

**An Exploration of Gloria Anzaldúa's Feminist Thought in *Borderlands/La  
Frontera : The New Mestiza***

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It is only during the last two decades that autobiographical writing started to attract the attention of academic circles in an unprecedented way. One of the reasons for this new visibility is that minorities have appropriated this genre: autobiography has proved to be an effective means for members of ethnic and/or sexual minorities to articulate, voice and legitimize their long-silenced and marginalized experiences. Indeed, autobiographical writing constitutes above all a means of building a sense of self and “agency” through the organization in writing of chaotic fragments of experience. In this respect Sidonie Smith states that “there is no essential original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating” (“Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” 108). Since the autobiographical subject is, in Smith’s view, amnesiac and incoherent, “autobiographical narration begins with amnesia, and once begun, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity intrudes” (109). In this study, I will argue that autobiographical writing is for Chicana feminist artists in general, and for Gloria Anzaldua in particular, a way of making sense of and coming to terms with experiences of pain and suffering that, once articulated and organized, comprise a system that serves the purpose of reading the world. Furthermore, autobiographical writing represents for Chicanas a source of empowerment and knowledge that is instrumental in the creation of politically informed collective identities.

The experiences voiced in women’s autobiographical writing are largely influenced, though not wholly determined, by their cultural experience and social location. The social location can be defined as the space of experience where the social facts of “race,” “gender,” “class” and “sexual orientation” become forces that influence the constitution of individual and collective identities. Latina and Chicana autobiographical writing cannot avoid assessing the consequences and implications of the narrating subject’s social location. Since the implications of the narrating subject’s social location transcend the individual’s sphere and articulate the experience of a marginalized community, the political claims of Latina and Chicana feminism find echo in Latina and Chicana autobiographical writing.

Chicana feminism accords a privileged place to women’s experiences of suffering and pain that are the consequences of their social location. According to Cherié Moraga, the Chicana’s exploration of her pain allows her to acquire the necessary self-knowledge to realize a work of self-transformation and build an identity with a privileged epistemic value (Moya 138). This process of self-transformation is largely based on the legitimization and revalorization of the Chicana’s experiences of psychic and physical suffering. The analysis

and comprehension of such experiences allows her to develop a subjective standpoint informed by her social location that enables her to read the world in meaningful ways. Furthermore, the understanding and coming to terms with painful experiences makes her reach an awareness of the sources of oppression forming the basis of such suffering.

By reconstructing the narrating subject's process of becoming aware of different sources of oppression, Chicana and Latina autobiographies contribute to the consolidation of collective identities. As Lourdes Torres states "Latina autobiographers do not create a monolithic self, but rather present the construction of the self as a member of multiple oppressed groups, whose political identity can never be divorced from her conditions. The subject created is at once individual and collective" (278). Chicana and Latina autobiographical writing then becomes a privileged instrument for making sense of experiences of suffering and pain that once properly assessed become not only a source of knowledge and empowerment but also a means of shaping politically conscious collective identities.

The above perspective will inform my analysis of Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Central to this autobiographical work is the concept of "borderland," which underwrites the author's conceptualization of the "mestiza consciousness." Another key motif is the author's acquisition and development of spiritual awareness, which is represented as a source of empowerment leading to self-transformation. In fact, the thread that weaves Anzaldua's autobiography, a fusion of various genres, is her spiritual growth and the reshaping of a forceful mythology based on the appropriation of various female deities, among them "la Virgen de Guadalupe." In the introduction to the second edition of *Borderlands*, Sonia Saldivar-Hull provides a fine synthesis of Anzaldua's work in the following terms: "using a new genre she calls *autohistoria*, Anzaldua presents history as a serpentine cycle rather than a linear narrative. The *historia* she tells is a story in which indigenous icons, traditions, and rituals replace post-Cortesian, Catholic customs. Anzaldua reconfigures Chicana affinities with the Catholic *Virgen de Guadalupe* and offers an alternative image: *Coatlicue*, the Aztec divine mother" (*Borderlands 2*).

I will begin my discussion by assessing the relevance of the concept of "borderland." Literally, this term refers to the US-Mexico border. In this sense, the term "border" evokes the US-Mexican war which resulted in the annexation of Texas by the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

relegating Chicanos to a second-class citizen status in their own land. On the other hand, in Anzaldua's autobiography, the term "borderland" alludes to the rigid boundaries Western binary thought erects in the spheres of race, gender, sexual orientation as well as to the separation between the spiritual and the physical realms. According to Anzaldua, any kind of borderland is to be transgressed; indeed, she conceptualizes political and ideological borders as "unnatural boundar[ies]" (2). The transgression of borders leads to a space "in between," a "third" space in which, what she terms, "mestiza consciousness" develops. The rigid and totalizing concept of "borderland" is thus put into question by the existence of this third space characterized by being hybrid and where dual thought is absent. The figure of the "mestiza" then becomes an icon of this "third" space situated at the borderlands.

Anzaldua's celebration of the "mestiza consciousness" that blooms at the borderlands is tightly linked to the idea of survival. The "mestiza's" survival depends on her capacity for self-transformation and adaptation. In order to survive at the borderlands, she must learn to be flexible enough to switch not only between English and Spanish but also between different and often conflicting cultural codes, ways of being and even identities. Owing to the consequences of her social location, the "mestiza" needs to learn how to live without borders and become instead a crossroads, a place of transit and constant flux. As Anzaldua insightfully expresses in "To live in the Borderlands means you," becoming a crossroads is a dangerous enterprise for

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,  
 you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,  
 forerunner of a new race,  
 half and half—both woman and man, neither—  
 a new gender;

In the Borderlands  
 you are a battleground  
 where your enemies are kin to each other;  
 you are at home, a stranger,  
 To survive the Borderlands  
 you must live *sin fronteras*  
 be a crossroads. (216-7)

Anzaldua thus describes the distress and danger entailed by being forced or choosing to live at the border and become a crossroads. At the border, “la mestiza” is alone, vulnerable and left to her own devices. To survive the borderlands, she needs to learn how to be wise enough to defend herself. Otherwise she will be an easy prey of “the mill with the razor white teeth [that] wants to shred off/your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart” (217). Not to be destroyed by those who consider her as a menace, for she challenges their deep-rooted principles and convictions, as well as by the flux of different forces that tread on her who has become a crossroads, “la mestiza” must learn to transcend dichotomies. She must become multiple and flexible; she needs to learn how to slither like a serpent to escape the dangers of the border. In “Cihuatl-yotl, Woman Alone,” the narrator affirms that her multiplicity is the fruit of her capacity for self-transformation: “I remain who I am, multiple and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk on the ground of my own being browned and hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved by the hands of the ancients, drenched with the stench of today’s headlines. But my own hands whittle the final work me.” (195).

The experience of living “en la frontera.” shapes and nurtures “the mestiza’s” flexible and supple sense of self and identity. The identity construction that derives from “the mestiza’s” experience of the borderland can be analyzed in terms of Cherrié Moraga’s conceptualization of the Chicana identity. According to Moraga, identity is a relational construction that helps individuals make sense of the world, and, as such, it has an important epistemic component (Moya 13). Even when it is largely influenced by the social location, the identity is a construction based on self-knowledge and subject to modification and transformations. Consequently, it is possible to change one’s identity and even to have several identities. But despite the possibility of building several identities, politically conscious women privilege one particular identity construction to suit strategic goals, for, as previously stated, certain identities have a superior epistemic value. In other words, certain identity constructions can become tools that help individuals to better understand and tackle the matrices of oppression ingrained in their social location. From this perspective, the “mestiza” identity presupposes a privileged epistemic stance, for it derives from an awareness of an oppression carried out along two major fronts: race and gender. The “mestiza” identity then implies an acute awareness of power relations and a predisposition to political struggle.

Like Moraga, Anzaldua adheres to the possibility of having multiple and flexible identities. The author asserts that “identity is an arrangement or series of clusters, a kind of

stacking or layering of selves, horizontal and vertical layers, the geography of selves made up of the different communities you inhabit. . . . Where these spaces overlap is Nepantla, the Borderlands. Identity is a process-in-the-making” (238 *Interviews/Entrevistas*). As Anzaldua states, the concepts of “Nepantla” and “borderlands” are intimately associated to the idea of identity building. For Anzaldua, even in an individual’s identity construction there exists borderlands that need to be transgressed. “Nepantla” stands then for the interstice or passageway in the geography of the self that contains the potential for self-transformation. As a stage in the process of self-transformation, Anzaldua establishes a parallel between “Nepantla” and

[a] birthing stage where you feel like you’re reconfiguring your identity and don’t know where you are. You used to be this person but now you’re different in some way. You’re changing worlds and cultures and maybe classes, sexual preferences. So you go through this birthing of Nepantla. When you’re in the midst of the Coatlicue state—the cave, the dark—you’re hibernating or hiding, you’re gestating and giving birth to yourself. You’re in a womb state. When you come out of that womb state you pass through the birth canal, the passageway I call Nepantla. (225-26 *Interviews*).

“Nepantla” is then the most important stage in Anzaldua’s process of self-transformation and spiritual awakening.

In Anzaldua’s feminist project, spirituality is the cornerstone of self-transformation and gives rise to the shaping of a “feminine” mythology based on the reappropriation of Aztec female icons. Concerning the importance of myth-making, Anzaldua states that “myths and fictions create reality . . . There are certain myths—the stories of Coatlicue, la Llorona, la Chingada, la Virgen de Guadalupe, and Coyolxauhqui, the moon goddess—that I associate with women” (220 *Interviews*). At this point, it is necessary to discuss the female deities that, in Anzaldua’s view, guide the mestiza in her journey of self-transformation .

“La Virgen de Guadalupe” is central to Chicana mythology. Anzaldua, as well as other Chicana feminists, reappropriates the figure of the “Virgen de Guadalupe,” manipulated and tamed over the centuries not only by the Spanish conquerors but also by the Aztec patriarchy. “La Virgen de Guadalupe” is in fact the direct descendent of a lineage of powerful Aztec female deities. These goddesses possessed, what Anzaldua calls, the “shadow-beast”, which she explains as that what “emerges as the part of women that frightens men and causes them

to try to control and devalue female culture" (*Borderlands* 4). The "shadow-beast" in these female deities led patriarchal culture to disempower them and confine them to a passive role by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided [they] who [have] been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects. *Coatlicue*, the Serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, *Tlazolteotl* and *Cihuacoatl*, were "darkened" and disempowered much in the same manner as the Indian *Kali*. *Tonantsi*—split from her dark guises, *Coatlicue*, *Tlazolteotl*, and *Cihuacoatl*—became the good mother.

After the Conquest, the Spaniards and their Church continued to split *Tonantsi/Guadalupe*. They desexed *Guadalupe*, taking *Coatlalopeuh*, the serpent/sexuality, out of her. They completed the split begun by the Nahuas by making *la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen Maria* into chaste virgins and *Tlazolteotl/Coatlicue/la Chingada* into *putas*; into the Beauties and the Beasts.

Thus *Tonantsi* became *Guadalupe*, the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people. (*Borderlands* 49-50).

Anzaldúa explains that the descendent of the Aztec goddess *Tonantsi* was "Maria Coatlalopeuh," whose name means "the one who has dominion over serpents" (51). On account of the fact that the names of "*Coatlalopeuh*," the fertility and Earth goddess, and "*Guadalupe*," the Spanish virgin, are homophones, the figures of these two virgins merged. Coatlalopeuh was thus made to lose her underworld characteristics (51). As it was to be expected, in due time, "*la Virgen de Guadalupe*" became associated with the Virgin Mary, and was confined to the role of mothering and nurturing celestial deities.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa strives at restoring "*la Virgen de Guadalupe*" the wholeness destroyed by the dualities ingrained in patriarchal culture. Like "*la Virgen de Guadalupe*," "*la Llorona*," *Coatlicue*, *Cihuacoatl* and *Tonantsi* were Aztec goddesses and, as such, they were considered as manifestations of the mother Earth. These serpent-women were goddesses of war and birth; they embodied heavenly and underworld powers and they incarnated the qualities of loving and nurturing motherhood but also the sexuality and underworld slyness of the serpent and the courage of warriors. Thus, the completeness of these female deities lied in that they synthesized the male and female principles as well as those of good and evil. Furthermore, since they belonged in equal measure to heaven, the underworld and the world of human beings, these goddesses were mediators between these

three layers of reality. In the following passage of “Antigua, mi diosa,” Anzaldua invokes one of the above mentioned female deities

Me consumaste enterita,  
 si, mi Antigua diosa  
 sembraste tus semillas de luz  
 en los surcos de mi cuerpo.  
 La cosecha: esta inquietud  
 que se madura en agonía (210)

Guided by these female deities, the narrating subject commences her journey of spiritual discovery. She has to go down into the underworld and confront her fears, demons and nightmares. The serpent goddess protects her and encourages her to confront her “shadow-beast,” and, in this way, strip herself of her old self and identity, which can be compared to a serpent’s skin. In her journey, the “mestiza” must go through “the *Coatlicue* state” that precedes “Nepantla,” which is the stage previous to the actual birth of a new sense of self and implies a major “spiritual and political crossing through which one arrives at a higher spiritual and political consciousness” (7).

The “Coatlicue stage” is like a womb, for the woman is, at this stage, plunged in total darkness and isolation. Like the maternal womb, the “Coatlicue stage” provides a source of nourishment: namely, the growing spiritual awareness. In fact, at this stage, an expansion of consciousness—which Anzaldua characterizes as an ocean—takes place (112 *Interviews*). The individual tears down the misleading veil of reality in order to reach a realm that transcends rational, scientific Western thought. This expansion of consciousness is not smooth; it causes pain and distress, for the individual must confront her demons and worst fears all alone. The flights of consciousness that take place during the “Coatlicue stage” entail a danger inasmuch as lack of will and self-control can lead to extreme confusion. The individual who passes through the “Coatlicue state” does not have to fight back or resist her fears and demons; instead, she has to let herself be taken over by them. Eventually, she will realize that her demons are not her enemies but rather her source of strength and power. In “Letting Go,” Anzaldua beautifully and sensitively describes the confrontation with the demons that takes place in the “Coatlicue stage,”

You must plunge your fingers  
 into your navel, with your two hands  
 split open,

spill out the lizards and horned toads  
 the orchids and the sunflowers,  
 turn the maze inside out.  
 Shake it. (186)

In “That dark shining thing,” Anzaldua depicts as well the pain and distress provoked by the “Coatlucue state.” But this time the narrating voice is that of a spiritual guide who encourages and accompanies a woman undergo the numinous transformation. The spiritual mentor explains that the transformation demands coming to terms with “the animal, the alien, the sub- or suprahuman . . . that . . . possesses a demon determination and ruthlessness beyond the human” (*Borderlands* 72). Most important, the spiritual guide warns that the “Coatlucue stage” is a point of no return; once reached, it is impossible to go back without confronting death or madness.

I remember hating him/me/they who pushed me  
 as I'm pushing you  
 . . .

It was then I saw the numinous thing  
 it was black and it had my name  
 it spoke to me and I spoke to it.

Here we are four women stinking with guilt  
 you for not speaking your names  
 me for not holding out my hand sooner  
 I don't know how long I can keep naming  
 that dark animal  
 coaxing it out of you, out of me  
 keep calling it good or woman-god  
 while everyone says no no no

I know it's come down to this:  
*vida o muerte*, life or death. (193-4)

As the spiritual mentor suggests, the “Coatlucue state” finishes when the woman “names all her names, once again she enacts the culmination of unearthing her multiple subjectivities: the ‘divine within, *Coatlucue-Cihuacoatl-Tlazolteotl-Tonatsin-Coatlapeuh-Guadalupe*-they are one” (72). The process of self-transformation does not finish with the “Coatlucue stage”

though. In the following excerpt of "Letting Go," Anzaldua describes the important passage from the "Coatlicue stage" to "Nepantla," the actual preparation for a major spiritual crossing.

This time you must let go.  
Meet the dragon's open face  
And let the terror swallow you.

You've crossed over  
And all around you space.  
Alone. With nothingness.

Nobody's going to save you.  
No one's going to cut you down,  
cut the thorns thick around you.  
No one's going to cut you down  
Cut the thorns thick around you.  
No one's going to storm  
the castle walls nor  
kiss awake your birth. (186-187)

Anzaldua thus depicts "Nepantla," which is "a Nahuatl word for the space between two bodies of water, the space between two worlds" (*Borderlands* 237). Whereas the "Coatlicue stage is like a womb, "Nepantla" is a transitional space that can be compared to the uterus' passageway inasmuch as it leads the individual to a major crossing.

Even if, especially at the beginning, the flights of consciousness cause profound distress, once the individual gains mastery over them, they become a source of empowerment. A heightened spiritual awareness implies the transgression of the limits imposed to consciousness and perception, and as such it is intimately connected to the notion of "going beyond borders," which is central to the cultural experience of "la mestiza." Indeed, "la mestiza's" life is marked by a continual switching between and transgression of borders. For her, transgressing borders implies transcending dichotomous principles such as spirit/body, male/female and good/evil, which pervade Western thought. Actually, being a politically engaged "mestiza" means an acceptance that survival depends on her ability to transgress or switch between borderlands.

The “mestiza’s” capacity to go beyond borders gives birth to what Anzaldua terms “mestiza consciousness.” According to the author, a “mestiza consciousness” is the fruit of a “racial, ideological, cultural and biological crosspollinization, an ‘alien’ consciousness—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*: It is a consciousness of the Borderlands”<sup>1</sup> (*Borderlands* 99). This consciousness of the borderlands is mainly characterized by the “mestiza’s” ability to transcend the binary thought rooted in a positivist worldview. For Anzaldua, Western thought is permeated by rigid dichotomies that give rise to violence (59). Consequently, “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” (102).

Anzaldua’s efforts at erasing dichotomies is particularly oriented towards transcending the duality established between good and evil. In this respect she asserts that “I . . . had to accept the fact that God is the Devil; they’re the same person; good and evil are different parts of the same coin. Christianity did this horrible thing by polarizing God and the Devil” (*Interviews*, 41). In another interview she argues once more that, like the yin and yang, good and evil cannot be separated; “we only separate them because of the duality, the way we work” (99). Anzaldua’s “Cancion de la diosa de la noche” makes evident her will to do away with the good/evil dichotomy. In this poem, a heavenly spirit comes down to the world of human beings and, to transcend the above mentioned dichotomy, seeks to become one with “la diosa de la noche,” who represents the underworld:

Now, I drum on the carcass of the world  
 creating crises to recall my name  
 The filth you relegate to Satan,  
 I absorb. I convert.  
 When I dance it burgeons out  
 as song.

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<sup>1</sup> In her autobiography, Anzaldua notes that “José Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged *una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color—la primera raza sintesis del globo*. He called it a cosmic race, *la raza cosmica*, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly ‘crossing over,’ this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool” (*Borderlands* 100).

I seek *la diosa*  
 darkly awesome  
 In love with my own kind. (219-20)

In addition to the erasure of boundaries between good and evil, in Anzaldua's thought, particular attention is paid to the transcendence of the spirit/body dichotomy. In *Borderlands*, the author implicitly concurs with Cherié Moraga's "theory in the flesh," which is based on the conscious exploration of the sources of women's suffering and pain. According to Moraga, "a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives, our skin colour, the land we grew upon, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politics born out of necessity" (cited in Moya 144). For Moraga the flesh is the site where "women of colour" experience the consequences of their social location, for women's bodies have been historically subjected to violence, abuse, domination, discrimination and prejudices.

Anzaldua adds an interesting dimension to Moraga's conceptualization of the body. For the author of *Borderlands*, the body acts as an interface between different layers of experience and consciousness. Indeed, to articulate the need to transcend the spirit/body dichotomy, Anzaldua proposes a "yoga of the body." To support her point the author argues that "we are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head. But the body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to 'real' events" (59-60). In Anzaldua's "yoga of the body," sex acquires a spiritual dimension. Furthermore, sexual intercourse is another way of transcending borderlands inasmuch as the partners partake in a physical experience that allows them to erase the limits of their bodies and merge into one heightened consciousness.

As formerly stated, "la mestiza's" strength lies in her capacity to avoid being trapped within borderlands and dichotomies. Nevertheless, her ability to deal with the ensuing contradictions and ambivalences plunges her into a state of perplexity and indecisiveness. And, because of her being torn between different worlds, "the *mestiza's* dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness" (*Borderlands* 100). As a result, her sense of self is the site of an inner struggle. In "Una lucha de fronteras," Anzaldua gives a poignant portrayal of the inner strife experienced by "la mestiza."

Because I, a *mestiza*

continually walk out of one culture  
 and into another,  
 because I am in all cultures at the same time,  
*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*  
*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*  
*Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan*  
*Simultaneamente. (99)*

As previously discussed, when “the mestiza” decides to confront the many voices that give rise to her state of perplexity and vulnerability, she enters the “Coatlicue stage”. By coming to terms with both her gods and demons, “the split between the two mortal combatants [is] somehow healed so that [she] is on both shores at once and, at once, see[s] through serpent and eagle eyes” (100-101 *Borderlands*). “The mestiza” learns that, in order to survive and cope with the ambiguous, the contradictory and the unpredictable, she has to be flexible and supple like the serpent and alert like the eagle. Out of necessity, she develops a plural personality and “operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (101). The flexibility and plurality of her new sense of self are the basis on which she builds a “mestiza consciousness” or a “consciousness of borderlands,” which enables her to evolve from being the sacrificial victim into “the officiating priestess at the crossroads” (102).

“La mestiza’s” newly acquired consciousness has a great potential for operating major breakthroughs or “crossings” in society. It is in this sense then that her “consciousness of the borderlands,” built upon a challenging and hazardous spiritual journey and the expansion of her perception of reality, constitutes an effective means of political change. Her success resides in her knowledge of how to survive on her own and with no means whatsoever other than her inner strength and what Anzaldua calls “la facultad.” The latter is defined as “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (60 *Borderlands*). “La facultad” is a matter of survival for many oppressed individuals caught between two worlds. People living on the borders remain vulnerable, for they are made to endure others’ racism, hatred, fear of difference and sexual aggression. In fact, “la facultad,” which is the fruit of spiritual knowledge, is perhaps the only means of survival of the oppressed, for, as Anzaldua argues, “when you’re against the wall—when you have all these oppressions coming at you—you develop this extra faculty” (123 *Interviews*). It

can be argued then that Anzaldua firmly adheres to a politically committed spirituality as a source of empowerment.

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldua associates writing with the idea of spiritual empowerment; writing constitutes in fact a fine vehicle for articulating and making sense of the experience of spiritual awakening and growth. Her conception of the act of writing is that of the ancient Aztecs who “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 *mictlan* (that which is below—the underworld and the region of the dead)” (91 *Borderlands*). Indeed, she associates the act of writing to shamanism and healing; her view of the writer is that of a “shape-changer, . . . a *nahual*, a shaman” (88). In an interview Anzaldua explains that she felt the calling to be a writer “in the sense of a shaman—healing through words, using words as a medium for expressing the flights of the soul, communing with the spirit, having access to these other realities or worlds” (19 *Interviews*). She associates writing with healing for the act of writing implies dissecting pain and suffering, unearthing one’s fears and demons and facing the chaos of experience. Writing is therefore like setting the bones of experience in place, stitching the wounds caused by being torn between different worlds. The act of writing thus acquires a physical dimension. Because of the restlessness that it entails, the act of writing is never easy or smooth. It inevitably involves some kind of resistance and struggle on the part of the artist, who needs to dissect a given experience in order to reconstitute it in writing. In addition, writing is connected to shamanism in the sense that, like a shaman, the writer shares with and passes on to the reader the knowledge she/he has acquired. The actualization of the finished work in the act of reading can therefore be compared to a ritual performance inasmuch as this process implies a co-presence of the author and the reader in an active exchange.

*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* constitutes an appealing, thought-provoking, complex autobiographical work that has greatly contributed to the construction and consolidation of Chicana and “mestiza” collective identity. Central to Anzaldua’s work are the author’s experience of spiritual awakening and growth as well as her acquisition of self-knowledge. The narration of her spiritual awakening and development does not remain her individual experience only, for the author intelligently portrays the social implications of spirituality as a means of empowerment for Chicanas. Indeed, her conceptualization of spirituality is central to “la mestiza’s” cultural experience, defined by the borderlands.

Actually, spirituality is portrayed as “la mestiza’s” most effective strategy of survival at the borders and as an effective means of unearthing the matrices of oppression ingrained in her social location. Anzaldua’s conception of spirituality is mainly associated with self-knowledge, which is to be acquired in a hazardous and challenging journey of spiritual discovery leading to self-transformation. During this spiritual journey, “la mestiza” must confront her gods and demons and make peace with both by developing the capacity to transcend dual thought, which Anzaldua considers as the root of all violence. In this journey of self-discovery, which results in self-empowerment, “la mestiza” is guided by Aztec female deities. To transform these ancient goddesses into symbols of an empowered femaleness, Anzaldua reappropriates the figures of *Coatlicue*, *Tonantsi* and *Coatlaloupeuh*--ancient Aztec female deities and manifestations of the Earth mother-- as well as the tame and docile “Virgen de Guadalupe.” By restoring to these ancient Aztec goddesses and “la Virgen the Guadalupe” their former completeness, Anzaldua makes her daring and appealing revisionary mythmaking transcend the dualities imposed upon these figures by indigenous and Spanish male culture. By merging the terms of dichotomies such as good/evil, female/male and mother/warrior, Anzaldua organizes a powerful and appealing mythological pantheon of female deities capable of inspiring Latinas and Chicanas in their political vindications. Indeed, Anzaldua’s *Borderlands* articulates an emerging female consciousness, a consciousness of the borderlands, whose potential to effect major “crossings” and transformations in society should not be overlooked.

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