} Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 101.

\textsuperscript{45} Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 101.

\textsuperscript{46} Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 101.

\textsuperscript{47} Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 101.
describe the possibility of the *mestiza* as one who “[unites- all that is separate.”48

According to Anzaldúa, the *mestiza* stands at “that focal point or fulcrum, that juncture” where this possibility exists.49 Initially, her words seem to echo Vasconcelos’ problematic idea of the illustrious inclusivity of *mestizaje*. But Anzaldúa then adds, “This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together.”50

Echoing the severing of Teresa of Ávila’s body in “Holy Relics,” discussed in the prior chapter, the concepts of wholeness and fragmentation again emerge. These concepts are not only related to what Anzaldúa means by “*mestiza* consciousness,” but are also directly related to her conceptualization of “self.” She claims that the “self” is fragmented, for it has “severed parts.”51 She also states that this self has a transcendent or spiritual power, able to introduce a “third element” which is “greater than the sum of its severed parts.”52 This third element is “a new consciousness, a *mestiza* consciousness.” Perhaps, in “Holy Relics,” the calling together of “the best loved bones of Spain” is also a call for a new consciousness.

“Consciousness,” and in particular, a “*mestiza* consciousness” emerges from the self’s attempt to create a “synthesis,” spurred to do so by the initial experience of being jarred out of ambivalence. To synthesize is to bring together and combine


50 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101.

51 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.

52 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 101-102.
things that are different from each other in order to create something new. The mestiza is herself a synthesis. But Anzaldúa describes her as the new mestiza, a new synthesis. Here, Anzaldúa breaks away from Vasconcelos’ idea of mestizaje, arguing that it is not simply the coming together of multiple races that creates a mestiza. The mestiza is always already “someone else” for she has learned to “turn the ambivalence into something else.”53 The “daughter of the darkskinned mother” is not simply part Anglo, part Indian for she is “greater than the sum of her severed parts.” Her fragmentation leads her to a new consciousness that prompts her to question the very categories that label her as fragmented. It shifts the ways she understands nos/otras and this knowledge produces a new way of being in the world. As Anzaldúa writes, “the work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.”54 But how does such work take place? What does it mean to “show in the flesh” and “through the images in [one’s-]work” how “duality is transcended”? And what is the relationship between this work, subjectivity, and spirit?

**Difficult Differentiations**

Anzaldúa gives possible answers to these questions through the image of the mestiza she creates in her work. For her, the mestiza “shows in the flesh” what it means to transcend duality since the mestiza’s very embodiment and sense of “self” resist being defined by dichotomous categories. This resistance requires developing

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54 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.
a sharp critical awareness as well as creativity. The mestiza must constantly ask herself: “Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back – which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo?”  

These differentiations become more difficult when the terms themselves become unstable. What exactly is “Indian,” “Spanish,” “Anglo”? How does a mestiza “break down” the discursive “prison” that surrounds her without succumbing to its terms?

Describing the messiness involved in the process of defining self, Anzaldúa writes, “Pero es difícil differentiating between lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto. [The new mestiza- puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of.”

To begin breaking down dualistic thinking one must first acknowledge the difficulty involved in such a process: it is difficult to differentiate between what has been inherited, acquired, and imposed. Understanding “self” necessitates being able to “take inventory” of those aspects of one’s subjectivity that are always, for Anzaldúa, understood in relation to a collectivity.

The new mestiza “puts history through a sieve” knowing that she must “winnow out the lies” and “look at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been part of.” Here, the first person plural pronoun “we” is used. Much like the “we” in the refrain of “Holy Relics,” there is a reaching out to a greater

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55 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.

56 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.

57 This is my full translation of “Pero es difícil differentiating between lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto” (*Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104).

58 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.
community. This community is implicated in the “lies” and “forces” of history; the new mestiza is part of this community. She is not immune from participation in these transgressions. The daughter of the “Indian mother” and “Spanish father” living in the “Anglo” world must acknowledge herself as part of the violence inherent in these categories even as they threaten to tear her apart. Perhaps this is why the process of coming into mestiza consciousness, of doing its work, is so difficult: it requires critical self-reflection that refuses to deny one’s own participation in nos/otras’ oppression.

“Luego,” after this painful recognition, the mestiza is able to throw out what is no longer valuable – “los desmientos,” “el embrutecimiento” – so that she can “hold onto” the “good sense – deep and rooted – of the ancient peoples.” 59 Importantly, community is again acknowledged, but it is differentiated from the community found within the “forces” and “lies” of “history.” This community is formed through a decision to “hold onto,” “aguardar,” the wisdom of ancient peoples. It is a community formed through a sharing of deep knowledge, of wisdom across time. Anzaldúa suggests that this knowledge is not easily found within official histories though it is there for those who know to look for it. It is hidden under the denials of historical records, the stories they silence. The work of the new mestiza entails looking critically and closely at history in order to decipher the wisdom of peoples it often sought (and seeks) to denigrate and erase. She must recognize that these

59 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 104. “[... She ‘holds onto’ the ‘good sense – deep and rooted – of the ancient peoples” is my translation of “Aguarda el juicio, hondo y enraizado, de la gente antigua.” In Spanish, aguardar means “to wait,” but in colloquial usage it can also mean to “hold” as in “hold on.” This seems to be the way that Anzaldúa uses “aguardar” in this sentence.
stories are her stories – that these stories can write and/or erase her. Although this desire to find and keep ancient wisdom might seem like a naïve glorification of “indigenous” knowledges, it can also be read as a multilayered critique of epistemological and historiographical systems that fail to see their own biases. Depicting the new mestiza as one who questions history while also carefully saving remnants of it, Anzaldúa suggests that keeping some connections with the past is also imperative in the creation of a new consciousness and community.

Discerning between what is “inherited, acquired, imposed,” “[putting- history through a sieve],” and determining which knowledges to “keep” are actions that require both a respect for the past and a courage to cut away from problematic parts of that past. “This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions,” Anzaldúa explains. Again, Anzaldúa shows that the “keeping” of ancient and/or indigenous wisdoms is not a romantic endeavor: the oppressive elements within these cultures and religions must also be discarded like the other “lies” of “history.” Similarly, since not all insights fall through the “sieve,” she implies that “history” also contains some truths within it and they, too, are to be kept. This movement away from all “oppressive traditions” is a “conscious rupture;”

60 See Anzaldúa’s idea of a “new tribalism.” She writes, “Many of us identify with groups and social positions not limited to our ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender, or national classifications. Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include – what I call the new tribalism” (“(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,” in The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader, p. 245 also found in This Bridge We Call Home). This “new tribalism” includes a deep acknowledgement of the relationship of indigenous cultures (particularly from North, Central, and South America) with mestiza identity while also refuting a simplistic or romantic notion of indigenousness.

61 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 104.
it necessitates awareness and intentionality. It is a “strategic” move as it both questions and destabilizes existing identity categories while also refusing to completely relinquish them.\(^{62}\) The work of the new *mestiza* is to “communicate [this rupture, [document- the struggle.”\(^{63}\) She does not give up the tasks of communication and documentation, tasks associated with historiography and other forms of meaning making that have sometimes tried to render her meaningless. Instead, “she reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths.”\(^{64}\)

As discussed in the prior chapter, Anzaldúa argues that the movement between history and myth is fluid. History, for Anzaldúa, is a myth because it is always an interpretation of events/situations; it is a narrative intended to give meaning. By shaping new myths, the *mestiza* is able to create new meanings. These enable her to “[adopt- new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers.”\(^{65}\) They also enable her – the “daughter of the darkskinned mother” – to develop new perspectives about her “self.”

**The Work of the Soul**

Coming into a different perspective about herself, the new *mestiza*

“strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity.” Note that this

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\(^{62}\) Here, I am alluding to Gayatri Spivak’s idea of “strategic essentialism” which can be compared to Anzaldúa’s idea of a “new tribalism.” Both thinkers acknowledge the precariousness of identity categories while also noting that sometimes these categories are useful within certain practices of subject formation and social activism. See Gayatri Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, (New York: Methuen, 1987), 205.

\(^{63}\) Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.

\(^{64}\) Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.

\(^{65}\) Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.
“tolerance for ambiguity” no longer serves as a “coping” mechanism. Unlike the new 
*mestiza* who initially “copes” by developing a “tolerance for ambiguity,” Anzaldúa 
writes that the new *mestiza* now actively “strengthens” her tolerance and 
*intolerance* for ambiguity. There are now things she is unwilling to tolerate. 
Something has shifted during the difficult process of differentiating between “*lo 
heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*.” Reinterpreting history and herself, the new 
mestiza has “[made- herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking” and 
has “[surrendered- all notions of safety, of the familiar.”  
66 Her new imperative is 
now to “deconstruct, construct.”  
67 Might this shift be “the work of the soul” that 
Anzaldúa mentions earlier? Is the work of the soul the development of *mestiza* 
consciousness?

Looking closely at Anzaldúa’s description of the work of *mestiza* 
consciousness, it seems evident that “soul” and “consciousness” function 
inseparably from – even synonymously with – each other. By using “soul” 
synonymously with “consciousness,” especially “*mestiza consciousness,*” Anzaldúa 
explicitly draws spirituality into her theorizations of “self.” While I analyze 
Anzaldúa’s understanding of spirituality in detail in Chapter 4, it is important to 
reflect here on what this inclusion of “spirituality” implies for Anzaldúa’s 
understanding of subjectivity. Firstly, I think that the correlation of “consciousness” 
with “soul” shows Anzaldúa’s commitment to pushing against theories of

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66 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.

67 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.
subjectivity that dismiss spirituality as a valid mode of knowing. (Recall her earlier critique of “rationality.”) Secondly, it also suggests that there is something in the “self” that can endure fragmentation – a “third element” that is “always greater than the sum of [the self's] severed parts.” This “third element” is the “consciousness/soul.” The “self” is able to endure the pain of fragmentation, of being torn and pulled, because the consciousness/soul is able to make something else out of it. It is able to transform the self’s suffering. Significantly, Anzaldúa refers to the consciousness/soul as a “third element” – it interrupts the violence of dualistic thinking. I think this shows that Anzaldúa does not understand “soul” as part of a duality like spirit/matter. The “soul” does not function over and against materiality. It does not disparage the mestiza’s “struggle of flesh” nor does it swoop in to save it. Instead, consciousness/soul is both part of this severed flesh and something more than the sum of its severed parts.

In her continued theorization of consciousness/soul, Anzaldúa claims that it is what empowers the mestiza to “[become- a nahual, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, another person.” Again drawing spirituality into her discussions

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As noted in Chapter 1, literary scholar Suzanne Bost claims that Chicana theorist Laura E. Pérez posits the idea of “spirituality” as an “intellectually transgressive” category in Anzaldúa’s work. I engage Pérez’s work in Chapters 4 and 5.

There are strong resonances between Anzaldúa’s understanding of the relationship between soul and flesh and 20th and 21st century Christian theological anthropologies that also seek to end the disparagement of materiality. I examine these resonances in Chapter 4.

Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 104-105. Within Mesoamerican folklore, a “nahual” is a person able to physically or spiritually shift him/herself into another being, including animals. It is a type of shape-shifter. It/he/she is considered a powerful, shamanic figure. Such a figure is explicitly discussed in Anzaldúa’s 2015 posthumously published dissertation; see Gloria Anzaldúa’s “Flights of the Imagination:
of “self,” Anzaldúa uses the image of the "nahual" – a being known as a “shape shifter” in Mesoamerican myth and folklore – to describe the powers that stem from new mestiza consciousness. As a “nahual,” the mestiza is a powerful shape-shifter, able to traverse spiritual and physical realms that, in Anzaldúaan thought, are never entirely separate.71 Like the mestiza who lives between worlds, being a nahual demands a consciousness, a soul, that sees in terms of relationality rather than separation. Perhaps, this is Anzaldúa’s way of showing through the “images in her work how duality is transcended.”72 By uniting the image of the new mestiza with the image of a nahual, Anzaldúa summons Mesoamerican spirituality and folklore into 20th and 21st century debates about subjectivity.73 She writes a new myth. No longer bound by the “lies” of “history” or any other “oppressive traditions,” this myth enables the new mestiza to actively “[deconstruct]” and “[construct]” her “self.” The self, like myths, can be re-created. Subjectivity, for Anzaldúa, is a process of becoming; it is not fixed but fluid.

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71 Anzaldúa discusses the interrelationship between physical and spiritual realms in most of her writings. In particular, see “Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Body: An Interview with Linda Smuckler,” in The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader, ed. AnaLouise Keating, 74-94.

72 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 102.

73 These debates are detailed in Chapter 1. Suffice it to say, Anzaldúa’s theorizations of “self” have been influential within (at least) the following three scholarly fields: Cultural and Ethnic Studies, Feminist Studies, and Queer Studies. In Anzaldúa’s 2015 posthumously published dissertation, Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscura: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality, editor AnaLouise Keating also situates Anzaldúa’s work in relation to New Materialism (Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscura, xxix-xxxvii). For this dissertation, I focus on her critical contributions to the aforementioned three fields primarily as they relate to religious studies.
The new *mestiza* is able “break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner.” She does this through a careful and critical process of differentiation in which she is able to “reinterpret history” and “adopt new perspectives” toward *nos/ostras*. There is little distance between “self” and “others” in this process since “subject-object dualities” tend to fall apart when one, like a *nahual*, is able to shift “into another person.” This shift can be understood as a shift in perception, one that enables a person to see in terms of relationality rather than opposition.74 Further, Anzaldúa writes that the new *mestiza* “learns to transform the small ‘I’ into the total Self. *Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tiene de sí misma, así será.*”75 The relationships between subjectivity, soul, and consciousness vividly re-emerge. Acknowledging the ideas of a “small ‘I’” and a “total Self,” Anzaldúa refuses to dismiss categories prevalently used in discussing subjectivity. But she complicates them by adding “soul.” For Anzaldúa, the new *mestiza* “shapes her own soul according to the concept that she has of herself.” The soul, also known as consciousness, appears to be similar to the “self” in that it too

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74 In suggesting that this shift can be understood as a shift in perception, I do not dismiss Anzaldúa’s beliefs in nagualismo, which she describes as “a type of Mesoamerican magic supernaturalism” (Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 32). Nagualismo holds that a *nahual* (or nagual, the two terms are interchangeable in Anzaldúa’s work) can actually shapeshift into another animal or thing. For an interesting account of this complex system and Anzaldúa’s understandings of it see, “Flights of the Imagination: Rereading/Rewriting Realities” in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, Ed. AnaLouise Keating, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 23-46. Here, I choose to describe this shifting as a shift in perception because it fits with Anzaldúa’s theorization of *mestiza* consciousness in Chapter 7 of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Indeed, it seems that Anzaldúa uses the image of the *nahual* as a metaphor for *mestiza* consciousness in *Borderlands/La Frontera* whereas her later work, and especially her dissertation, speaks more directly about nagualismo.

75 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 105. My translation: “She shapes her own soul according to the concept that she has of herself, so be it.”
can be created and recreated. Like the “self,” it is not fixed and Anzaldúa quickly affirms this possibility for endless transformation as she writes, almost as if uttered in prayer, “so be it” – literally “amen.”

**Living and Traveling Entre (and In) Worlds**

The creation and recreation of self and soul is a process that involves, for Anzaldúa, the creation and recreation of society. For her, the “self” and “soul” are not privatized or easily separated from greater communities of relationship. A mestiza consciousness is not only aware of this connection, but also of the radical relationality between most seemingly contradictory categories. For Anzaldúa, duality is “the root of all violence.”

*Mestiza* consciousness pushes against dualities precisely because *mestiza* consciousness emerges from tolerating (and later not tolerating) ambiguities. It grows out of an (often painful) experience of pushing against categorization and its work becomes the critical and creative questioning of these categories.

The work of *mestiza* consciousness has profound political possibilities. Anzaldúa writes, “A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.”

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76 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 59. She elaborates, “In trying to become ‘objective,’ Western culture made ‘objects’ of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing ‘touch’ with them” (59). This “Western” mode of “consciousness” known as “rationality,” she argues, has often been juxtaposed to other ways of knowing. In particular, it has attempted to denigrate “Indian” and “Mexican” forms of consciousness that believe “every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it” (58).

77 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.
developing a *mestiza* consciousness is part of this “massive uprooting.” It signifies the possibilities of bringing about “our best hopes,” which entail envisioning a world freed from the violence of dualistic epistemologies.

Resisting dualism by positing the ideas of “plural personality” and “world traveling,” Argentine philosopher María Lugones engages Anzaldúa’s conceptualizations of self and *mestiza* consciousness in “On *Borderlands/La Frontera*: An Interpretive Essay.”78 She begins by noting Anzaldúa’s profound influence on her own thinking. “*Borderlands* has been a very important text for me. [...] I have carried Anzaldúa’s insights and metaphors with me for several years in my daily ruminations and in my daily exercise of triple vision.”79 She continues,

> Work on oppressed subjectivity focuses on the subject at the “moment” of oppression and as oppressed. Oppression theory may have as its intent to depict the effects of oppression (alienation, ossification, arrogation, psychological oppression, etc.), without an intention to rule out resistance. But within the logical framework of the theory, resistance to oppression appears unintelligible because it lacks a theoretical base. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* is a work creating a theoretical space for resistance.80

Though Lugones’ description of *Borderlands/La Frontera* as “a work creating a theoretical space for resistance” signals her appreciation for Anzaldúa’s work, it also points to a telling difference between them. While both thinkers seek to undo dualistic thinking, Lugones does so mostly through philosophical language whereas Anzaldúa gravitates toward language found in religion, myth, and spirituality. I


think this difference highlights an underlying belief of Anzaldúa’s work: namely, the interrelationship between (stories of) suffering, self, and spirituality. Because oppression is inscribed and perpetuated through “the myths in me, the myths I am,” resistance to oppression is “the work of the soul,” the formation of a consciousness that enables one to move like a nahual. To access the soul, to change consciousness, one has to summon it through language it understands – the language of myth and spirituality. While Lugones does not speak explicitly of soul, she does speak of ontology, positing the ideas of “plural personality” in this essay and “ontological pluralism” in her later writings. She notes that she finds in Anzaldúa’s mestiza a model of “plural personality” capable of resisting oppression.81 Lugones writes, “the plural personality of the new mestiza is a self-critical, self-animated personality.”82

In Lugones’ Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions she details this model of “plural personality” and its possibilities for resisting oppressions.83 Lugones argues that the inescapability of oppression is something that must be taken seriously in any articulations of “self.”84 The “inescapability” of oppression does not mean that oppression cannot be pushed

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84 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 8-16.
against or moved through but that it is inescapable according to what she calls the “logic” of oppression. To move oneself into the place of oppression/resistance (the two are always simultaneous realities for Lugones) one has to first realize that all self-identities are based on “maps” that are created by and based on the “logic” of oppression. In order to move beyond this “logic,” one has to realize that there can be multiple “maps” because there are multiple “worlds.”

As Lugones notes, “each person is many.” Each person inhabits a multiplicity of worlds. Lugones argues that this “world traveling” is something that oppressed people have always known because it has been necessitated by their constant movement between different worlds. “World traveling” reminds us that in one world a person might be seen as an “insignificant other” while in a different world he/she is an integral part of a family, community, society. Importantly, Lugones is not simply arguing that people act differently in different contexts but that people are different in different contexts. This understanding demands an “ontological pluralism,” a recognition that there are multiple ways of being. One potential radicality of her argument is that we sometimes do not even know that we are inhabiting different worlds, that is, we are not always aware of our “traveling.” Therefore, Lugones suggests that a potentially liberatory practice is for people to become aware or conscious of how they might be seen in another person’s world,

85 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 8-16.
86 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 10-12, 85-90.
87 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 85-90.
88 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 55-56.
thus recognizing the fluidity of identity categories that can otherwise be confining. Such awareness, Lugones notes, is not always possible because of the tendency in humans for self-delusion. Still, when possible, it is good to keep this “world traveling” in mind, to ask oneself what world(s) one might be inhabiting in a particular moment. This awareness, Lugones argues, helps us to understand subjectivity as multiple rather than fixed or static: to remember that a “self” is always in flux and never easily determined.89

The inability to easily determine or define a “self” is evident in Lugones’ explicit reflections on mestizaje in her chapter entitled, “Purity, Impurity, Separation.”90 Reflecting on the process of separating an egg yolk from an egg white, moving back and forth between English and Spanish, playing with the genres of autobiography and theory, Lugones demonstrates a vivid awareness of the many and often inseparable worlds she inhabits. This awareness plays into her definition of mestizaje as she writes, “I think of mestizaje as an example of and a metaphor for both impurity and resistance. I hold on to the metaphor and adopt mestizaje as a central name for impure resistance to interlocked, intermeshed oppressions.”91 Mestizaje, for Lugones, “defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts.”92 She

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89 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 96-98.
90 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 121-148.
91 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 122.
92 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 123.
continues, “In this play of assertion and rejection, the mestiza is unclassifiable, unmanageable. She has no pure parts to be ‘had,’ controlled.”

Like Anzaldúa, Lugones critically embraces mestizaje. For Lugones, it is a way of articulating notions of “self” that counter the “logic of control and unity.” Both describe possibilities for change, personal and political, that can stem from a consciousness that resists duality. This consciousness calls for a radical relationality. As Lugones writes,

I don’t think we can consider ‘our own’ only those who reject the same dichotomies we do. It is the impulse to reject dichotomies and to live and embody that rejection that gives us some hope of standing together as people who recognize each other in our complexity.

This echoes Anzaldúa’s earlier assertion that “a counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed” where “both are reduced to a common denominator of violence.” In theorizing “self,” Anzaldúa and Lugones push against oppressive logics of categorization. They do so not by denying or evading these systems, but by delving deeply into the spaces and places where this violence occurs: the borderlands and worlds we move between and inhabit. Yet they enter these spaces speaking different tongues, Lugones using the language of philosophy, Anzaldúa summoning the soul into her conception of self.

So be it

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93 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 123.
94 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 133.
95 Lugones, Pilgrimages Peregrinajes, 143.
96 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 100.
In conceiving “self,” Anzaldúa reminds us that the stories we suffer – “the myths in us” – attempt to become “the myths we are.” They affect our becomings, positively or negatively. To trace the myths in the mestiza, Anzaldúa turns to the story/history of mestizaje. Unlike Vasconcelos who sees “an abundance of love” in the encounters between Spanish and indigenous peoples, Anzaldúa sees the rape of the “darkskinned mother.” And she does not turn away. Instead, she attends to this violence by writing a new myth. It is a myth that tells a long and complex history/story of pain and strength and ambivalence. It is the myth of the new mestiza.

The new mestiza has a “plural personality” where “nothing [is- rejected, nothing abandoned.” Yet even in the midst of her refusal to reject, to abandon she is simultaneously called to “winnow out the lies” and “rupture.” Somehow, and Anzaldúa is “not exactly sure how,” these seeming contradictions come together enabling the new mestiza to “reinterpret history” and thus “shape new myths.” A “nahual,” the new mestiza is able not only to shape new myths, but also to shape(shift) herself. She is able to “shape her own soul” which is always “greater than the sum of her severed parts.”

“So be it.” That is Anzaldúa’s response to this list of seemingly inherent contradictions. “Self,” Anzaldúa argues, cannot be neatly organized or fully understood; attempts to do so often involve violence and suffering. Instead, her myth of the new mestiza invites us to ponder what it might be like to “define who we
are by what we include.”  

It is a call to critically and creatively analyze the categories through which we define nos/ostras. Doing so, Anzaldúa suggests, might offer a way for us to live together in nonhierarchical multiplicity. Así será.

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Chapter 4

“Through the Pulling of Flesh”: Writing a Spirituality of Transformation

Writing is dangerous because we are afraid of what the writing reveals: the fears, the angers, the strengths of a woman under a triple or quadruple oppression. Yet in that very act lies our survival because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared. – Gloria Anzaldúa, “Speaking in Tongues”

At its best, a theology of the flesh would avoid separating vulnerability from the life-giving qualities of carnality. Christian flesh is both the clay of creation and the matter of incarnation. Neither rotten nor invulnerable, Christian flesh may ground theologies attuned to the human capacity to endure pain as part of life, as the very possibility of experiencing passion with other fleshly beings. – Mayra Rivera “A Labyrinth of Incarnations: The Social Materiality of Bodies”

To bring into being something that does not exist in the world, a sacrifice will be required of you, sacrifice means to make holy. What will you give up in making holy the process of writing? – Gloria Anzaldúa, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process”

Introduction

Chapters 2 and 3 have traced the relationship between fragmentation and wholeness as seen in Anzaldúa’s reimagining of suffering and self, with particular attention to the role of stories/histories in these processes. They have engaged Anzaldúa’s claim, “I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become.” Chapter 2 analyzed a specific instance of suffering as portrayed in “Holy Relics” which, I argue, shows how Anzaldúa traces the roots of suffering in the
stories “we” tell – the “myths in me.” Although stories can tear us apart, they do not have to undo us. Instead, these ruptures offer spaces through which new accounts and identities can emerge. For Anzaldúa, fragmentation offers the possibility of recreation. Chapter 3 shows the philosophical and theoretical complexities of these thoughts as they relate to questions of “self” – the “myths I am.” It showed how Anzaldúa’s critical re-thinking of Vasconcelos’ concept of mestizaje posits a new understanding of “self,” a new myth: the myth of the new mestiza. Characterized by a “tolerance and intolerance for ambiguity,” the new mestiza offers a model of subjectivity that emphasizes the fluidity of a “self.” It also posits an understanding of consciousness/soul that sees these categories as inextricably connected to each other in the self. While this consciousness/soul has the power to transform the self’s fragmentation into “something else,” it also shares in the self’s suffering. Like the self, consciousness/soul is never fixed or complete but always becoming.

This chapter examines how these understandings of suffering and self contribute to Anzaldúa’s concept of transformation. “Transformation” evokes a sense of going beyond or moving across, of becoming something different than one’s initial “form.” How do Anzaldúa’s concepts of suffering and self inform this going beyond, this becoming something/someone different? What, for Anzaldúa, is “transformation”? And what does it look like to “write the myths we want to become” after we have investigated the “myths in us” and the “the myths we are”? In order to answer these questions, the chapter explicitly engages an aspect of Anzaldúan thought least studied in scholarship about her work thus far:
spirituality.¹ "Spirituality," according to Anzaldúa, is "a source of sustenance, a way of knowing, a path of survival" that "not only transforms our perceptions of 'ordinary' life and our relationships with others, but also invites encounters with other realities, other worlds."² Spirituality can be transformational.

Writing, for Anzaldúa, is a spiritual, "shamanic" act capable of bringing about transformation.³ By "shamanic," she refers to the tradition of shamanism found across multiple cultures and religions within which it is believed (among other things) that certain individuals are able to travel between and inhabit different realms of being. For Anzaldúa, writing and other creative acts are components of what she calls "spiritual activism" – a concept developed in her later writings.⁴ She believes that transformation of self and world – the two never really separated – can come through practices of spiritual activism that invite us to move, like the shaman, between worlds of being and knowing.

¹ In Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature, Bost writes, "though many critics avoid Anzaldúa’s spiritual leanings, this avoidance misses the crux of [Anzaldúa’s- thinking about bodies, identities, communities, and politics" (110). In her introduction to Anzaldúa’s 2015 posthumously published dissertation, Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality, AnaLouise Keating reiterates the call for sustained scholarly engagement of spirituality in Anzaldúaan thought. She writes, "In Light in the Dark, Anzaldúa takes [the- ‘decolonial turn’ even further and includes a groundbreaking ontological component” – an "aspect of Anzaldúa’s work [that- has been underappreciated and often ignored” (xxix). I explicitly engage Keating later in this chapter and Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro in Chapter 5.


³ Gloria Anzaldúa, "Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink” in Borderlands/La Frontera, 87-97.

The chapter begins by analyzing Anzaldúa’s understanding of writing as shamanic act/spiritual practice by looking closely at Chapter 6 of Borderlands/La Frontera, “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink” and Anzaldúa’s essay, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman.” While the former text shows how Anzaldúa positions her writing practice in relation to Aztec shamanism (as she understands it), this latter text demonstrates her continued theorization of writing as shamanic/spiritual practice after the publication of Borderlands/La Frontera. It furthers insights about her belief in the transformative power of re-mythologizing. I then turn to two of the last writings published before Anzaldúa’s untimely death, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process” and “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts.” In her notes, Anzaldúa claims that these essays are “sister” to each other, both offering reflections on writing as spiritual/political practice – as an act of spiritual activism. These texts not only offer explicit discussions of writing as spiritual activism but can also be read as examples of spiritual activism. In them, Anzaldúa acts as shaman – calling “us” holy relics together from our scattered directions, inviting us to transform our fragmentation into “something else.”

**Writing as Shamanic: Bridging Binaries**

Anzaldúa understands writing to be a shamanic act. In “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink” she explains that “In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from

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the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life.” Anzaldúa does not elaborate on what she means by “ethno-poetics.” Presumably, she is referring to the field of study within literature and linguistics that examines representations of oral narratives. But she also ties “ethno-poetics” to the term “shaman” and then proceeds to tie both to “[her- people, the Indians.” Later, she clarifies that the Aztecs are “the Indians” to whom she refers to as “[her- people.” Such connections between ethno-poetics, art, and Aztec shamanism signal that Anzaldúa positions her own writing practice within these traditions. But before examining how this position informs Anzaldúa’s understanding of writing as shamanic/spiritual act, it is important to clarify what Anzaldúa means by “Aztec” shamanism. Although Anzaldúa’s historical understanding of Aztec and other Mesoamerican cultures, and her use of their mythologies, is debated, Anzaldúa never claims to be a formal expert in Mesoamerican studies. I think that her reference to Aztec ethno-poetics and

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6 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 88.

7 For an interesting discussion of ethno-poetics, including its theorizations and possible applications, see Jan Blommaert, “Applied ethnopoetics,” in *Narrative Inquiry*, 16:1, (2006), 181-190. In this chapter, I read Anzaldúa’s use of “ethno-poetics” as part of her larger argument regarding art as a spiritual, shamanic practice.

8 For example, historian of religion David Carrasco iterates this concern in his essay co-authored with Roberto Lint Sagarena, “The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Shamanic Space” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 223-241. I explicitly engage Carrasco and Lint Sagarena’s essay later in this chapter. For now, it suffices to say that determining the extent of Anzaldúa’s independent study of Aztec and other Mesoamerican cultures is no easy task given the fact that she does not cite every source she consults unless she is directly quoting or paraphrasing it. In her footnotes to *Borderlands/La Frontera* she lists these texts which I presume inform her conception of Mesoamerican cultures: Burr Cartwright Brundage, *The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979); C. A. Burland and Werner Forman, *Feathered Serpent and Smoking Mirror: The Gods and Cultures of Ancient Mexico*, (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1975); John R. Chávez, *The Lost Land: The Chicano Images of the
shamanism is similar to her creative engagement of Teresa of Ávila and Christian concepts of female holiness in “Holy Relics.” In each case, Anzaldúa moves critically between historical and imaginative engagements of these traditions, troubling the dichotomy between history and story.

Seeking non-dichotomous ways of knowing and being, Anzaldúa is drawn to what she perceives as a non-dualistic epistemology inherent to Aztec shamanic ethno-poetics. She claims that “the religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined” in the ethno-poetics of the Aztec shamans.⁹ Her

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⁹ Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 88.
understanding of artistic expression – including writing – is connected to shamanism and to epistemologies that resist dualism.

Anzaldúa begins the chapter’s title with the Nahautl phrase, “tlilli, tlapalli.” She writes, “for the ancient Aztecs, tlilli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de sus códices (the black and red ink painted on codices) were the colors symbolizing escritura y sabiduría (writing and wisdom).” For the Aztecs and for Anzaldúa, writing and wisdom are connected to each other. The Aztecs, she continues,

believed that through metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth, communication with the Divine could be attained, and topan (that which is above – the gods and spirit world) could be bridged with mictlán (that which is below – the underworld and the region of the dead).

Words – the metaphors and symbols they create – have the power to move between worlds, to bridge them. Words can be transformative. This insight reiterates Anzaldúa’s belief in the power of myth as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Myths are the stories/histories that shape existence; they are comprised of metaphors and symbols that form and transform us, and our worlds. For Anzaldúa, the shaman is one who understands the power of words – spoken or written – to elicit transformation. Placing herself in this shamanic tradition, Anzaldúa’s writing – its subjects, styles, and practices – also attempts to bridge between worlds.

10 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 91.

11 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 91, emphasis mine.

12 In shamanic ceremonies, words are used to summon spirits, induce ecstatic states, go into trance. See, for example, David Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena, “The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: Borderlands/La Frontera as a Shamanic Space” in Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, Culture, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 223-241.
Like the Aztec shamans she describes, Anzaldúa enters into writing through ritual: “I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer – an affirmation and a voicing of intent.”

Anzaldúa does not specify why she offers incense and corn, or lights a candle; she does not list the sources that influence her rituals. Such an omission suggests that Anzaldúa’s description of her ritual practices is not meant to be prescriptive. She is not interested in creating doctrine. Instead, her rituals can be read as invitations: those of you who know why she offers incense and cracked corn are welcome to join, those of you who do not know, feel free to inquire. The role of the shaman, the role of the writer, is to invite transformation but it is only the person who can transform him/herself. It is only his/her consciousness/soul that can make “something else” out of his/her fragmentation. The poet-shaman is a guide, not a savior. This is an important distinction to keep in mind as we examine Anzaldúa’s re-thinking of “sacrifice,” and her role as shaman, later in this chapter.

Anzaldúa then shifts from these “sacred” practices to “secular” ones, “[washing- dishes or [her- underthings, [taking- a bath, or [mopping- the kitchen floor.” She notes that these tasks are part of an “induction’ period” that “sometimes takes a few minutes, sometimes hours.” It is telling that Anzaldúa’s writing practice initially involves both “sacred” acts like making offerings as well as “secular” acts like washing dishes because it follows her description of Aztec

13 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 89.
14 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 89.
15 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 89.
shamanic ethno-poetics that push against dichotomous thinking. The sacred and secular she argues, and shows through her own writing process, are not easily separated. Instead, these secular tasks form the crucial “incubation period” during which her writing has time to gestate.

In addition to questioning the sacred/secular binary, there is also an inherent feminist critique in this description of writing that questions a male/female binary. The tasks Anzaldúa highlights – washing dishes and clothing, mopping floors – are stereotypically deemed “women’s work” and often devalued as having little aesthetic or other significance. But Anzaldúa describes them as part of the process of writing. They, too, are creative acts.

For her, it is during these acts that she pushes through a “resistance.” According to Anzaldúa, writing “always” initially demands “[going- against a resistance. Something in [her- does not want to do [the- writing.” Although she does not specify the source of this resistance, she writes later in the chapter,

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16 Recall from Chapter 3 Anzaldúa’s claim: “The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended” (Borderlands/La Frontera, 102, emphasis mine). Anzaldúa’s work, I think, attempts to enact the mestiza consciousness that she describes. Borderlands/La Frontera is a work of mestiza consciousness. This chapter argues that Anzaldúa’s later writings on spiritual activism can be similarly read as not only describing but also enacting spiritual activism.

17 There is a significant amount of feminist (and other) scholarship regarding “women” and “art,” including investigations of the “domestic sphere” as inspiration for/mode of creative expression. See, for example, Lester Strong’s 2002 interview with artist Judy Chicago, “Painting a Revolution: A Talk with Judy Chicago on Art, Gender, Feminism, and Power,” in International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies, Vol. 7, No. 4, (October 2002); Alice Walker’s, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose, (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1983), 231-243.

18 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 89.
“writing produces anxiety.”19 She continues, “looking inside myself, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me.” And she notes,

Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being queer – a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls. Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate and wait for something to happen.20

Writing, she suggests, invites one to engage in critical self-reflection. For Anzaldúa, critical self-reflection is part of writing in any genre. It is not simply reserved for autobiographical writing or the writing style she terms autohistoria. “Autohistoria” literally means “self-history.” Using “autohistoria” rather than “autobiographical” highlights the collective history implicit in any account of “self.”21 For Anzaldúa, all “personal” accounts are also “political” accounts for they involve a “self” who is ever in relation to wider histories. This belief about writing follows the “ethno-poetics of the shaman” that she describes earlier since it pushes against any dualism that would allow a writer to separate him/herself from the subject(s) he/she is engaging through writing. Writing about others is always writing about nos/ellas. Further, this understanding of writing parallels some of Anzaldúa’s conceptions of self discussed in Chapter 3, since writing also demands both “a tolerance [and intolerance- for ambiguity.” A writer, she argues, “[comes- up against all sorts of walls” or struggles through “a boundless, floating state of limbo.” It is worth noting that the struggles involved in writing are framed dualistically: the tension is felt in

19 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 94.
20 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 94.
21 See Chapter 3 for a detailed analysis of “self” in Anzaldúaan thought.
being either “[walled-]” or “boundless.” I think that this framing shows Anzaldúa’s belief that violence and pain emerge from duality. The role of the writer – much like the role of mestiza consciousness – is to “break down the subject-object duality that keeps her [and all of us …- prisoner” to systems of oppression and injustice.

Similar to the Aztec shamans that Anzaldúa imagines, a writer is one who can move between worlds precisely because he/she sees them as interconnected rather than separate. As she explains, “living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create.”22 The writer – or any creative person – already lives in the borderlands. Understanding borderlands as a metaphor for the psyche does not disregard the reality of geopolitical borders and the bloodshed common to their creation and defense. Instead, it highlights how borders are not only inscribed on land but also in us. We carry the borderlands within nos/otras. Like most borderlands, this place of possible creativity is painful. Anzaldúa compares it to “a cactus needle embedded in the flesh.” She notes, “it worries itself deeper and deeper, and I keep aggravating it by poking at it. When it begins to fester I have to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to figure out why I have it.”23 For her, writing demands investigating sites of pain and suffering in nos/otras. She continues, “I get down deep into the place where it’s rooted in my skin and pluck away at it, playing it like a musical instrument – the fingers pressing, making the pain worse before it can get better.”24 After this pressing and plucking,

22 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 95.
23 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 95.
24 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 95.
“making the pain worse before it can get better,” the needle finally comes out and there is “no more discomfort, no more ambivalence. Until another needle pierces the skin.” Anzaldúa concludes, “that’s what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of the experience, whatever it may be.”

Transformation as Risk ... Confronting La Coaticue

Writing as an “endless cycle of making it worse, making it better, but always making meaning out of experience” gives many insights into Anzaldúa's broader understandings of transformation. Similar to her image of the cactus needle embedded in the flesh, transformation involves going directly to the source of pain, where one can “get down deep into the place where it’s rooted.” For Anzaldúa, transformation occurs through the flesh; it is not something relegated to the realm of spirit. As I discuss later in this chapter, flesh and spirit function together in her thinking and are not always easily separated. Following the Aztec shamans she earlier describes, Anzaldúa sees writing – or any creative process – as a possible bridge between human and divine, flesh and spirit. While the image of a bridge suggests a separation between these two categories, Anzaldúa argues that the distance between human and divine, flesh and spirit does not have to be imagined dualistically. Difference does not demand separation/opposition. Instead, it can invite relationship. A willingness to enter into the space between categories, to enter into the borderlands, sometimes “[makes- the pain worse before it can get

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25 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 95.

26 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 95.
better.” Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 95.

28 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102.

29 The ability to travel between realms (including the world of the living and the world of spirits) is considered a key component of shamanism. See, for example, Vilmos Dioszegi’s definition of shamanism as referenced by David Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena in “The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Shamanic Space” in *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, Culture*, eds. Gastón Espinosa and Mario T. García, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 229.
“Transformation” is akin to the concept of “healing” discussed in Chapter 2 where “wholeness” is not something in which fragments return to their original state, but rather an ability to see something new in the midst of brokenness. Such a shift in perspective comes at a cost. It demands delving into one’s shadow through critical self-reflection, entering into what Anzaldúa calls “the Coatlicue state.”

In Aztec mythology, Coatlicue, “Serpent Skirt,” was the earth goddess of life and death who was killed by her daughter Coyolxauhqui. To avenge Coatlicue’s death, her son Huitzilopochtli killed his sister Coyolxauhqui by dismembering her body. According to the myth, he threw Coyolxauhqui’s head into the sky where it became the moon and threw the rest of her dismembered body down the sacred mountain.30 Drawing from this myth, Anzaldúa takes the images of Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui and re-imagines them throughout Borderlands/La Frontera and her subsequent writings. Later in this chapter, I will analyze how Anzaldúa reimagines these goddesses, especially Coyolxauhqui, in relation to developing a spirituality of transformation. For now, it suffices to say that Anzaldúa sees Coatlicue as “[depicting- the contradictory.”31 She writes, “[Coatlicue- is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death,


31 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 69.
mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.” Again, Anzaldúa seeks images that push against duality, that show relationships between seeming oppositions.

But this living between/through oppositions – living in the borderlands – always threatens to tear one apart. The “Coatlicue state” involves death as much as it involves life. Anzaldúa notes, “It is [...] learning to live with la Coatlicue that transforms living in the Borderlands from a nightmare into a numinous experience.” Here, she makes two important points: 1. living in the borderlands can be a “nightmare” and 2. this “nightmare” can be transformed “into a numinous experience” if one learns to live with “la Coatlicue.”

As a person of the borderlands, a writer’s task is to pluck and pull at the root of violence, at duality. In order to get at this root, a writer has to “get down deep,” delve into the underworld, *mictlán*, where Coatlicue terrifyingly awaits with serpents in place of her head and claws in place of her hands. This is a nightmare. It is a dangerous process. Further distressing is the fact that the “cactus needle,” the source of pain, is “embedded in [one’s own] flesh.” Dualism, Anzaldúa suggests, is already rooted in *nos/otras*. It is embedded in us, in the borders we carry within ourselves. When we pull at *it*, we are pulling at *nos/otras* for *mestiza* consciousness is always “breaking down” any existing “subject-object duality.” This means that in pulling at the root of suffering, we are pulling at our own flesh, our own souls. According to Anzaldúa, this is the risk of transformation. It claws at us, and partly

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32 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 69.

33 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 95.

34 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 68-69.
undoes us. She warns that “only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed.”35 Paradoxically, learning to live with la Coatlicue means learning to see that what tears us apart can heal our brokenness if we allow it to shift how we understand fragmentation and wholeness. Such an insight can turn the “nightmare into a numinous experience.”

**Sacrifices and Offerings: Difficult Differentiations**

Although Anzaldúa argues that transformation requires the pulling of flesh, she is critically aware that some flesh is pulled more than others’. Recall Anzaldúa’s troubling of Christian conceptions of female holiness (and fragmentation) in “Holy Relics.” In the poem, Teresa’s body is greedily pulled apart by “over ardent fingers” that want a piece of her for themselves. Yet these relics never prove to be miraculous. Instead, it is only when Teresa acts on her own, through her own fragmentation – offering her bloodstained rag, the smell of her flesh – that healing occurs.36 There is a difference, Anzaldúa suggests, between offering oneself and being offered. While the circumstances of one’s life – gender, race, sexuality, class, abilities, and other differences – might place one in a borderlands not of one’s choosing, one can choose to create/struggle/think through this place. Like the new *mestiza* discussed in Chapter 3, this demands cultivating “a tolerance and intolerance for ambiguity.” A tolerance for ambiguity can be understood as a willingness to accept that there are circumstances of life one cannot control, while an intolerance for ambiguity can be understood as a call to push against the

35 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 97.

36 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 176-181.
injustices implicit in the processes of categorization. Because these processes tend to rely on dualistic categories to frame and evaluate experience, they are often what have forced one into a borderlands in the first place. “This weight on [the mestiza’s-back – which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo?” Anzaldúa’s question also seems to ask: why does one have to choose between these terms? What borders do they reinforce/patrol?

For Anzaldúa, people do not choose to be in the borderlands. The borderlands is where people find themselves when torn between simplistic categories that fail to speak to the complexities of nos/otras’ subjectivities. Entering into the borderlands, allowing it to teach one a different way of being in the world, is a choice. As feminist scholars – among others – have noted, “choice” is a problematic term. Women, and other members of minoritized communities, are often socially conditioned to want to “sacrifice” (“offer”) themselves for others. Beard’s analysis of female sanctity and suffering discussed in Chapter 2 is an excellent example of how this phenomenon emerges within the particularities of Christian history. The myths of female sanctity implore women to offer themselves for others in the name of holiness. Yet, as “Holy Relics” shows, this holiness is not holy at all. Instead, it is the Teresa who uses her own power – not her stolen relics –

37 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 104.

who proves to be holy. Power and choice are related. To say that entering into the borderlands is a choice, I mean that for Anzaldúa “making meaning out of the experience” can be powerful. Meaning making becomes a way to exercise power even in the midst of a seemingly disempowering situation. And this speaks to the difference between offering oneself and being offered.

Such a difference should be taken into account, I think, when interpreting Anzaldúa’s claim that “only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed.” She makes this statement in “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink” as she closes her reflections on writing as shamanic. In the last lines of that chapter, she again ponders the image of the cactus needle. But this time, the cactus needle is not embedded in the flesh, this time she takes it up, and notes, “this work [her writing]-, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, are my offerings, my Aztecan blood sacrifices.” What is striking about this image is that Anzaldúa takes up the cactus needle, piercing herself – she is making an offering, not being offered. She is writing a new myth of sacrifice. Similar to her use of Teresa of Ávila to write a new myth of holiness, Anzaldúa also uses the image of Aztec blood offerings to posit a different understanding of sacrifice.

Anzaldúa’s re-imagining of sacrifice draws upon both Aztec and Christian traditions. Such a connection speaks to the historical roots of mestizaje, the coming together of Mesoamerican and Spanish cultures. As Bost writes, “[...] Aztec and Spanish Catholic cosmologies syncretically fused to form mestizo cosmology [...].”

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39 Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera, 97.
40 Bost, Encarnación, 100.
Yet recall from Chapter 3 Anzaldúa’s problematizing of *mestizaje*: the “daughter of the darkskinned mother,” the new *mestiza*, is always “greater than the sum of her severed parts.” It is not enough to say that “sacrifice” in Anzaldúa, in the *mestiza*, shows a fusion of Aztec and Christian notions of sacrifice for “something else” is also emerging.

**“Something Else” ... Rethinking Flesh/Spirit**

I think that this “something else” is a rethinking of the relationship between flesh and spirit that is integral to Anzaldúa’s understanding of transformation. As discussed in Chapter 3, Anzaldúa posits the idea of a “consciousness/soul” that is not immune to suffering. Like the self, it can be fragmented but is also always greater than this fragmentation. The “consciousness/soul,” the “spirit,” is inextricably connected to the flesh – both of it and not of it. Flesh and spirit demand a “tolerance and intolerance for ambiguity.”

Seeking non-dualistic epistemologies through which to engage the world, including the relationship between flesh and spirit, Anzaldúa turns to the ethno-poetics of Aztec shamanism – as she interprets them. With them, she “[ponders- the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body.” Yet her words also echo Christian ideas of incarnation and sacramentality. Briefly, I want to follow these echoes of Christian thought to see how they inform Anzaldúa’s reimagining of the relationship between flesh and spirit as well as her larger concept of transformation. I want to see how Anzaldúa, the poet-shaman, uses words to bridge across worlds – Aztec and Christian – to bring about something else.

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41 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 97.
Christian thought has wrestled with the relationship between flesh and spirit. And like Jacob and the angel, Christianity has sometimes come away limping. At the heart of Christianity is not only a story of redemptive suffering, as Beard points out, but also a story of God becoming human – of spirit becoming flesh, and flesh becoming spirit. The stories/histories of incarnation are long and messy and cannot in their entirety be responsibly attended to here. As Rivera writes in *Poetics of the Flesh*, “In Christianity, flesh evokes a creative touch, divine love, and suffering. More prominently, it alludes to sin, lust, and death.” And that is only “flesh” Never mind “spirit.” But as Rivera’s words show, Christian “flesh” is already tied to “spirit” for it connotes “divine love,” among other things. Flesh and spirit


44 Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh*, 1. Rivera makes an important distinction between “flesh” and “body” in *Poetics* that speaks to the “slippery materiality” evoked by “flesh” and the supposed completeness evoked by “body” (2, 5-8). She also discusses this distinction in her essay, “A Labyrinth of Incarnations: The Social Materiality of Bodies,” in which she writes, “‘Flesh’ helps me focus on the material elements of corporeality more consistently that the term ‘body’ does. The difference between body and flesh reflects the terms’ distinct semantic histories and affective charges and is detectable even in the common usage of the terms. ‘Body’ tends to denote an entity complete in itself, formed and visible to those around it, whereas ‘flesh’ evokes the materiality of bodies” (195-196). Based on my readings, Anzaldúa uses the terms “flesh” and “body” together and seemingly interchangeably though I think that both connote for her the “slippery materiality” that “flesh” connotes for Rivera.
function together in Christianity, often dichotomously, other times – as in the case of Incarnation – in ways which try to affirm their inseparability. As theologian Stephanie Paulsell notes, “[...] Christians have inherited an ambiguous legacy about the body. Christianity has long struggled with uneasiness about the body, even as it affirms the goodness of the body in its bedrock beliefs.”45 I think it is this “ambiguous legacy” about the body, about flesh, in Christianity that Anzaldúa summons into her theorizations of flesh and spirit.

The “daughter of the darkskinned mother,” the mestiza, is aware that Christianity has not affirmed the “goodness” of all bodies. Too often, Christianity’s ambiguity about the body has been used to justify sexism, racism, colonialism, homophobia, ableism, and a host of other evils.46 It is an ambiguity that one cannot tolerate. Yet in pondering the relationship between flesh and spirit, Anzaldúa evokes a religion in which the Word is made Flesh, where “metaphors and symbols concretize the spirit and etherealize the body.” Much like her paradoxical use of Teresa of Ávila to rewrite holiness, I think Anzaldúa draws on Christian language because she sees it operative in “the myths we are,” the myths inscribed in our flesh and spirits. Some of these Christian myths affirm the interrelationship of flesh and


spirit, but others perpetuate the violence of duality. For Anzaldúa, it is the task of the poet-shaman to interrogate these myths and to offer new ones that might make “something else” out of the words that pierce us so as to heal the wounds that remain.

**Shaman as Healer**

In her later essay, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman” Anzaldúa explains the role of shaman as healer as she further develops her concept of writing as shamanic, elaborating on the political and ethical aspects of this practice.\(^\text{47}\) The essay is written “eight months after *Borderlands/La Frontera* hit the bookstores” and details Anzaldúa’s critical self-reflection on “just what exactly had [she-] written and why.”\(^\text{48}\) She comes to “realize that [she-] was trying to practice the oldest ‘calling’ in the world – shamanism – and that [she-] was practicing it in a new way.”\(^\text{49}\) Anzaldúa explicitly admits to acting (or “trying to act”) as a shaman through her writing. She continues her reflection on shamanism by noting, “in non-literate societies, the shaman and the poet were the same person.”\(^\text{50}\) She continues, “the role of the shaman is [...] to preserve and create cultural or group identity by mediating between the cultural heritage of the past and the present situations people find themselves in.”\(^\text{51}\) This image of the shaman as mediator is reminiscent

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\(^{48}\) Anzaldúa, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” 121.

\(^{49}\) Anzaldúa, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” 121.

\(^{50}\) Anzaldúa, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” 121.

\(^{51}\) Anzaldúa, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” 121.
of the Aztec shamans she earlier describes – those who mediate between the world of gods and the underworld of the dead through writing. It also recalls Anzaldúa’s image of the *mestiza* as mediator between conflicting cultural and spiritual heritages. Like the new *mestiza* who “puts history through a sieve [and] winnows out the lies” in her efforts to create a new consciousness, the shaman also positions him/herself in the space between past and present with an orientation toward the future.52

Seeing herself as a shaman who mediates between past and present in an effort to help “create cultural or group identity,” Anzaldúa looks “through [her-poet’s eye] and sees ‘illness’ as ‘whatever is harmful in the cultural or individual body.’”53 The shift to/movement between “creating cultural or group identity” and “illness” is something that Anzaldúa does without providing a more explicit transition, except to note that she is “[carrying- the poet-shaman analogy further.”54 Anzaldúa sees healing as intrinsic to the role of poet-shaman. But how does a poet-shaman heal? For Anzaldúa, the “illness” observed by the poet-shaman includes “disinformation/misinformation perpetrated on women and people of color.”55 It includes the dualistic categories that attempt to define and confine “self.” This “illness,” according to Anzaldúa, “always [...] takes the form of metaphors.”56 As

52 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 104.
shaman, the writer is a healer who attempts to “‘cure’” nos/otras by “extracting the old dead metaphors” or by “adding what is lacking,” creating new metaphors. Writing becomes a potentially healing act not only because it can re-process prior experiences of suffering, but also because it enables one to re-think them. This re-thinking enables new metaphors to emerge which can “give us a handle on the numinous, a handle on the faculty for self-healing, one that may cure the depressed spirit, the frightened soul.”

Anzaldúa’s concept of the poet-shaman (writer) as one who heals by “extracting the old dead metaphors” and “adding what is lacking” offers further insights into her recurring practice of re-thinking and re-telling myths, particularly myths involving the violent dismemberment of women. Firstly, it clearly shows that re-mythologizing is, for her, a shamanic practice. Secondly, as a shamanic practice, it has the possibility of healing “illness” which is connected to “metaphor” and the ways meaning is made or unmade. For Anzaldúa, “making meaning out of [...] experience, whatever it may be” is critical to creating a self who can cultivate a “tolerance or intolerance for ambiguity.” It is the work of mestiza consciousness. By re-imagining and re-telling the stories of Teresa of Ávila, Coatlicue, and Coyolxauhqui, Anzaldúa offers new metaphors to think through dualisms like fragmentation and wholeness, flesh and spirit – dichotomies that have often been used to rationalize and perpetuate violence against women and other people of minoritized communities.

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Although appreciative of Anzaldúa’s attention to spirituality, and shamanism in particular, historian of religion David Carrasco and scholar of American Studies Roberto Lint Sagarena take issue with Anzaldúa’s re-mythologizing in their essay, “The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: Borderlands/La Frontera as a Shamanic Space.” They begin by acknowledging that “many scholars and writers have focused on ethnic, gendered, and political elements of the space [Anzaldúa describes],” but they argue, “that the heart of her portrayal of the borderlands is articulated, and must be understood, as a religious vision.” In particular, they examine how “the shamanic imagination – with its attention to spiritual journey, songs, and voices of ancestral spirits, psychic injury, and internal healing – informs her entire project.” They proceed to trace the shamanic as it appears throughout Borderlands/La Frontera, placing it in conversation with the work of other authors and thinkers like Rudolfo Anaya and José Cuellar, “also known as ‘Dr. Loco.’” They also include David Carrasco’s reflections on his personal experiences with shamanism during graduate school. At the end of their essay, they articulate some “critical thoughts” which relate directly to Anzaldúa’s practice of re-thinking and re-telling myths. I now attend to these “critical thoughts,” showing how they presume the epistemological privilege of “history” over “story.”


60 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 224.

61 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 224.

62 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 225-229, 232-234.
Carrasco and Lint Sagarena write, “Anzaldúa claims an interior awareness of the Mexica goddess Coatlicue.” They continue, “While [Anzaldúa] has made initial contact with the indigenous traditions that speak of Coatlicue, she has missed several relevant opportunities to study Coatlicue more thoroughly.” They proceed, “discussions of Coatlicue without a discussion of Coyolxauhqui, her fate, her stone image, and its central meaning in Aztec religious symbolism are problematic given [Anzaldúa’s] dedication to this myth cycle and imager.” Furthering their critique of Anzaldúa, they describe how the myth of Coyolxauhqui’s violent dismemberment, “became one of the legitimations for mass human sacrifice, including the ritual killing of children and women among Mexicas.” And to this fact they add, “imagine what Anzaldúa’s creative mind could do with the narrative of this song had she engaged it through the easily accessible accounts and scholarship about this fuller rendition of the ‘Coatlicue State.’”

Carrasco’s and Lint Sagarena’s critical commentary on Anzaldúa’s use of the Coatlicue myth – especially their concern about “the degree of her accountability to the cultures and traditions she is appropriating” – is an important caution to keep in mind. But I think that their “critical thoughts” are problematic in two ways.

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63 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 237.
64 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 237.
65 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 237.
66 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 238.
67 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 238.
68 Carrasco and Lint Sagarena, 238.
Firstly, their comment that Anzaldúa engages Coatlicue without engaging Coyolxauhqui is based on their assessment of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. But Coyolxauhqui figures prominently in Anzaldúa’s later work, especially “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process” and “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts.” Indeed, Anzaldúa gives attention to both Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui by talking about them in relation to each other through her concepts of the “Coatlicue State” and the “Coyolxauhqui Imperative.”

Secondly, and more importantly, Carrasco’s and Lint Sagarena’s critique assumes the epistemological privilege of history over story. While having a fuller historical knowledge of the Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui myth might have further inspired “Anzaldúa’s creative mind,” such a presumption begs the question of whether a myth can ever be contained by the boundaries of “historical” facts. Is there only one way to tell a myth? And can Anzaldúa’s re-imagining of the myth, which resists carefully citing historical sources, also posit a decolonial ethic of re-mythologizing? In other words, might she be questioning the privileging of history over story, given the politics of historiography? I see in Anzaldúa’s re-telling of myths broader commentaries on suffering and transformation – experiences that, for her, were not

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69 Anzaldúa’s posthumously published dissertation, *Luz en lo Oscuro/Light in the Dark*, also explicitly engages Coyolxauhqui and shows Anzaldúa’s further conceptualization of “the Coyolxauhqui Imperative” (xxi-xxiii, 9-22). I discuss *Luz en lo Oscuro/Light in the Dark* in Chapter 5.

reserved to one group or another but belong to all who “define who we are by what we include.”

In “I’m a citizen of the universe’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change,” literary scholar AnaLouise Keating similarly discusses re-mythologizing as an act of spiritual activism in Anzaldúa’s work that seeks to foster a “relational worldview.”\textsuperscript{71} Noting (and lamenting) the various reasons “scholars avoid Anzaldúa’s politics of spirit,” Keating quotes an Anzaldúan critic who takes issue with Anzaldúa’s use of myths in \textit{Borderlands/La Frontera}.\textsuperscript{72} The critic writes,

Anzaldúa’s language, her grammar, her talk are ultimately completely mortgaged to a nostalgia that I find unacceptable. The resurrection of the old gods (be they ‘white’ or ‘indigenous’) is a futile and impossible task. To invoke old gods as a tool against oppression and capitalism is to choose the wrong weapon.\textsuperscript{73}

In response to this charge, Keating argues that “Although revisionist mythmaking does play a role in her spiritual activism, Anzaldúa does not try to resurrect ‘old gods,’ reclaim an ‘authentic’ precolonial spirituality or religion, or in other ways nostalgically reinvigorate pseudo-ancient traditions or beliefs.”\textsuperscript{74} Striking in this exchange between Keating and Anzaldúa’s critic is the emphasis each puts (albeit in different ways) on the idea that religious language and spirituality are “old.” For the

\textsuperscript{71} AnaLouise Keating, “I’m a citizen of the universe’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Spiritual Activism as Catalyst for Social Change,” \textit{Feminist Studies} 34, nos. 1/2, (Spring/Summer 2008), 53-69; 60.

\textsuperscript{72} Keating, “‘I’m a citizen of the universe,’” 54.

\textsuperscript{73} Keating, “‘I’m a citizen of the universe,’” 55.

\textsuperscript{74} Keating, “‘I’m a citizen of the universe,’” 55-56.
critic, “old” means “irrelevant.” He/she uses “old” to suggest that Anzaldúa is motivated by nostalgia for past religious images, “old gods” that are rendered powerless in the face of seemingly current problems like “oppression and capitalism.” Ironically reflecting this anxiety about irrelevance, Keating defends Anzaldúa’s project of remythologizing by claiming that it has significance for “contemporary” situations. She argues that “[Anzaldúa-] investigates a variety of indigenous and post-indigenous histories and traditions in order to learn from them, and she applies what she learns to our contemporary situation.”

What Keating is pointing to and what the critic fails to see, is that Anzaldúa understands the “old gods” to be very much alive in the myths that shape existence – including the myths that sustain “oppression and capitalism.” As Chapters 2 and 3 have shown, these are the myths in us, the myths we are. We have to investigate them in order to write the myths we want to become. And this, for Anzaldúa, means conjuring up “old gods” or whatever names we give to what ultimately concerns us.

For Keating, Anzaldúa “re-members the past” in order to “create an activist-based spirituality that is deeply informed by contemporary events.” This Anzaldúan “politics of spirit,” Keating argues, “demonstrates that holistic, spirit-inflected perspectives – when applied to racism, sexism, homophobia, and other contemporary issues – can sustain and assist us as we work to transform social injustice.”

Keating’s exchange with the Anzaldúan critic reiterates the

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75 Keating, “I’m a citizen of the universe,” 56, emphasis mine.
76 Keating, “I’m a citizen of the universe,” 56.
77 Keating, “I’m a citizen of the universe,” 56.
interconnection between re-mythologizing and spirituality in Anzaldúa's work. For Anzaldúa, re-mythologizing is an act of re-membering, of gathering together what has been torn apart and fashioning it into “something else.” As we will see in the rest of this chapter, it is a shamanic act capable of healing wounds caused by “binary-oppositional politics” – including the politics of privileging history over story, the politics of whose flesh is pulled.78

**Anzaldúa as Shaman ... Toward a Spirituality of Transformation**

Anzaldúa’s practice of critical re-mythologizing and her belief that writing is shamanic can be seen in two of her later works published before her untimely death, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process” and “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts.” Similar to her descriptions of writing in “Tlilli, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink,” she shows movements between sacred and secular in “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process.”79 She writes, “you light copal incense, hoping the smell, your ritual, will coax you into the writing” while also “[brewing- some chai tea” and earlier “vacuuming.”80 Although her reflections on writing draw on her earlier conceptualizations of writing as shamanic practice, what is strikingly different about this essay is that it is written exclusively in the second person. It is as though she is trying to pull “you” – the reader – into the experience even as she is presumably

78 Keating, “‘I’m a citizen of the universe,’” 66.


talking about herself. Just as the “we” in “Holy Relics” draws the reader into the poem and suggests a greater collectivity to which reader(s) and narrator belong, so too does this second-person writing perspective suggest connection and relationship. The difference is that this relationship is between the narrator/author (presumably Anzaldúa) and the reader. Such a relationship suggests an intimacy between the reader and Anzaldúa as though she is inviting “you” to journey with her through the creative process of writing, of “putting Coyolxauhqui together.” Given Anzaldúa’s earlier admission of seeing her writing practice as one through which she acts as “poet-shaman,” I think that the use of the second person in this essay signals Anzaldúa’s offering of herself as shamanic guide to the reader, mentoring him/her into the “ethno-poetics of the shaman.” In other words, if writing for her is shamanic, and if this essay is directed to those who write/create, then it can be read as an introduction to the ways of becoming “poet-shaman.”

Discussing the writing process (or any creative process) as shamanic she notes, “To bring into being something that does not exist in the world, a sacrifice will be required of you, sacrifice means to make holy.”\(^{81}\) And then she asks, “What will you give up in making holy the process of writing?”\(^ {82}\) Here, in her continued conceptualization of writing as shamanic practice, Anzaldúa reiterates that writing and other potentially transformative processes of creation tend to involve pain. They demand a “sacrifice.” But she also asks what you will sacrifice. It is not a command, but a question. Anzaldúa is not interested in sacrifices that do not

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involve choices – those offerings are not holy. She is not re-inscribing calls for sacrifice and “holiness” that have only served to tear women (and other minoritized people) apart as “Holy Relics” shows. Instead she is inviting you, the writer, to make an offering, not to be offered. But what do such offerings look like?

Anzaldúa suggests that the sacrifice involved in writing is connected to the vulnerability of offering one’s thoughts (which for her involves one’s body) to the world. She writes, “To write is to expose yourself, to let down your protective walls – a given that comes with the territory.” Anzaldúa notes, “You’ve learned that writing about writing is more about life than it is about writing, that writing mirrors the struggle in your own life, from denial to recognition and change; that writing illumines your fears and dreams.” Writing asks you to reflect on yourself, on nos/ostras. Inherent in these reflections on the “sacrifice” involved in writing is an understanding of the difference between making an offering and being offered. Note that it is “you” – the writer – who “exposes yourself” and “[lets- down your protective walls.” You have “learned that writing about writing is more about life” – that writing (about anything) tends to “mirror the struggle in your own life.” This, I think, is how Anzaldúa differentiates the “sacrifice” and “holiness” she mentions from notions of sacrifice and holiness that create and sustain violence and suffering.

The power inherent in the writer, in the poet-shaman, is similar to the power


inherent in the Teresa of Ávila of “Holy Relics” who is able to heal when she acts on her own rather than being acted upon. Your fragmentation, Anzaldúa suggests, does not have to diminish your power. Through it a wholeness capacious enough to contain and celebrate its own fragmentation can emerge. And this can prove healing for all of nos/otras.

As poet-shaman, Anzaldúa “exposes [herself-],” including her own “fragmentation,” throughout “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process.” In trying to lead “you” through the process of also becoming a poet-shaman, she traces her own vulnerability and suffering. To “make holy this writing” she shares her own experiences of struggling with “your/[her- ambition, your/[her- obsession with perfection.”85 She shares what “you/[she has- learned from your/[her- body and chronic illness” which in her case includes diabetes. From “pricking” fingers every few hours to put “blood on the glucose meter” to constantly worrying about other aspects of this illness, including bleeding eye capillaries that cause you/her to “see floaters and pulsating lights.” This threat of losing your/her vision being your/her “worst nightmare” since “if you/[she- can’t see to write and read, there goes your/[her- life.”86 Anzaldúa shows “you” that she, too, knows suffering, and that she, too, is willing to offer herself to “make holy” the process of writing.


86 Anzaldúa, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process,” 245. For further reading on the relationship between Anzaldúa’s struggle with pain and chronic illness and her work see, for example, Suzanne Bost’s, “Pain: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Challenge to ‘Women’s Health,’” in Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010) 77-113 and AnaLouise Keating’s, “‘Working toward Wholeness’: Gloria Anzaldúa’s Struggles to Live with Diabetes and Chronic Illness,” in
For her, this “holiness” is not only personal but also political. It demands interrogating stories/histories that perpetuate suffering and violence and seeking to undo them, especially by re-thinking and re-telling them. And for Anzaldúa, how you re-tell them is just as significant as why you re-tell them. Even the question of writing style – how you write – is an ethical question. She notes, “style brings up the politics of utterance – who says what, how, to whom, and on whose behalf. When you use a particular language register to re-create particular realities, you include certain groups of people and exclude others.”  

As a poet-shaman, “you wonder if you are unknowingly reproducing the dominant ideology along with its literary conventions.”  

In this essay, Anzaldúa draws on the Aztec mythic female figure of Coyolxauhqui as a metaphor for the creative process of writing. What “politics of utterance” does this metaphor involve? Anzaldúa writes, “In Aztec mythology, Coyolxauhqui is the moon goddess, a warrior woman. Making her the first human sacrifice, her brother Huitzilopochtli, the war god, decapitated her, dismembered her body, and scattered her limbs.”  

She then continues, “Organizing the parts [of a story-] into a unified whole and drafting a full version el cuento [story-] is the act of putting Coyolxauhqui back together again.”  

Initially, Anzaldúa’s re-telling of the Coyolxauhqui myth seems to simply recount the story, not questioning the violence

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suffered by Coyolxauhqui, or problematizing the tradition of human sacrifice that the myth historically encourages. But she then likens the process of writing a story, which for her includes critical and theoretical writing, to the process of putting Coyolxauhqui together. What are the politics of this re-membering? What new metaphors is Anzaldúa creating while extracting dead ones? Taking the essay itself (as a whole) as an example of such re-membering, Anzaldúa shows that struggle and suffering, symbolized in the image of violent fragmentation, do not undo our power. It is after all, the moon – Coyoxauhqui’s severed head – that illuminates the darkness. It is she who “lifts the veil between inner and outer worlds,” showing that they are one, that duality is illusory.\footnote{Anzaldúa, “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process,” 244.} For Anzaldúa, this is what you – writer, poet-shaman – will come to see. And it will transform you – it will transform nos/otras.

In “now let us shift … the path of conocimiento … inner work, public acts” Anzaldúa offers herself again as poet-shaman, using the second-person perspective through it until, tellingly, the very last paragraph of her concluding “ritual … prayer … blessing … for transformation” shifts to the first-person-plural “we.”\footnote{Anzaldúa, “now let us shift … the path of conocimiento … inner work, public acts,” in \textit{this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation}, eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 576.} This “we” is reminiscent of the “we” in “Holy Relics” and I conclude this chapter by reflecting on its implications for understanding how Anzaldúa writes – offers – a spirituality of transformation.

Similar to her writing style in “Putting Coyolxauhqui Together: A Creative Process,” Anzaldúa again invites a reader – “you” – to accompany her continued
conceptualization of writing as shamanic/spiritual practice. In particular, she names and explains seven stages of conocimiento. For her, “conocimiento” is an epistemology “beyond the subject-object divide, a way of knowing and acting.”

Note how conocimiento takes up mestiza consciousness’ task of “breaking down subject-object” duality. She continues, “those carrying conocimiento refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality.” Further, “a form of spiritual inquiry, conocimiento is reached via creative acts – writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism – both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity).”

In her theorization of conocimiento, Anzaldúa draws on her earlier works’ insistence that duality is the root of violence and continues her search for non-dualistic epistemologies. She shares this search with “you,” inviting a reader to know (conocer) this other way of knowing by detailing the seven stages of conocimiento. They are: 1. el arrebato … rupture, fragmentation … an ending, a beginning; 2. nepantla … torn between ways; 3. the Coatlicue state … desconocimiento and the cost of knowing; 4. the call … el compromiso … the crossing and conversion; 5. putting Coyolxauhqui together … new personal and collective stories; 6. the blow-up … a clash of realities; 7. shifting

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93 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift … the path of conocimiento … inner work, public acts,” 541.

94 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift … the path of conocimiento … inner work, public acts,” 541-542.
realities ... acting out the vision or spiritual activism.\textsuperscript{95} As their names suggest, many of these stages are initially conceptualized in Anzaldúa’s earlier writings; what is unique to “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts” is that Anzaldúa explicitly puts them into relationship with each other by listing them as stages. Lest this act of listing be (mis)interpreted as an act of categorization Anzaldúa writes, “All seven [stages- are present within each stage, and they occur concurrently, chronologically or not.”\textsuperscript{96} The seven stages demand a tolerance and intolerance for ambiguity. Like the Four Directions mentioned in Chapter 2, they also speak to a collectivity that does not demand uniformity. In fact, Anzaldúa explains that “the first stages of conocimiento illustrate the four directions (south, west, north, east)” while stage 5 represents “the next,” stage 6 “above and below,” and stage 7 “the center.”\textsuperscript{97}

Anzaldúa elaborates on each stage by offering details from her own life, sharing her experiences of living in the borderlands, of risking transformation. Her writing style is that of a spiritual guide. No longer writing about spiritual activism, she is enacting spiritual activism. Acting as shaman – the text is her prayer, her offering. As Chicana theorist Laura E. Pérez notes, “Gloria’s writing [is- her embodied thinking, and I dare say, her prayer or incantation, her words of power,

\textsuperscript{95} Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts,” 546-574.

\textsuperscript{96} Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts,” 545.

\textsuperscript{97} Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts,” 545.
delivered with intentionality, as performative act.”\textsuperscript{98} This “performative” element echoes Anzaldúa’s initial reflections on writing: the “ethno-poetics and performance” of the shaman that she first describes in \textit{Borderlands/La Frontera}. As performative language, Anzaldúa’s words seek to bring about what they describe. Keating notes, “As do indigenous practitioners, Anzaldúa grounds herself in a metaphysics and ontology positing that words, images, and material things are intimately interwoven.”\textsuperscript{99} In Anzaldúa’s spirituality, words can bridge \textit{topan} and \textit{mictlán}, the seeming gaps between flesh and spirit; words can forge something else. As Keating notes, “the performative power of specific, carefully selected words shifts reality.”\textsuperscript{100} Acting as poet-shaman, Anzaldúa seeks to shift reality – to transform it – through her carefully and critically chosen words.

The seven stages of conocimiento in “now let us shift” can be understood as an invitation to being transformed. Taken together as a whole, rather than in parts, they move toward a spirituality of transformation that I think Anzaldúa seeks through her shamanic acts of writing. She writes,

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\textsuperscript{100} Keating, “‘There is no arcane place for return,’” 119. For more on “performativity” in relation to broader debates about subjectivity and ritualization, see Amy Hollywood, “Performativity, Citationality, Ritualization,” in \textit{History of Religions}, Vol. 42, No. 2, (November 2002), 93-115.
\end{flushright}
Through the act of writing you call, like the ancient chamana, the scattered pieces of your soul back to your body. You commence the arduous task of rebuilding yourself, composing a story that more accurately expresses your new identity. You seek out allies and together, begin building spiritual/political communities that struggle for personal growth and social justice. By compartiendo historias, ideas, las nepantleras forge bonds across race, gender, and other lines, thus creating a new tribalism.”

As poet-shaman, Anzaldúa summons all of us “holy relics” and pieces of Coyolxauhqui, asking us “to define who we are by what we include.” To risk “pulling flesh” and “share our stories/histories” thus “forging bonds across” the categories that threaten to divide nos/otras. For her, this is the possibility of transformation: to “link hands and hearts / together find a path through the dark woods / step through the doorways between worlds / leaving huellas [footprints- for others to follow.”

Así será.

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101 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts,” 573-574.

102 Anzaldúa, “now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts,” 576.
Chapter 5

Closing Offerings

There is no theoretical solution to the mystery of suffering and evil, but there is the immense field of responsive action toward overcoming what kills women’s human dignity. Here and there such action succeeds, granting fragmentary experiences of salvation, anticipations of the human condition where suffering and evil are overcome. Light dawns, courage is renewed, tears are wiped away, a new moment of life arises. Toward that end, speaking about suffering Sophia-God of powerful compassionate love serves as an ally of resistance and a wellspring of hope. But it does so under the rule of darkness and broken words. – Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is*

Often a wound provokes an urgent yearning for wholeness and provides the ground to achieve it. In shadow work, the problem is part of the cure – you don’t heal the wound; the wound heals you. – Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*

Questions that Remain

How do we speak of suffering? The answers to this question are multiple. In the Christian tradition, answers given have sometimes perpetuated suffering. As Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson notes, understandings of redemptive suffering that put “such a premium on suffering as a way of satisfying God” inevitably “[create- passivity in believers who are told to be like the Suffering Servant obedient unto death without opening one’s mouth.”¹ They foster “a victim mentality that cuts the nerve of the struggle for justice.”² Attributing redemptive value to pain has been especially disastrous for women and other members of

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² Johnson, “‘Christ died for us,’” 181.
minoritized communities since it discourages challenges to sexism, racism, classicism, and heterosexism, as well as other social injustices.

Speaking of suffering is dangerous. As Mayra Rivera notes, “Words also become flesh. Words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies. Social discourses divide the world and mark bodies differently [...- Social hierarchies become flesh.”

The words we use to speak about suffering are also the words we use to categorize bodies, to determine identities. In a religion where the Word became Flesh, it is not coincidental that ambivalences about flesh – including its relationship to spirit – are displaced onto those whose bodies are marked with certain words like “woman,” “black,” “queer,” “poor,” “blind.” Theologian Michelle A. Gonzalez writes, “The ambiguity surrounding the body [in Christianity- mirrors, in many ways, the ambiguous views of woman throughout Christian theology, where she is both celebrated and disparaged.”

Such ambiguity extends to a multiplicity of bodies in which “social hierarchies become flesh” – hierarchies that also include the privileging of certain races, classes, sexualities, and abilities. Through its words about suffering, Christian thought has sometimes called minoritized people to sacrifices too terrible to name. It has shown the dangers of speaking about suffering in unambiguous ways.

So, how might we speak meaningfully about suffering in ways that attend to its ambiguities? How do we confront social injustices while also affirming the new

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3 Rivera, Poetics, 2.

4 Michelle A. Gonzalez, Created in God’s Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), 124.
ways of seeing and being in the world that living through such injustices have inspired? How do we affirm the possibilities for transformation that can emerge from suffering without glorifying or justifying suffering? These are questions that remain, inviting continuous conversation.

**Anzaldúan Insights**

Seeking ways to enter into this conversation about suffering, I have turned to the work of Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa, a borderlands thinker who was unafraid of ambiguity. Aware of the power of words to become flesh, she posits that the roots of our sufferings can be found in the myths we carry within ourselves. These are the stories/histories written in words that become our flesh. In particular, I trace her rethinking of stories/histories involving the violent dismemberment of female religious figures, specifically Teresa of Ávila and Coyolxauhqui. Anzaldúa’s critical engagement and creative reimagining of these stories/histories leads her to develop an understanding of fragmentation and wholeness that resists dualistic epistemologies. For Anzaldúa, suffering emerges from dualism and the violence inherent in processes of categorization, especially as they function in identity formations. “Self,” Anzaldúa argues, cannot be neatly organized or fully understood; it is always in process. Writing, as an act of “spiritual activism,” mirrors this process of becoming because it demands critically and creatively analyzing the stories/histories that inform our understandings of self and others – of nos/otras. It requires looking closely at the words that wound and elevate us. Writing is, for Anzaldúa, a spiritual/shamanic act. Indeed, Anzaldúa’s writings can be read as acts
of spiritual activism. Through them, she acts as poet-shaman, calling us toward a spirituality of transformation.

Somewhat uncannily, as I was nearing the completion of this dissertation, Anzaldúa’s UCSC dissertation was posthumously published. Edited by literary scholar and personal friend of Anzaldúa, AnaLouise Keating, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* was published in October 2015.5 The timing of its publication “spooked” me a bit – as though Anzaldúa was once again speaking though this time from beyond death. As I read through it, I was impressed by Anzaldúa’s continued theorization of fragmentation, self, and transformation, especially as she ties them more explicitly to the image of Coyolxauhqui.

Keating notes that “Coyolxauhqui serves as Anzaldúa’s ‘light in the dark,’ representing a complex holism – both the acknowledgement of painful fragmentation and the promise of transformative healing.”6 Or, in Anzaldúa’s words, Coyolxauhqui represents the psychic and creative process of tearing apart and pulling together (constructing/deconstructing). She represents fragmentation, imperfection, incompleteness, and unfulfilled promises as well as integration, completeness, wholeness.7

The “complex holism” represented by the image of Coyolxauhqui in Anzaldúa’s final writings is also already present, I think, in Anzaldúa’s earlier writings like “Holy

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Relics.” In “Holy Relics,” a complex holism emerges as fragmentation – portrayed by the greedy tearing apart of Teresa of Ávila’s body – forces us to reimagine what holiness looks like – portrayed by the miraculous powers of the Teresa who acts through her fragmentation. By showing how certain notions of holiness can lead to fragmentation, the poem simultaneously shows how certain understandings of fragmentation can potentially lead to wholeness. As Anzaldúa writes in *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, “Often a wound provokes an urgent yearning for wholeness and provides the ground to achieve it. In shadow work, the problem is part of the cure – you don’t heal the wound; the wound heals you.” Anzaldúa’s ongoing project of critically re-mythologizing stories involving the violent dismemberment of women seems to be her way of going to the source of suffering – to the wound – in order to transform it into a means of healing.

The use of re-mythologizing as a means of healing reiterates Anzaldúa’s understanding of writing as a spiritual/shamanic act. Recall that a shaman “extracts the old dead metaphors” so as to bring about new metaphors – those that can “give us a handle on the numinous, a handle on the faculty for self-healing, one that may cure the depressed spirit, the frightened soul.” As I argue in Chapter 4, Anzaldúa takes on the role of shaman in her writings, attempting to lead her readers – “us” – toward a spirituality of transformation.

In *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, Keating argues that the role of spirituality in Anzaldúan thought is still neglected by most scholars. They ignore the

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8 Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*, 89.

“ontological dimensions” of Anzaldúa’s writings. Such an omission, she suggests, misses the rich complexity of Anzaldúa’s work, including its political possibilities for social transformation. According to Keating, “In Light in the Dark, Anzaldúa takes [the- ‘decolonial turn’ even further and includes a groundbreaking ontological component” – an “aspect of Anzaldúa’s work [that- has been underappreciated and often ignored.” Although I cannot fully engage Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscura here, I want to conclude by reflecting on this “ontological component” of Anzaldúa’s work as it directly relates to the “spirituality of transformation” discussed in Chapter 4.

For Anzaldúa, spirituality is “a source of sustenance, a way of knowing, a path of survival” that “not only transforms our perceptions of ‘ordinary’ life and our relationships with others, but also invites encounters with other realities, other worlds.” I emphasize the phrases “source of sustenance” and “way of knowing” to show that implicit in Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of “spirituality” are ontology and epistemology. The two function together within her understanding of the spiritual. Keating notes this relationship and writes,

[Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscura- represents the culmination of Anzaldúa’s lifelong investigations and demonstrates that, for Anzaldúa, epistemology and ontology (knowing and being) are intimately interrelated – two halves of

10 Anzaldúa, Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscur, xxix.


one complex, multidimensional process employed in the service of progressive social change.\textsuperscript{13}

What does this relationship imply for understanding Anzaldúan spirituality? A possible answer to this question stems from Anzaldúa’s understanding of herself as “poet-shaman.” From her \textit{autohistorical} reflections in “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman” to her shamanic role in “now let us shift,” Anzaldúa consistently pushes against dichotomous ways of \textit{knowing} in order to enact a different way of \textit{being} in the world. Believing that the root of violence and suffering is “duality,” Anzaldúa plucks and pulls at it by offering non-dualistic theorizations of \textit{nos/otras}. Although Anzaldúa posits an ontology that acknowledges the reality of “other worlds,” it is not an ontology that disparages this world for the sake of other worlds. The transcendent is not to be sought at the expense of the immanent. We are not to tear apart \textit{nos/otras} in the name of supposed holiness. Instead, we are to remember that we are the holy relics; we are what we seek.

Spirituality, for her, has profound political implications. It is about power. As Laura E. Pérez notes, “spiritual masters of traditions across the globe and across time make clear that spirituality and religiosity are about power.”\textsuperscript{14} Power – the power to move between worlds, to heal wounds – comes from our way of knowing, from our \textit{conocimientos}. But it also comes from what we do not know, from ambiguity. Like the shamans who travel between the worlds of gods and spirits and


the underworld, we too are asked to push against the limits of what we know and who we presume ourselves to be. We are most powerful, Anzaldúa’s many writings suggest, when “we define who we are by what we include.”

This is Anzaldúa’s “spirituality of transformation”: tolerant and intolerant of ambiguity, always calling for critical self-reflection, ever seeking a wholeness capable of celebrating its own fragmentation. It is a rich source of insight for Christian feminist theologians, and all others, who seek to speak of suffering in ways that might heal rather than further wound.

A closing offering ...

Finding Each Other
(For Gloria)

We are the holy relics
thrown down the sacred mountain
Pulled apart by over-ardent fingers
and our own ambivalence
Pero es difícil differentiating between the two ...

We enter into la frontera
Feel the tear of Coatlicue’s claws,
the sharp pulling of flesh ...
Bear the heavy gaze
of those who once loved us,
and the birth of la raza.

But this time is different ... something shifts this time we offer our bloodstained rag to ourselves –
let it heal nos/otras.
This time la luna shines for all whose flesh/spirits are pulled.

Así sera.
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