

Living *Sin Fronteras*:  
Transforming Body and Ethnic Mythologization  
in Gloria Anzaldúa's Works

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In *Borderland/La Frontera* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa explores both internal and external borders by using mixed language and the reinterpretation of folklore and ethnic mythologization in an experimental style by mixing forms of anecdotes, prose, and poetry. In her creative exploration of fluid identity, she has written a postmodern work in which she portrays the imaginative body and positions the significance of writing in seeking coalition among women of color. Her thoughts and intentions as an activist in the work, along with the success in publishing famous anthologies by women of color, starting with *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), assured her leading position among women of color activists. She calls making anthologies her engagement in activism, in which the writers propose multicultural contemporary feminist issues on identities and intersecting oppression of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. As the title of the book indicates, *Borderland/La Frontera*, the concept of a "borderland," an imaginary body and identity, is explored in the autobiographical writings. Anzaldúa mythologizes and fantasizes her body and experience in the context of Mexican folkloric traditions. She mirrors herself in the famous Mexican folkloric figure *La Llorona* (Weeping Woman), legendary and supernatural creatures, and the goddesses in Aztec mythology, such as *Coatlicue*, appear in her work.<sup>1</sup> Her novel features elements of fantasy and mythology. Considering these images and the use of forms, her work is as diverse and multifaceted as she

is herself. Her unique conception of her own body, which is imaginative and creative, empowers her to present and bring her success as being appreciated and supported by multicultural women of color all over the world.

The body is considered as a site of resistance and subversion. The exiled body illustrated in the work evokes an image that includes such Bakhtinian keywords to the body as *monstrous*, *grotesque*, and *spectacular*. She refers to her body as being an “alien” body and an animal body, such as a “Shadow-Beast” or snake, references that bear meanings connected to deviation, exclusion, and freedom. The snake is a recurrent figure historically associated with deity existence in ancient myths in many cultures. In “My Black *Angelos*,” she draws on the figures of Mexican myth and folklore, especially such Mexican folkloric female figures as *La Llorona*, *La Malinche*, and *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, in which the body is also read as a central theme.<sup>2</sup> Her work can be considered autobiographical fantasy, in which she mythologizes herself as a leader of women of color. Anzaldúa positions her writing as physical act that supports and unites women of color and believes that her creativity and writing actions realize a revolution and collective alliance among them.

The borderland is first physically defined by Anzaldúa as follows to situate herself in her personal history, thus the work is perceived as both conceptual and autobiographical:

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower,

middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (18)

As the title and the poem's line "borderland means you [...]" (216-17) indicates, Anzaldúa's concept of the "borderland" is a central theme in her work. She positions the "borderland" both as a physical and psychological space. The physical borderland is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border and exists in which different cultures, races, and classes encounter and intersect. On the other hand, psychological borderlands are described as the sexual and the spiritual ones that are not limited to the physical space. Anzaldúa defines herself as "a border woman": "I am a border woman, I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican [Texas-Mexican] border, and others, all my life. It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape" (18).

She not only presents the concept of the "borderland," her body also embodies it, as "a border woman." Alma Rosa Alvarez states that *Borderland* has been considered a Chicana/o postmodern text featuring a postmodern subject with unique sense characterized by migration: "A migratory sensibility is one where an individual is able to move from one paradigm to another. In the Chicana/o experience, this sensibility is heightened by a history of geographic, linguistic and cultural border crossings and dislocations...which often have to be negotiated on a daily basis" (152).

She also explains that Anzaldúa's text is postmodern because the writer realizes "multiple subjectivities"(53) in which "the Chicana body is a site of ambiguity and contradiction due to the Chicana's racial and cultural hybridity as well as current and historical disloca-

tions which have forced her into a migratory status" (51). In opposition to male-dominated and heterosexist Mexican culture and the ideology of the Chicano movement in 1960s, "*Borderlands* presents a conceptualization of Chicana consciousness rooted in the Chicana body" (51). Thus, though it can be considered that the elements of identity she constructs may contradict one another, she presents them to show multicultural aspects of them, which allows space for diversity not only for her, but for other women of color as well. She presents her body in various ways, mythologizing and fantasizing it as the otherized, monstrous and abject as well as a spectacle.

By presenting multiple subjectivities reflecting herself in various folkloric figures, supernatural creatures, and animals, her work is characterized with the elements of myth and fantasy. Defining modern fantasy, Richard Matthews points out that fantasy allows us to believe in infinite possibility: "In fact, the literary genre of modern fantasy is characterized by a narrative frame that unites timeless mythic patterns with contemporary individual experiences. [...] most critics agree it is a type of fiction that evokes wonder, mystery, or magic—a sense of possibility beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live" (1). Anzaldúa's work of myth and folklore can be read as modern fantasy in this context. Philip Martine defines fantasy as personal, whereas myth is universal. He positions modern fantasy as an established genre, the work of which "celebrates the ability to be small yet brave, to be lacking in power yet able to tell imaginative tales that fight our fear of the dark" (19). Thus, by creating a work of autobiography and adding elements of mythologization, she presents herself as a female figure that transgresses traditional values. She explains herself as *mestiza*, one whose body crosses border of multiple identities.

Anzaldúa talks about the element of "alien[ness]" (18) in herself

and the borderland where she lives is “not comfortable but home” (18). As she positions this book, it speaks for and about her, thus validating her work as autobiographical: “This book, then speaks of my existence. My preoccupations with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation...with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows” (18). She mythologizes herself by presenting herself as a mysterious and fantastic character, thus legitimizing herself as a speaker for other women.

“The Shadow-Beast” is one of the images of resistance within the body that she presents to readers: “There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed” (38). Here, “the Shadow-Beast” appears, she explains; it is a part of her that rejects rules and boundaries both from inside and outside. It is resistant, and even physically rebels against order by kicking with both feet from inside her body. She continues telling about the Shadow-beast, arguing that women hide it in order not to be rejected, even though they fear that it may “break out [of] its cage” (42). Anzaldúa says that women try to control it, as it is an “unacceptable aspect of the self” (42) that will be rejected and threatened by the norms of the dominant culture. She tells of the threatening and destructive nature of “the Beast” when it is forced to stay under control and is oppressed: “Yet still others of us take it another step: we try to waken the Shadow-Beast inside us. Not many jump at the chance to confront the Shadow-Beast in the mirror without flinching at her lidless serpent eyes, her cold clammy moist hand dragging us underground, fangs bared and hissing” (42). She explains it as some-

thing that is oppressed inside the female body that is beyond control. This is projected by looking at oneself in the mirror and referred to as having horrific and violent image of serpent. Anzaldúa also tells of their ambivalent and contradictory nature, saying that they have, on the contrary, some “tenderness” (42) in the creature. Through this account, Anzaldúa refers to those women who have courage to control and look at it.

In creating “the Shadow-Beast,” Anzaldúa imagines women of color as having a “alien” element that parallels recognizing the beastly nature within oneself: “Alienated from her mother culture, ‘alien’ in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios* [the gaps], the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (42). She turns the image of violence and darkness associated with the beast into a positive image loaded with resistance and power. The image of “Shadow-Beast” and the alien in Anzaldúa’s work evoke that of the monster referred to in the discussion of the female Gothic by David Punter and Byron Glennis:

Monsters, as the displaced embodiment of tendencies that are repressed or, in Julia Kristeva’s sense of the term, ‘abjected’ within a specific culture not only establish the boundaries of the human, but may also challenge them. Hybrid forms that exceed and disrupt those systems of classification through which cultures organize experience, monsters problematize binary thinking and demand a rethinking of the boundaries and concepts of normality. Gothic texts repeatedly draw attention to the monster’s constructed nature, to the mechanisms of monster production, and reveal precisely how the other is constructed and

positioned as both alien and inferior. (264)

They point out that the monster challenges the concepts of normality and cultural boundaries. There have been many critics since the late 1960s who regarded the female Gothic as a subversive genre that reveals women's fantasies as well as their protests against patriarchy. In this context, it can be considered that her bodily text is subversive as it is characterized by the element of female Gothic.

Anzaldúa claims that the woman of color is doubly alienated by her own culture and the dominant culture in America. She sees that she is caught between two places, in the borderland. As she describes it, it is "her face" (42) that is caught, the physical aspect of her experience is emphasized. Anzaldúa's Chicana identity is based on "the Indian woman's history of resistance" (43), presenting image of the animal within herself, she expresses her will to challenge and resist.

In her body, she contains a variety of things, including "home": "Not me sold out my people but they me. So yes, though 'home' permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home" (43). The feeling and experience of restless movement toward "home" is expressed as being deeply embedded in the body and associated with the physical experience. Anzaldúa sees that "home" is a physically inseparable place symbolized in the image of the body. She also accuses Mexican culture of discouraging and disabling women, which she does by using the expression of physical disability as a metaphor: "I abhor some of my culture's ways, how it cripples its women, *como burras* [like dirty, ignorant and unteachable woman] our strengths used against us, lowly *burras* bearing humility with dignity" (43).

Upon finding the animal she calls the "Shadow Beast" in her body, she reflects herself in various animals and creatures including

snake. Alma Rosa Alvarez finds that Anzaldúa deeply contextualizes herself in the serpent of Aztec mythology, which symbolizes sexuality, life, death, and creation, in order to integrate the body and soul under the basis of “[t]he Coatlicue state” (55). Though the snake is connected to ambivalent images in various cultures, it holds special meanings in the context of Aztec culture:

In early Aztec culture, the serpent was the soul as earth. The woman’s body was thought to parallel the earth and was thus the very site of spirituality—the receptacle of the soul. The serpent also represented creativity, therefore, the individual body as well as the communal body were simultaneously inscribed with the sacred, the secular, the artistic, the social, the functions, and the aesthetic. This conceptualization is quite distinct from the later imposed Western separation of the spiritual and material (66-67).

Anzaldúa also incorporates both the masculinity of the eagle and the femininity of the serpent symbolically represents(57). Thus, Alvarez suggests that her reference to the crossing of borders characterizes Anzaldúa’s body as ambiguous, contradictory, and postmodern(57). There are additional episodes in which she reveals her encounter and strange experience with snakes: “That night I watched the window still, watched the moon dry the blood on the tail, dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, *mi tono* [my key], my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune” (48).

Such associations with snakes enable her to present herself as mythical creature, since snakes are referred to as goddesses in Mexican folkloric traditions: “Snakes, *víboras* [viper]: since that day I’ve sought and shunned them. Always when they cross my path, fear



and elation flood my body [...]. She—that's how I think of *la Víbora*, Snake Woman. Like the ancient olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent" (48).

Anzaldúa is both attracted to and avoidant of snakes and vipers, it reminds her of *la Víbora*, Snake Woman. As Anzaldúa explains, the serpent was the most significant symbol in pre-Columbian America, which the Olmecs related woman to the serpent's mouth with deadly teeth: "Forty years it's taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul" (48). The snake is considered "the most sacred place on earth, a place of refuge, the creative womb from which all things were born and to which all things returned" (56). Anzaldúa goes on to introduce "Snake people:" "Snake people had holes, entrances to the body of the Earth Serpent; they followed the Serpent's way, identified with the Serpent deity, with the mouth, both the eater and the eaten. The destiny of humankind is to be devoured by the Serpent" (56). Thus, given that serpents are a significant motif in Latin American culture, including Mexican culture, associating her with the snake is one more successful way of representing herself as a mythic and fantastic character.

Anzaldúa tells of her experiences encountering and embodying snakes after seizures. She saw them in her bedroom and embodied snakes. She sees a cobra the size of the room, approaching with one's hood toward her, then which suddenly disappeared. She regards the cobra as her source of power: "I realized she was, in my psyche, the mental picture and symbol of the instinctual in its collective impersonal, pre-human. She, the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life" (57). Thus, by using the symbol of the snake, Anzaldúa represents a resis-

tant character, as opposed to a traditional Mexican female character. She mythologizes herself by presenting her body as being taken by a snake. Anzaldúa also considers the ghost seen in the neighborhood where she grew up in South Texas, at the Mexican border, to be one of the most significant female folktale figures, La Llorona, the Weeping Woman, and associates it with herself. Anzaldúa also indicates that Serpent Woman is connected to La Llorona, which is yet another image she imposes on her own body.

In her study of Chicana writers, Tey Diana Robolledo explains mythology represents a collective idea that identifies the ways we should live(79). In opposition to dominant cultural beliefs embedded in traditional mythology, women writers attempt to create new role models for themselves or reinvent existing models by giving them different traits and characteristics(49). Robolledo exemplifies the Mexican folkloric ghost La Llorona, the Weeping woman, who killed her child in madness and then commits suicide. This figure is repeatedly used in Chicana writers' works. As in Robolledo's discussion of haunting of the female ghost, "[a]lthough La Llorona represents ambiguity, guilt, and loss, and inspires fear of the unknown, she is nevertheless part of us [Chicana]—a dark part we need to come to terms with" (79). La Llorona "will continue to stalk us and to haunt us until we come to terms with her" (80).

Elizabeth Jacobs also points out that, in Anzaldúa's work, the heroine is figured positively with La Llorona. By Anzaldúa's positioning La Llorona, as the earth goddess Cihuacoatl, who is also connected to the empowering pre-Columbian figure worshipped by Aztec warriors.<sup>3</sup> In Anzaldúa's work, "[i]n being reconnected to this more powerful genealogy *la llorona's* weeping is more radically interpreted as an oppositional scream against patriarchal inscriptions of womanhood" (61). It is the also the case that, in Anzaldúa's work,

La Llorona can be read as a subversive figure.

Kathleen Brogan explains the function of ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature: “Ghosts in contemporary American ethnic literature function similarly: to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of the past into the service of the present” (4). Brogan defines a new type of ghostly presence as a “cultural haunting” that appeared after the time of the civil rights movement. She describes cultural haunting and ghosts as transcultural figures that relate to the communal memory with which women of color writers deal. Ghosts offer alternative stories that challenge dominant history, which leads to an emphasis on multiple viewpoints, the reconstruction of the past, and the creation of alternative histories by telling of oppressed stories (17). The appearance of ghosts and folkloric figures in Gloria Anzaldúa’s work fits the idea of commemoration, Brogan explains, as follows:

Commemoration is a central feature of every story of cultural haunting [...]. By speaking of ethnicity as a performance, I am both rejecting the concept of ethnic identity as a static and bounded entity and further refining the more recent understanding of ethnic identity as a “process.” Close attention to the emergence of redefined ethnicities in stories of cultural haunting illuminate the importance of ritual in the ongoing construction or, more precisely, *enactment* of cultural identity. (22)

According to Brogan’s discussion of commemoration, Anzaldúa’s creation can also be read as a form of commemoration.

Even though female body is stigmatized, as she describes as having taught that the female body to be “an ignorant animal” (59) in her culture, Anzaldúa sees extraordinary value in her body. The

body she understands reacts in the same manner equally both to imaginary events and real ones that are exposed to both real and imaginary stimuli, which needs to be controlled. Thus, by being exposed to both real and imaginary stimuli, Anzaldúa talks about not giving in to the “non-corporeal entities” (60) that are coming through her nose with the wind, which “frightens the soul out of the body” (60).

She also mentions her exceptional ability to feel: “I feel a tingling on my skin when someone is staring at me or thinking about me. I can tell how others feel by the way they smell, where others are by the air pressure on my skin” (61). Her senses are sharp and responsive to indirect forms of pressure. She has a supernatural ability to feel other people’s emotions without seeing, which she calls it “a sixth sense” (61). She further mythologizes herself by recounting strange experiences in her childhood:

I was two or three years old the first time Coatlicue visited my psyche, the first time she “devoured” me (and I “fell” into the underworld). By the worried look on my parents’ faces I learned early that something was fundamentally wrong with me. When I was older I would look into the mirror, afraid of *mi secreto terrible* [my horrible secret], the secret sin I tried to conceal— *la seña* [the sign], the mark of the Beast. I was afraid it was in plain sight for all to see. The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside. (64-65)

Anzaldúa uses and turns this negative image of “evil” into a somewhat positive character and also as her source of power. She explains about strange experiences from an early age, “Coatlicue” came to her and possessed her. In this poem, told in the third per-

son narrative, Anzaldúa mythologizes herself by regarding herself as “alien.” This unique and imaginative creation of herself projects her as symbolic and mythical:

She has this fear that she has no names that she has many names that she doesn't know her names She has this fear that she's an image that comes and goes clearing and darkening the fear that she's the dream work inside someone else's skull. She has this fear that if she takes off her clothes shoves her brain aside peels off her skin that if she drains the blood vessels strips the flesh from the bone flushes out the marrow. She has this fear that when she does reach herself turns around to embrace herself a lion's or witch's or serpent's head will turn around swallow her and grin she has this fear that if she digs into herself she won't find her notches on the trees the birds will have eaten all the crumbs She has this fear that she won't find the way back.  
(65)

She objectifies herself here, using a third person narrative, considering herself as an illusion, a “dream work inside someone else's skull” (65). Her body is exiled and alienated, expressed in a way that is tentative. She imagines her brain as being easily pulled aside by taking off her clothes and, “if she drains the blood vessels [and] strips[,] the flesh from the bone flushes out the marrow” (65). She is vulnerable to nature and supernatural power and she fears being swallowed. Her image of the body is transformed into trees in which birds eat crumbs. This representation of the body here expresses a disowning of one's own body, which is an elusive and highly imaginative image that expresses a chronic fear of losing both her body and herself. Anzaldúa's body is situated in opposition to “normal” and “standardized” bodies in the work. In real life, she

had suffered from a hormonal dysfunction since childhood: "She felt shame for being abnormal. The bleeding distanced her from others. Her body had betrayed her" (65).

Anzaldúa talks about her early menstruation, but uses the third person when telling of the episode. She is alienated from her body by the actual event, during which she thinks her body has "betrayed her" (65). Beyond her control, the body is perceived as an object detached from herself. Though she feels the weight of the physical pressure of eyes that "penetrate her; they slit her from head to belly" (65), she cannot protect her own body. She feels distressed and insecure about being exposed and vulnerable to their attention, captured in the gazes of others. On the other hand, she speaks of supernatural power she has, seeing multiple selves in her body:

During the dark side of the moon something in the mirror catches my gaze, I seem all eyes and nose. Inside my skull something shifts. I "see" my face. Gloria, the everyday face; Prieta and Prietita, my childhood faces; Gaudi, the face my mother and sister and brothers know. And there in the black, Obsidian mirror of the Nahuas is yet another face, a stranger's face.<sup>4</sup> (66)

She continues on to describe her extraordinary experiences. Anzaldúa confesses in her interviews that she has started menstruating at the age of three months. This was accompanied by severe pain, which doctors diagnosed as a rare hormonal dysfunction. She speaks to Chicana and criticizes the self-mutilating and self-derogatory consciousness many Chicanos internalize: "As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something 'wrong' with us, something fundamentally 'wrong'" (67). Recognizing self-conscious-

ness of being stigmatized, she points out the disadvantage of degrading oneself among Chicanos. She disapproves of many people's tendency toward self-accusation, as follows through her physical experiences:

Every time she makes "sense" of something, she has to "crossover," kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her. It is a dry birth, a breech birth, a screaming birth, one that fights her every inch of the way. It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. (70)

She refers to the past as the old skin as well as ghost, the symbol or cultural representation of a state of being in-between in contemporary American literature. Here, she mentions ghost that is often used to express suppressed aspects of certain cultures and histories. Border-crossing is also metaphorically referred to as the physical expressions of torturous labor that requires courage and strength. She explores the inside of her imaginative and mythological body with the support of the supernatural power of snakes:

Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. For a few minutes, *Antigua, mi Diosa* [my ancient Goddess] I'm going to give up my control to you. I'm going to pull it out. I plunge my hands into my solar plexus, pull. Plop. Out comes the handle with a dial face, dripping blood, unblinking eyes, watching. Eagle eyes, my mother calls me. Looking, always looking, only I don't have enough eyes. My sight is limited. Here, *Antigua* [my ancient Goddess], take this lever-shaped handle with needles that measure

the temperature, the air pressure, danger. You hold it for a while. Promise to give it back. Please *Antigua* [my ancient Goddess] (72).

By asking an ancient snake goddess for help, she operates and breaks into her body for treatment and discovery. Here, the body is perceived as her battleground, in which she confronts herself. She is represented in an fantastic and imaginative way and leaves the control of her body to "*Antigua, mi Diosa*," thus she is able to pull out a strange and bloody creature from her stomach by her hands. The thing she takes out of her body has watchful, "eagle eyes" with limited sight. Her body is also transforming and is being possessed by, and the turns into, a snake: "Suddenly, I feel like I have another set of teeth in my mouth. A tremor goes through my body from my buttocks to the room of my mouth. On my palate I feel a tingling ticklish sensation, then something seems to be falling on me, over me, a curtain of rain or light. Shock pulls my breath out of me" (73). She expresses the physical sensation of being taken by and becoming serpent. The body is flexible and elusive as well as multiple, feeling something in her that beats and illuminates, which stays in her body. She looks at it with eyes of thousand serpents, which seem to strengthen her: "Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing that grows thicker every day. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone" (73).

Regarding to representing bodily identity, food is another resource of identity in contemporary female American autobiographical writings. Anzaldúa, too, uses food for cultural representations that she relates to the hybrid "mestiza" body<sup>5</sup>:

Indigenous like corn, like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn—a female seed-bearing



organ—the mestiza is a tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads. (103)

Anzaldúa associates “mestiza” with the strength of indigenous corn that can “survive the crossroads” (103). The corn she has associated herself with is deeply rooted in the Mexican diet and is an emblem food. In her explanation of making tortillas with her mother, we can also read this as creative act that parallels Anzaldúa’s own creation: “She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens. With stone roller on *metate* [pre-hispanic kitchen tool], she grinds the corn, then grinds again. She kneads and moulds the dough, pats the round balls into *tortillas*” (103).

In relation to her body and identity, Anzaldúa emphasizes the significance of language and its use. She lists a variety of languages she is able to use. She insists that her identity is based on these languages:

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate.... I will overcome the tradition of silence. (81)

Construction of identity based on languages is physical in Anzaldúa’s representation, as she refers to her ethnic identity being a “twin skin” (81) to linguistic identity, and notes, “I am my language” (81). Degrading language, then, would threaten her when she

articulates that she will never be able to accept her physical identity as long as her languages are denied. Her voice is as diverse in her image, and she claims to have multiple voices in addition to her “serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice” (81). It is Anzaldúa’s battles against silence that she confronts with writing. In the context of battling against acquiring and identity, the act of writing is her means for survival. She sees the act of writing as a physical one: “If I can get the bone structure right then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches. The problem is that the bones often do not exist prior to the flesh, but are shaped after a vague and broad shadow of its form is discerned or uncovered during beginning, middle and final stages of the writing” (88).

She captures her creativity and writing itself in both physical and imaginative ways. She refers her writing to creation of body, constructing outlines, sentences and then paragraphs, which she projects the process physically. As she writes, she finds it problem when structure comes later, after writing certain number of sentences and paragraphs. The writing is pictured as a mean for creating her own body: “Picking out images from my soul’s eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. [...] the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hand” (93). Her action and her writing itself are characterized by physical images, as she comments, she creates images from her eyes of mind. The will to create is captured as being real and concrete as her body parts for her. By engaging in a creative act, she introduces her ritual and attitude toward her writing:

My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body. The [w]

riting is my whole life, it is my obsession. This vampire which is my talent does not suffer other suitors. Daily I court it, offer my neck to its teeth. This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, are my offerings, are my Aztec blood sacrifices. (97)

Writing is a spiritual and holy act for her and she carefully prepares before writing. It is devotion in which her body is “a blood sacrifice” (97).

As a *mestiza*, she crosses borders of cultures and her body as crossroads, become multiple cultures themselves simultaneously. In *Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders*, she says, “Because I, a *mestiza*, continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time [...]” (99). Born in one culture and exposed to two, being a *mestiza* involves struggles internalized within the body: “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” (100). Anzaldúa shows evident pride in her identity as *mestiza* in her awareness in creating a culture: “As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out [...]. *Soy un amasamiento* [I am an act of uniting], I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (102-3). She reveals her sense

of unbelonging, in-betweenness and transcendence, which also gives the impression of richness in herself. Here again, she offers an image of herself that is both “darkness” and “light”, which are opposites of one another. As a mestiza, she belongs to multiple countries, yet is in a state of alienation, disowning her home country, that seems to be contradictory. She claims that she is “cultureless” (102) while at the same time is “cultured” (103), thus indicating her contradictions and impossibility of definition. In other words, she tells that living as a mestiza is a complex and diverse task, emphasizing that her negotiations of identity involve physical experiences: “In our very flesh, the evolution works out the clash of cultures” (103).

Employing a third person narrative, as in her awareness of leading the women of color movement, she values her writing as creating history using symbols and rewriting myths: “She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths [...]. She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person” (104-5). Her writing repeatedly refers to pregnancy and the labor experience: “Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. [...]. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place” (104).

Thus, the process of writing is imagined and materialized in actual and physical movement. Anzaldúa expresses contradictions and ambivalence about herself while articulating that her presence and will to have a voice through writing: “I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They’d like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven’t, we haven’t” (108). Here, she

represents visibility as she speaks and writes. Her body is used to resist social erasure strongly claiming her presence.

Concerning body, animals and creatures reside in Anzaldúa's highly imaginative body and they influence her in a variety of ways. This is also exemplified by the toad she says lives in her brain:

The toad comes out of its hiding place inside the lobes of my brain. It's going to happen again. The ghost of the toad that betrayed me—I hold it in my hand. The toad is sipping the strength from my veins, it is sucking my pale heart. I am a dried serpent skin, wind scuttling me across the hard ground, pieces of me scattered over the countryside. And there in the dark I meet the crippled spider crawling in the gutter, the day-old newspaper fluttering in the dirty rain water. (94)

Toad symbolizes ambivalent image associated with poison as well as fertility.<sup>6</sup> She is sacrificed by toad that has been a part of her. She becomes disrupted into pieces seems to indicate that she is disconnected from her own body and without control. Under the conditions her writing is interpreted as process as well as healing, of putting back her pieces of broken body back together.

Anzaldúa articulates that writing is a psychologically and physically exhausting act that deals with one's own anxiety. Writing is also, she argues, the act of looking at oneself and one's experiences. Writing forces writers to think about and confront their own identities, that are multiple and complex. It is a process of healing treatment, as she imagines it as cactus needle on her skin.

Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. 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. I get deep down 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. Then out it comes. No more discomfort, no more ambivalence. Until another needle pierces the skin. 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. (95)

Anzaldúa expresses anxiety about living in a “Borderland” characterized by physical restlessness. She imagines the state as a cactus needle piercing her skin and challenges and stimulates it even more by touching and pushing the needle. This pain goes away and turns into pleasure when she tries harder to find it by searching for its root. It finally comes out and takes away the pain through a process she refers to as writing. The act of writing is linked with the experience, which explains her notion that writing is a battle for her life, in addition to a process of creating herself and her own body: “When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm creating my own face, my own heart—Nahuatl concept. My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body” (95). The notion of writing is further explored and emphasized as physical act, one that creates her own body and soul. Compared with a pregnancy experience, writing is the act of transformation accompanied by a physical burden:

She fights the words, pushes them down, down, a woman with morning sickness in the middle of the night. How much easier it would be to carry a baby for nine months and then expel it permanently. These continuous multiple

pregnancies are going to kill her. She is the battlefield for the pitched fight between the inner image and the words trying to recreate it. (95-96)

The uneasiness and restlessness of the writing process is reflected in pregnancy and then labor motifs. Writing is expressed as “continuous multiple pregnancies,” one that would possibly kill a maternal body. The body becomes a site of battle for the struggle of creation. It is the act of facing and confronting herself—“That’s why she makes herself sick—to postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask” (96). She says that, while she encourages herself and other women to have a mestiza consciousness and be a crossroads of cultures and differences, she reveals her own difficulty with playing the role: “Her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing through it” (95). When she writes, an enormous burden is imposed on her body, which serves as a “bridge” (96). Within the battle against herself, she becomes “ground with corn and water, eject her out as *nahual*, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human” (96-97). The image of herself as the protagonist is loaded with those of transformation and border-crossing, effectively using her body.

Anzaldúa’s both highly aggressive as well as healing work of a variety of autobiographical episodes and forms, includes three notable poems (“Letting Go,” “My Black Angelos,” and “To Live in the Borderland Means You”) in which she deals with representations of the imaginative body and identity.<sup>7</sup>

“Letting Go” is about an imaginary body in which she takes out a variety of creatures and plants inside. She positions the body as

“flexible maze” (186), so that she can turn inside out and destabilize. These living things symbolize the supernatural powers that they offer her. Her body contains plants and creatures inside and she boldly puts fingers into her navel and rips open to take them out multiple times. It leads to giving in to offer herself to “the dragon’s open face” (187). Her body, as a “maze” (186) in which she encounters the dragon and, when she finishes her battle with it, the place becomes an empty space. She has to be alone and on her own—“Face it. You will have to do, do it yourself” (187). After opening her body at the navel a hundred times, eventually her body transforms and returns to “elements”(187). She develops gills on her breasts, which she evolved to use in between breathings. This poem shows that the body is a site for continuous challenge, in which Anzaldúa battles with herself.

In “My Black Angelos,” Anzaldúa reflects herself in the Mexican folkloric figure of La Llorona, the Weeping Woman. She hears the cry of Llorona, who seeks her dead child in silence. Being possessed by La Llorona, she follows her by the smell of carrion. She calls the ghost “my black Angelos.” The monstrous ghost woman takes out “meat,” “lint,” and “lice” from her body (206). Eventually, the woman “crawls into my [Anzaldúa] spine” takes her body, “shining under my [her] skin in the dark whirling my [her] bones twirling” (206). The woman and she become one, crying in the dark as she says, “[w]e sweep through the streets [...]. We roam with the souls of the dead” (207). With the Weeping Woman taking over her body and becoming one, they wander the streets. Anzaldúa associates herself with the weeping woman, La Llorona, and becomes even more empowered by being possessed of her body. As Elizabeth Jacobs argues, historically stigmatized folkloric figure La Llorona, is represented positively “as an empowering mystical force” (61) for contemporary



Chicana writers as Anzaldúa.

“To live in the Borderlands means you” indicates that living in the Borderland is living in a state of diversity. The protagonist is a “half-breed,” who warns that the people would “walk through you, the wind steals your voice” (216). The experience of living in the borderland is described using food metaphors of everyday life. The food and language are two of major things that she explores regarding her body, which reveals her resistance to seduction and violence. She considers the borderlands as the battleground and the image of living in the borderlands is characterized by feelings of being threatened and restless, while at the same time the place seems to be open for positive transformation. Though she may present living in the “Borderlands” as being torturous, difficult, and challenging, she also suggests that “you must live sin fronteras/ be crossroads,” as it is the only way to survive (217).

Anzaldúa’s engagement in the battle and creation of a highly imaginative body are art of her intention to speak for women of color. Her work is characterized by the element of fantasy, which deeply involves ethnic mythologization. Anzaldúa’s work reflects the social and political conditions at the time of women of color movement in which the work is produced. Rosemary Jackson positioned literary fantasy as a form of subversive literature that is created from within its social context. Thus, a close examination of fantastic texts will uncover the particular conditions that fantasy protests, as fantasy deals with cultural constraints revealing desire generated from absence and loss (3). As Jackson indicates, fantasy expresses desire that operates in two ways fulfilling both functions: “[I]t can tell of, manifest or show desire (expression in the sense of portrayal, representation, manifestation, linguistic utterance, mention, description), or it can expel desire, when this desire is a disturbing element

which threatens cultural order and continuity (expression in the sense of pressing out, squeezing, expulsion, getting rid of something by force)” (3-4).

Anzaldúa also projects herself into fantasy to present desire. By fantasizing the protagonist herself in her work, Anzaldúa becomes and represents herself as a subversive figure in an autobiographical fantasy. In Anzaldúa's creative exploration of fluid and imaginative bodies and identities, she engages in an ethnic mythologization of herself and has helped her to become an icon for the women of color movement. Throughout her life, she emphasized the significance of writing in seeking coalition among women of color. Her thoughts and intentions are developed in *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (2002), in which Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating, as editors, anthologize women of color's personal/political essays and works of creative writing. *this bridge we call home* follows the idea and model of a previously published book, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), and *Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color* (1990) and continues their success. The writers in these anthologies propose multicultural contemporary feminist issue, on identities and the intersecting oppression of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. Their voices are characterized by anger and alienation from neglect and the erasure of their identities to reveal their perceptions of the “reality” of living as women of color in the United States.

Anzaldúa and Keating position that their anthology-making as a form of political activism to represent contributors' voices of resistance. This idea was supported by feminist scholars of the third-wave feminism and around the world. This collaborative project by the editors and writers in those books address issues such as the

construction of identity and indicate possibilities for global and transnational alliance-building through the act of writing. Even though their backgrounds and experiences are diverse, Anzaldúa seeks an alliance through women's struggles for their plights. Her ethnic mythologization of the body and identity in *Borderlands/La Frontera* made great contribution to women of color of third-wave feminism. Today, she continues to be appreciated as one of the major postcolonial thinkers who has influenced the formation of "borders school" (Singh and Schmidt 13-14). Anzaldúa's autobiographical fantasy of subversion brought her success in making a strategic coalition among women of color and people around world, regardless of their cultural differences.

#### Notes

1. For, *Coatlicue*, see María Herrera-Sobek 209. Coatlicue is the Earth Goddess in Aztec mythology. Herrera-Sobek finds that Anzaldúa focuses on the Earth Mother Goddess as a source of inspiration and creative energies: "The 'Coatlicue State' for Anzaldúa is a state of introspection, when the creative process is reconnecting with the cosmic forces of the universe. Upon one's return from the Coatlicue State of reflection, a person feels rejuvenated and filled with strong creative powers" (209).
2. For *La Llorona*, see María Herrera-Sobek 83 and Castro 140-42. La Llorona is the most famous and tragic Mexican legendary female figure. She was a woman who fell in love with a Spaniard and had several children with him. However, he decided to marry a Spanish woman and leave her. In rage, she killed her children and later punished by God. Since then, she is said to continue seeking for children even after death as a ghost, roaming the waterways, canals and rivers. She is also called as "The Weeping (Wailing) Woman," who weeps and wails in regret looking for her lost children. For *La Malinche*, see María Herrera-Sobek 85-6 and Castro 149-50. La Malinche is the common name of the Aztec princess Malintzin

Tenépal, who is also known as Doña Marina. Though she was from a noble family, she was sold as a slave by Mayan merchants who is said to be her own mother. She was given to Hernán Cortés when he came to Mexico in 1519 from Spain. She spoke several languages and quickly learned Spanish. She worked for Cortés' as a translator and also became mistress. She had a son with him. Her name is pronounced by Spaniards as Malinche. She is symbolized as several images including Indian woman that produced mestizo. Malinche is also used to call person who betrays one's own community and its people.

For *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, see María Herrera-Sobek 87-91 and Castro 239-41. La Virgen de Guadalupe is commonly known as the Virgin Mary who showed her presence to a Mexican Christian Indian Juan Diego on December 9, 1531. She claims herself as the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, who spoke Nahuatl, indigenous language.

3. For *Cihuacóatl*, see María Herrera-Sobek 80, 82, 84. Cihuacóatl is called as "Snake Woman" in Anzaldúa's work, who is principal goddess in Aztec mythology. Herrera-Sobek explains that Cihuacóatl is referred to as La Llorona.
4. *Nahua* or *nahuatl* are those people (estimated 1. 5 million) who use indigenous mesoamerican languages and dialects. They are estimated 1. 5 million and most of them live in Central Mexico. The words also indicate the languages and dialects that are used by Nahuas. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nahuatl> (January 2013)
5. For *mestiza*, see Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 121-22. Mestiza is the word of Spanish origin, referring to the idea of mixing of races as well as cultures.
6. For image of toad, see de Vries 468.
7. "Letting Go" (186-88), "My Black Angelos" (206-207) and "To live in the Borderlands means you" (216-17) particularly deal with representations of body and identity in *Borderland/La Frontera*.

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