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**Meditating with Kali, Tlaloc and Guadalupe:  
Making Sense of the Sacred in Chicana Studies**

*Gabriela Pérez*

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**On the “-x” in Chicana, Chicanxs, and Chicana Studies**

This essay intentionally uses the “-x” ending in lieu of “-@,” “-a,” and “-o.” While I recognize that the “-e” ending (“Latine”) can also be used to emphasize gender inclusivity, using the “-x” helps to disrupt the reading. I hope this disruption: 1) helps slow down the reading, as one aim of this paper is to convey the contemplative nature that I—as author, participant, and observer within the Chicana Studies field—have experienced and 2) underscores the tension of Chicana identity as it grapples with the historic “Chicano” and moves into new possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Before arriving to the Chicana/o and Central American Studies department at UCLA, I enjoyed—to some extent—the freedom to express my thoughts on religion. I had the privilege of being surrounded by peers who could, at the very least, entertain the words that came out of my mouth. If we were to treat the first *Harry Potter* book as sacred, how would we read it?<sup>2</sup> What would that look like? These questions, as Vanessa Zoltan so persuasively pointed out in a lecture at the Graduate Theological Union in April earlier this year, reminded me that I was not alone in

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful for my colleagues, mentors, and friends who have guided me along the way. Thank you for your patience with me.

<sup>2</sup> Vanessa Zoltan, *Praying with Jane Eyre: Reflections on Reading as a Sacred Practice* (New York: Random House/TarcherPerigee, 2021).

similar thoughts; her lecture reminded me that I am very much still part of a community of scholars that asks questions about the phenomenology of religion. I lost this perspective as I went through my first year as a doctoral student in Chicana/o and Central American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.<sup>3</sup> This essay explores those insights.

My first introduction to the Chicax Studies field was during my first graduate course in Chicana/o and Central American Studies at UCLA in the fall of 2021. Within the first five minutes of the course, we were encouraged to meditate in order to ground ourselves. Some two hours later, the class was asked to collectively build a community *altar*. I found it odd because at Harvard Divinity School, and even during my undergraduate days at the community college and the University of California at Riverside, class time never included similar rituals. That first class stood out to me in contrast to my class on Latinx Spirituality taken in the same quarter at UCLA. (Just imagine the complaints if the professor asked us to meditate in the Latinx Spirituality class!) This was my introduction to the Chicax Studies department at UCLA.

These experiences, which I could easily have dismissed, tempted me to make sense of how the Chicax Studies department at UCLA—a major influence in the Chicax Studies field—handled the religious dimension of the field. I was trained in Religious Studies—a place I call home—and had to relocate to the Chicax Studies field. The transition was sudden, abrupt, and a bit disturbing. With its rocky terrain, and the journey through it, this move often left me disoriented. As a scholar of religion, the field of Chicax Studies often left me isolated and far

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<sup>3</sup> “CCAS,” “CCAS at UCLA,” and “Chicax Studies at UCLA” all refer to the Chicana/o and Central American Studies Department at the University of California, Los Angeles. I do not focus on the Central American Studies portion of the name for the rest of the paper because it was only recently added and is still in its early stages as a field. If the sacred/profane Model is useful to analyze Chicax Studies, it should also be able to be a useful tool of analysis for Central American Studies.

from my Religious Studies home. During my first year in the Chicana Studies department at UCLA, I received pushback from professors and peers. Some of my ideas, like finding new methods with which to study religion in the field, were dismissed. When I proposed the possibility of adding new courses in the field, like “Gloria Anzaldúa as Secular Saint,” I was told that the department was not a seminary. When I questioned why some rituals related to spirituality were placed at the top of a ritual hierarchy but not others, I was told that some rituals needed to be seen because they had been historically oppressed. When I asked if I could bring my entire self to the classroom—my entire Roman Catholic self into the conversation—I often felt embarrassed to ask. On more than one occasion I feared being called “the crazy Jesus lady.” Sometimes, I felt as if I could not share parts of the New Testament that I found helpful when thinking about liberation. I would receive surprised looks from peers and even professors when I observed that not all Buddhists were peaceful and that Chicanas could also be Mormon. And on more than one occasion, I had to choose my words carefully and say “sacred”/ “spiritual” instead of “religious” because the latter evoked anxiety in my listeners. These examples are just the ones I feel comfortable sharing in this essay. There are others.

Being dismissed in this way led to significant solitude during my first year in the program; the Chicana Studies department at UCLA became an intellectually lonely place for this scholar of religion. However, the Mexican writer, poet, and diplomat Octavio Paz tells us that solitude is not always terrible. In this solitude, I realized that I had the opportunity to begin making sense of my experiences. Out of the solitude, and echoing Paz, I now want to make sense of the chaos; I want to share these experiences, reactions, and observations with others; and I want to go back to my center again—my *axis mundi*. I want to be the sun again. As Chicana theorists remind me, experiences are a space of knowledge production and a place to build

theory. Ultimately, in order to be a better scholar of religion, I must also view the world from different vantage points and this, for me, involves becoming familiar with Chicana Studies.<sup>4</sup> It is my sincere hope that, I can take this moment, this essay, and attempt to make sense of these observations from my first year as a doctoral student in Chicana Studies.

### **Thesis**

As a recovering alcoholic, my very first step on the road to recovery was to acknowledge that there was a problem. In the Chicana Studies context, the first step is to acknowledge that the religious dimension of the Chicana experience in general has been left out of the discourse. I can imagine why that would be since religion, particularly Christianity, has used hurtful means of conversion. In the Americas, conversion to Christianity can fall within the category of settler colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Those in charge of urging communities to convert can easily fall in line with the settler colonial formula of “destroy and eliminate.” How then does Christianity grapple with this past? How can Chicana Studies trust that not all Catholics have a “destroy and eliminate” mentality? There can be at least two answers to this question: 1) Catholics who reject the settler colonial formula or mantra of “destroy and eliminate” should be able to declare this and 2) Chicana Studies should be encouraged to imagine a world in which not all religious dimensions fall within absolutes. Although this paper focuses on the latter, I would like to underscore, for my Chicana Studies colleagues, that this paper does not seek to evangelize you in any way.

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<sup>4</sup> A majority of my research originates from reconstructing the life narrative of Patricio F. Flores, the first Mexican American Roman Catholic bishop in the United States. Even if he was not on the front lines of the Chicano Movement, he was aware of its historical significance.

<sup>5</sup> See Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4 (2006): 387-409.

### *Conocimiento* and Sacred/Profane Frameworks

Because this paper attempts to make sense of the sacred in Chicana Studies in a broad sense but also within the particularities of my experience of the first year in the Ph.D. program, I will 1) rely heavily on the use of the subjective and 2) use Mircea Eliade's sacred and profane framework.

Regarding the subjective, I am inspired by the Anzaldúan notion of *conocimiento*, what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the heightened awareness or consciousness that propels an individual to create.<sup>6</sup> It is in this process—from awareness to creation—that I find myself. I am aware of my gender, class, and other characteristics and markers, but I am also aware of my own training in Religious and Theological Studies, which often clashes with Chicana Studies as a discipline. This awareness of the clash is now taking on a life of its own; the next step is to create meaning out of the discord. I do this by writing (this essay). I am sure Anzaldúa would encourage it.

That said, I want to expound briefly on the choice to begin with Eliade's approach to the sacred. Because Eliade moves away from theological notions of sacred, using his approach can help to ease Chicana Studies' anxiety when confronting religious dimensions of Chicana life, movements, or events. I propose that even using the word "sacred" instead of the word "religion" can lessen that anxiety. As Eliade notes, the sacred can be found even for those who have opted out of religion.<sup>7</sup> What makes Eliade even more helpful is precisely that his notion of the sacred is

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<sup>6</sup> Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Eliade uses "the nonreligious man/religious man" in his writing but this wording only perpetuates more anxiety. It might be useful—maybe even healing—to, at the beginning stages of this shift towards religious dimensions in Chicana Studies, refrain from using the word "religion" as it invokes severe anxiety among Chicana Studies scholars. The goal, in time, is for Chicana Studies to feel less of that anxiety and safe enough to grapple with religion as an analytical tool in Chicana lives.

possible because it exists *outside* of theology. It is this move away from the theological notions of the sacred that may be helpful for Chicax Studies. Here is, for example, example about the collective community *altares* that we created in the first class I mentioned earlier. Before arriving to that first class, we were asked to bring an item that represented us. Presumably, this special item was special because it did not resemble the other objects around it. What set it apart from other objects? What stories or memories did it contain? It is precisely this understanding of how an object transcended its material composition that allowed the *altar* to be the space where, collectively, all the special (sacred?) objects punctured the profane (table, chairs, classroom setting, etc.) thus revealing a sacred space. Of course, the classroom language that was used to ask for this personal, special item and create this collective, community *altar* was devoid of religious, spiritual, or even sacred jargon. Yet the notions of sacrality were very much present. While I am tempted to go into a deeper analysis of this moment of sacrality within the Chicax Studies classroom, I will go into a deeper analysis using Sor Juana as an example later on in this essay. For now, it is enough to say that this shift from theological ideas of sacred can help lessen the anxiety that the words “religion,” “theology,” and even “spirituality” evoke within Chicax Studies.

The final reason for choosing Eliade’s use of “sacred” and “profane” is that Eliade seeks to apply his notion of the sacred and profane to traditions beyond Christianity. While Eliade’s locus informs his notions of the sacred and profane across these different traditions, it may be useful to apply these ideas of the sacred to Chicax lives in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, since Chicaxs are not a homogeneous group: not every Chicax comes from a Christian milieu. Because Eliade’s concept of the sacred and profane can be experienced by anyone at any time or place or in any manner—in any subjective experience of the sacred—it may be more palatable to

a field that also emphasizes subjective experience. Of course, this approach may fail and it is also possible that it will not be fruitful. Still, I use it as a starting point here.

### **Talking to God in Nahuatl, Spanish, English, and Spanglish**

My Catholic identity often complicates my location within the field of Chicana Studies. It is one thing to be Catholic outside of academia but disclosing my identity as Catholic to my Chicana peers and colleagues within the classroom takes on a different ontological reality. In disclosing my own relationship with God and even my own joys of growing up Catholic (Imagine that!) I risk being placed into the “crazy Jesus lady” category. I am sure I already have been. As AnaLouise Keating<sup>8</sup> might say, I am absolutely risking the personal. I risk being dismissed by professors who might not care about the spiritual components that I notice as I read through Anzaldúa’s work. However, just when I think that all hope is lost—that maybe it was a mistake to join this field—I continue to risk the personal and disclose the tensions that inherently exist for me as a Chicana Catholic who grew up in a Nahuatl-speaking home because when I do, I am often met with people from different walks of life who thank me for disclosing since they, too, have been grappling with their Chicana and Christian identities. They, too, have often had to suppress one identity in order to be accepted by the other. It seems that one’s being both Chicana and Catholic often makes other people uncomfortable. Sometimes, when I have the opportunity to meet one-on-one with students, the undergraduate and graduate students feel safe enough to share their childhood narrative of growing up within a religious community, or in one devoid of religion, and how that identity was also complicated by their Chicana identity. I suppose for some, this was also an internal conversation about political and religious identities. Whatever the

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<sup>8</sup> AnaLouise Keating is a scholar specializing in women of color theories, Gloria Anzaldúa, pedagogy, and transformation studies and author. <https://twu.edu/ws/faculty-and-staff/analouise-keating-phd/>.



students have said, I have felt that my role as a Catholic Chicana has been to make space for these conversations to take place even if we have differences.

It is necessary for me to talk about the role that Nahuatl plays in my Catholic identity.<sup>9</sup> My family comes from the state of Puebla in Mexico. I have had the privilege of spending summers in our family home during my childhood. I have also seen pictures of that home in times when most of the rooms in the house were not rooms but rather one big open-air kitchen with a giant *comal*<sup>10</sup> in the center. Some parts of the home, like the bathroom, did not have running water, so getting water from the *cisterna* was a daily task. Once a week the women in the family, myself included, would go into the *temascalli*<sup>11</sup> that was tucked in one corner of the courtyard, for *una hojeada*. Much of the cooking was done from scratch. As a child I was aware of this way of life so different from the ease of using home appliances in the United States, but I was never under the impression that we lacked anything. In fact, I cannot recall a moment when my family “hated” our way of life in Mexico. *This* was everyday life; *this* was the profane.

A significant portion of this world also included Nahuatl. Everyone in my family back in Mexico spoke Nahuatl except me. Sometimes I would tag along with my *tía* to buy hand-made *tortillas* a few blocks away. The neighbor making and selling the corn *tortillas* would ask my *tía* if she wanted to sit and chat for a bit. My *tía*, always the social butterfly, would accept, and we would stay for an hour or so while eating *tacos con salsa* and drinking Coca-Cola. For the most

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<sup>9</sup> The work of theologian Cecilia Titizano has been highly influential, for me, in reimagining the possibility of being Catholic, Chicana, *and* Indigenous.

<sup>10</sup> A round, flat griddle with a smooth or slightly rough cooking surface and a shallow edge. Traditionally made of clay, these griddles are often made of cast iron. Their use in Indigenous communities in Central America dates back to centuries before the Common Era.

<sup>11</sup> A form of sweat lodge.

part, the two women spoke in Spanish but when they wanted to be discreet, they would switch to Nahuatl and I could no longer understand what they were saying. All of my *tías* and *primas*, and even my *amá*, are still like this. Even after they had moved to San Diego and Los Angeles, they would code-switch when the information was too sensitive. When I asked to join their group, they just laughed and dismissed it. As a child I relentlessly asked my mother to teach me the Nahuatl language but she would only give me a few words. Ever the learner, I would even suggest that we set up a time to learn but my *amá*, being a single parent, was always busy working. I absorbed all I could until I took formal Nahuatl classes some twenty-five years later. In December 2020, just as I was applying for the PhD program, I found a collective in Southern California that offered Nahuatl classes.<sup>12</sup> I signed up and took two introductory courses. In the first class, we learned how to introduce ourselves. It was the first time I introduced this part of myself in the public sphere. I would like to add that the mundane nature of speaking Nahuatl was never lost for my family. Maybe my family is less religious or less aware of the sacred than others, but the Nahuatl language was just everyday language and was treated as such. It was profane. Yet, for me, it was special; it was sacred.

It is only in retrospect that I can even begin to analyze this identity, a topic outside the scope of this paper. For our purposes here it is enough to highlight that this layer, that of an Indigenous identity, is very much still present in my daily life, perhaps even more so since I reconnected with my Nahuatl-speaking past. Within me there is an innate need and desire to reconnect to that past—the one that my great-grandparents and their great-grandparents inhabited—and not just to connect to them but also to the world that they inhabited, their rituals

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<sup>12</sup> These courses taught the Nahuatl from *La Huasteca* region; Nahuatl is not a monolithic language.

and their ideas of sacred—not to glamourize that world, but to return to a part of me.<sup>13</sup> I see this as a process of going back to a particular center.

### **Reimagining Method and Methodology**

Recognizing my own complexities with Catholicism, Indigeneity, and *Chicanidad*, I find it helpful to be kind to myself. It also helps to be patient as I move through my own processes of holding all three identities simultaneously. Holding these identities may influence the ways in which I conduct research and even which methods I choose. Ultimately, if I am thinking about methodology, I must also consider the ways in which I think about my research. It is not enough to only be a researcher or a student, or someday a professor. In the same way, it is not enough to only consider the methods which I employ in my work. If Chicax Studies encourages us to make theory from subjectivity, then we must also consider that methodology is not devoid of the personal.

Here, I am thinking about how my Catholic identity, and my understanding of what it means to be a Catholic in a world where not everyone is or is interested in being Catholic, informs my research. Knowing that I have my own relationship with God that can never be shaken by the world, how do I use this sense of security to make spaces for others who are not like me? Is this what grace looks like? Do I extend grace to everyone regardless of where they are on their walk with Jesus or not? How do I forgive those who reject my insight on the religious dimension of life? Will this be my ministry? How do I serve God while serving humanity?

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<sup>13</sup> Though this paper has the name Tlaloc, god of water, in the title, the analysis of this particular image has veered outside the scope of this paper. For our purpose, it is enough to say that my relationship with Tlaloc falls closely to that of Jesus, the best friend.

The apostle Paul reminds us in the Letter to the Colossians that ministry can be paired with grace. My ministry, as I have prayed about and felt called to do, originates in grace. The third chapter of Colossians lays out instructions for navigating this kind of place. At the age of thirteen, I made a conscious effort to take up *my* cross and follow Jesus. I had little idea of what that actually meant, but it was something I felt called to do. Almost two decades later, I am still carrying this cross and I am still following Jesus. Neither is always an easy task, but if I take up my cross, I suppose that I have been raised with Christ also. If this is true, then I must consider Paul's guidance. Therefore, when Paul asks me "to put to death . . . whatever in you is earthly" as well as get rid of "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language,"<sup>14</sup> I take this as one component of my approach to bridging Religious Studies and Chicanx Studies. This is just one way in which I can operate as a scholar in the world: by focusing on grace, love, and empathy when doing research or teaching. Eventually, this will be one pillar of my pedagogy. Moreover, Paul reminds me that in leaving behind the old self, there is a new self that comes after, one that can potentially transcend the material world. And as he points out, "in this renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all."<sup>15</sup> Christ being divine implies that the divine is in all; despite those human-made constructs, we all have within us some of the divine.

This is key if I am to take up conversations with groups of people who have been hurt by the Catholic Church. I am thinking of my LGBTQA2S *hermanxs* in Christ and considering their hurt. Many have shared with me how they left the church because they were reminded that their humanity was somehow "less than." Despite any desire to remain in the Church, they just could

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<sup>14</sup> Col 3:8.

<sup>15</sup> Col 3:11.

not remain in a place that could not see their divinity. Thus, when I mention my own happy moments of being in the Catholic Church, like my First Communion or the first day of being a catechist, it feels unfair. They too should have been able to have happy moments. Logically, they decided to make memories in other places. While this essay is not about how the church can retain its members, especially youth, it should take seriously—*really seriously*—the hurt experienced by its members. That pain is real. That pain is what informs the ways in which I broach the topic of religion. In order to encourage others to begin seriously considering the religious dimension of life, it is crucial for me not only to emphasize that not all Catholics are the same, but also to keep my commitment to seeing the divine in everyone I encounter.

If I take my Catholic identity seriously, I must also consider what Paul says next in his Epistle to the Colossians:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.<sup>16</sup>

Here, Paul is directing me towards a possible life as a Catholic not only in a contentious world but also in my work as a researcher and educator in the twenty-first century. Oddly enough, my reading of Anzaldúa echoes this move to transcend structures and borders. Though some readers miss it, Anzaldúa does indeed emphasize the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit in her writing. Even if Anzaldúa rejected Catholic doctrine, would she also reject Paul's call to "seek

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<sup>16</sup> Col 3:12-15.

the things that are above”<sup>17</sup>? Would she be able, at the very least, to entertain that some Catholics also want to transcend borders and boundaries? It is by extending grace that I have managed to navigate the rough Chicana Studies landscape in this last year. It is by centering grace in this paper that I would like to bring the fields of Religious Studies, Theology, and Chicana Studies into conversation.

### **From Movement to Department**

As a scholar of religion, I tend to notice human behavior related to rituals, symbols, and myths even when the religious work I observe is being performed by non-religious institutions.<sup>18</sup> A brief example of this is the Starbucks corporation. It has its red cup season; an iconic green logo that can be identified globally; and its origin story in Seattle, Washington. Though the Starbucks corporation is not an organized religion in the way that Christianity is, it is still capable of doing religious work. Religious work can look like providing a sense of comfort, consistency, and community; providing a sense of time (cycles, seasons, milestones, rites of passage); providing structure (the go-to Starbucks location, apps and rewards, merchandise); and providing a space for reflection. Other practices can also do religious work—surfing, running, or attending concerts—but the Starbucks example does help to set the groundwork for analyzing the Chicana Studies field, and in this section, the Chicana Studies department at UCLA.<sup>19</sup>

Although the field of Chicana Studies was not my initial site of observation the experiences described in this paper are in reaction to Chicana Studies as a field and as a

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<sup>17</sup> Col 3:1.

<sup>18</sup> See David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> I am also aware that this section relies heavily on my own observations of the department and that these are just initial observations.

department at UCLA. These experiences did not generate *ex nihilo*; they were in reaction to Chicana Studies *as an institution*. With this in mind, I would like to provide the first scenario and use Eliade's notion of sacred/profane to shed light on how the Chicana Studies department at UCLA can do the religious work mentioned above.

During orientation to the Ph.D. program in Chicana studies at UCLA, the incoming cohort heard the origin story of the department. This narrative, orally recounted at the start of orientation, described the challenges and sacrifices that students, faculty, and allies encountered in the process of making space for their scholarship in the university. Student agency, we were reminded, is what created the department we were joining. This academic space was not simply given to us: others had to put their lives on the front lines in order for us to be here. The department was born out of struggle. This origin story is retold in a variety of other spaces such as class discussions and department events. Presumably, this origin story is retold to new students every year. This origin story, or origin myth, is repeated over the course of months and years. My intention in highlighting this origin myth is not to trivialize or minimize it. On the contrary, my intention is to demonstrate the sacrality of this origin story. What sets *this* story apart from all the other stories in the history of the department? I am sure we can also discuss the significant milestones within the department's history like the first group that graduated with a bachelor's degree in Chicana Studies or the day the department established its graduate program. These historical moments were also shared with the incoming cohort during orientation, but they differ from the founding story.

If we consider Eliade's model of the sacred and the profane to think about this origin story, two patterns begin to emerge. First, the distinct nature of the origin story. By this, I mean that the origin story of how the UCLA Chicana Studies department was founded is distinct from

all the other stories in the department's history precisely because it is the first. As such, it carries a special quality; it is significant to those who are aware of the historical context of the Chicano Movement and subsequently aware of the push for these types of academic spaces. Not only is this particular origin story historically significant but it also transcends the other moments in the department's history. Or, seen from a different perspective, this particular origin myth helps to center the department; the origin story operates as the center, the *axis mundi*.

Second, this origin story reminds us about temporality. Here, I am thinking about the way which this origin story is repeated. We may not retell the origin story every day or even every quarter of the academic year, but the story is retold when the audience is unfamiliar with the origin story. To know the department, and even the Chicano Movement broadly, is to know this origin. As previously mentioned, this origin myth is retold at significant functions relating to the department, like orientation for new graduate students. It is in this moment, in the retelling process, that time directs the audience into the past. For a moment in time—profane time—time is suspended—punctured—to bring the audience back to the beginning, back to the center. It is this going back, this desire to remember the origins, which sets this origin story apart from the other stories throughout the department's history. When this origin myth is shared, we break away from the profane—in this case, time—and return to the *axis mundi* of the department, a sacred space where it all began, in a sacred time. Eliade calls this the eternal return: we are always wanting to recreate the center, the *axis mundi*, and we construct our worlds to replicate this return.

Of course, every Chicana Studies department has a different origin story. So, while these observations come from a particular department, I would not be surprised if other departments had similar origin stories that are retold in the same way. Again, while Chicana Studies is not an



institution that falls into the organized religion category, it still has the capacity to do religious work. Learning about and being reminded of the students who went on hunger strikes so that I could have this platform serves to inspire and direct. In this origin story, I am reminded of my own agency; I am reminded that if I want change in the world, I can make it happen. More importantly, the story affirms that if a community wants change, that community can make it happen. Miracles can happen when the collective chooses to take calculated risks. I find comfort in knowing that I am not alone in this kind of struggle. In this origin story, I am also given a sense of direction in times of crisis. When I find myself feeling as if the Chicana Studies department has gotten too rigid or unwilling to acknowledge its students' needs, I am reminded that students sacrificed their life for this department. We exist, in part, because of their sacrifice. If the department is the cathedral, then the students who put their bodies on the lines are the *piramides* buried beneath that cathedral. Remembering this, I find comfort and guidance about my next moves when I feel paralyzed. Of course, this is what the origin story evokes within me; it is different for everyone. Yet this kind of story is how the sacred manifests itself even in a space seemingly void of religion.

We can also see this with other aspects of the department, such as the people it chooses to remember publicly. We also have markers on campus that help remind us of this past and this origin story. For example, Judy Baca's mural at UCLA captures a history (center) and asks those who find meaning in the mural to go back to that center (time).<sup>20</sup> In the mural, the world is recreated and it acts as an *axis mundi* for Chicana (and campus) history. As Charlene Villaseñor Black notes in a 2021 interview on art as a way of shaping our view of the world and others,

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<sup>20</sup> Mike Fricanco, "New mural captures campus history and UCLA's future," *UCLA Newsroom*, <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/stories/judy-baca-mural-unveiled>.

“religious art was early public art.” Villaseñor adds that over centuries, public Chicana art became clear political messages. And despite these explicit political messages, I argue that the art, space, process, place, and mural are sacred. The mural becomes a reminder of the center and it asks us to go back to the beginning—to focus on what is at stake if we let go of this fighting spirit. This is why Chicano Park, in San Diego, become significant. More than its historical significance, it offers a space to go back to the center.

These places act as the center and invite us to go back to the beginning. This is also why some find Alma Lopez’s *Our Lady*<sup>21</sup> to be vile while others find refuge in the image. Sacrality is subjective and placing the rose bikini on *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* threatens this center and time for many. Paradoxically, it is also possible that the same image can be the center for others while they bring it into *their* time, their beginning. The sacrality found in art, murals, the artist’s process are just some modalities of how the sacred manifests, and an in-depth study using Chicana art and murals would help expand on this use of the sacred/profane model. CCAS’s origin story and murals in Chicana history are just two ways in which non-religious institutions are capable of doing religious work. It is enough to say here that other aspects of the department can be analyzed in the same way.

The following section takes a look at what Chicana Studies misses out on when it does not grapple with the religious dimension.

### **Critiques of Chicana Studies Pedagogy**

As someone who is still relatively new to the field of Chicana Studies, I knew that it was unlikely I would take a class on religion at the graduate level. Much to my surprise, the department offered a class on Latinx spirituality during my first quarter in the fall of 2021. Since

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<sup>21</sup> See <http://almalopez.com/ourlady.html> on the artist’s website, <https://almalopez.com>.

then, I have learned that this is not the norm in the department. According to the course catalog, the CCAS department at UCLA lists 208 courses, 160 of them geared towards undergraduate students. Of those 160 courses, two have the word “ritual” in their titles. Only one course has the word “religion” explicitly in its title.<sup>22</sup> If we consider this curriculum as a training ground for future Chicana Studies scholars, we must also consider the courses that are not taught. In other words, we must consider the possibility that Chicana Studies (or maybe just UCLA CCAS) does not fully prepare its students and future scholars to engage with the complex world of religion, spirituality, and/or the sacred. More importantly, by not adding courses in those areas, CCAS also perpetuates the notion that religion is irrelevant and that Chicana experience is devoid of the sacred. Of course, CCAS at UCLA may just be an outlier; there may be crossover at other schools, particularly schools that also have a strong Religious Studies department. For now, I want to focus on one particular historical actor that, if we consider Chicana Studies’ attitude of indifference towards the religious dimension as a lens of analysis, would drastically change.

The most challenging aspect of my Chicana lesbian feminist theory class was bringing up these insights. I must confess that I was too scared to share these thoughts. I was fearful that the professor would just say “thanks for sharing,” as another professor in another course had when I offered any comment on the religious dimension of our Chicana studies. When the class read Sor Juana’s *La Respuesta*, I waited for someone to speak in depth about the role of religious rhetoric in Sor Juana’s writing, but no one ever did. Most, if not all of the commentary revolved around Sor Juana’s identity as a lesbian wearing nun’s garb: she was a nun and the Catholic Church was riddled with patriarchy. That commentary is indeed helpful, but what drew me to the historical Sor Juana was the religious rhetoric she used to talk to the Church (patriarchy) *and* how the

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<sup>22</sup> These numbers do not consider any classes that were offered after fall 2021.

Church leaders contended with her. The same kind of commentary came up about Our Lady of *Guadalupe*, especially Alma Lopez's *Our Lady*. Even in my final paper for the class—in which I argued why Sor Juana and Anzaldúa were prophetic voices—the professor's comments did not demonstrate any reflection on the ways in which I constructed the identity of a prophetic voice outside the confines of a religious figure. While the professor made some valid points about the need to use more materials from the syllabus, this experience was a reminder that even scholars who have been in academia for decades are reluctant to entertain an analysis of the religious dimension of life, including Chicana life. I acknowledge that I have more to learn; I also am aware that everything I say will not resonate with everyone. While I am not an expert on Sor Juana or Chicana lesbian feminist theory, I would like to encourage those who are such experts to consider what is left out when the obvious goes unnoticed.

### **Making Sense of the Sacred in Sor Juana**

When Sor Juana's life and work is taught, she is described as a nun. Sor Juana is historically located within her time as part of a cloister in the convent. Sometimes, when she writes, she relies on theological and religious rhetoric. Yet there are moments when this religious dimension is taken for granted to the point of invisibility by those who study Sor Juana. Imagine, if you will, a Sor Juana without the habit, convent, or use of religious rhetoric. What is left? Who is Sor Juana without the religious accoutrement? How would we reconstruct a Sor Juana without the religiosity of her time? If religion is irrelevant, then why keep it in the picture when reconstructing the historical, or non-historical, Sor Juana? It is precisely the religious dimension that makes Sor Juana possible. As an example, we will examine one piece of *La Respuesta* that follows the religious and theological rhetoric mentioned above.

At the end of the seventeenth century, cognizant of the Catholic Church hierarchy's attempt to silence her, Sor Juana replies to the bishop of Puebla in *La Respuesta*. Sor Juana's use of religious and theological rhetoric is what carries *La Respuesta* and what we will, in part, examine. Sor Juana writes:

Moses, because he was a stutterer, thought to himself unworthy to speak to Pharaoh. Yet later, finding himself greatly favored by God, he was so imbued with courage that not only did he speak to God himself, but he dared to ask of Him the impossible: "Shew me thy face." And so it is with me, my Lady, for in view of the favor you show me, the obstacles I described at the outset no longer seem entirely insuperable.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Sor Juana invokes Moses and I will use the rhetoric of humility to analyze this further.<sup>24</sup>

First, it is important to point out that Sor Juana describes Moses as a stutterer. She does not describe him as leading the Israelites out of Egypt, nor does she describe him as receiving the Ten Commandments from God—both of which illustrate a heroic and triumphant leader in the sacred texts. Those descriptions of Moses are far more common than a stuttering Moses. Knowing that Sor Juana is a master of rhetoric, I find her use of the stuttering Moses even more significant. Why does Sor Juana choose *this* Moses? What does the stuttering Moses accomplish that a Ten Commandments Moses cannot? By subverting a triumphant Moses, who led the Exodus, and elevating a stuttering Moses, Sor Juana achieves two things in *La Respuesta*: she employs the rhetoric of humility and she subverts all of the "heroic" males in the Bible. These

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<sup>23</sup> Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Answer/La Respuesta: Including Sor Filoeta's Letter and New Selected Poems*, crit. ed. and trans. Electa Arenal and Amanda Powell (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009), 43.

<sup>24</sup> Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 47.

accomplishments add to the part of the conversation that Sor Juana does not articulate explicitly in the letter. Is she telling this man, the bishop of Puebla, that he is not as great as he thinks he is?

In addition to the stuttering, Sor Juana describes Moses as filled with doubt and feeling unworthy of speaking to Pharaoh, illustrating the power imbalance between the two men. Given the status of Pharaoh, it makes sense that Moses would question his worthiness. By highlighting the unworthiness felt by Moses, Sor Juana adds to the humility already present in the letter. Moreover, this humility is immediately juxtaposed to a more courageous Moses after he learns he is being favored by God. It is unclear from this passage what “favored by God” entails; however, from the context in the book of Exodus, it is likely that being favored by God includes reassurance from God.<sup>25</sup>

It is also interesting to note Sor Juana’s omission of what God said to Moses. Surely Sor Juana is aware of the contents of this conversation. In short, Moses asks God why. God responds by reassuring Moses that He (God) will be “with his mouth and teach [him] what [he is] to speak.”<sup>26</sup> Moses becomes aware that he is favored by God because God tells him directly and more than once. The fact that this part of the story is omitted from Sor Juana’s letter can be seen as Sor Juana’s knowledge of her own conversation with a force greater than herself. This is just speculation, as it is difficult to gauge whether Sor Juana really had conversations with God. Still, the adage about enlightened person to talking about their enlightenment seems to carry weight here. It is very possible that Sor Juana is aware of God’s favor for her.

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<sup>25</sup> Ex 4:10.

<sup>26</sup> Ex 4:12.

That said, it also makes sense for Sor Juana to highlight the courageous Moses. Moses gains courage from his conversations with God enough to ask the unthinkable: for God to show God's face. Note how the power dynamics have changed. Once doubtful and stuttering, Moses becomes equal to God. Moses has gained so much power and courage that Moses he demands—he does not ask or request—that God show God's face. The once humble Moses is no longer humble, and the once humble Sor Juana, in her writing, is humble no more. She confirms this at the end of the passage by declaring that she, too, is favored and will overcome any obstacles set by Pharaoh. Thus, by maneuvering the rhetoric of humility Sor Juana is in a position of being humble in the eyes of church hierarchy—as was common in letter-writing in the seventeenth century—while simultaneously subverting church patriarchy. Ultimately, Sor Juana allows the reader to judge her, for she is no longer concerned about the judgment of others. She already knows her fate. Therefore, anything she says cannot hurt her. She will say whatever she wants in whatever way she pleases. This rhetoric of humility can be seen in other parts of the letter when she questions her worth. Of course, she knows her worth but uses the rhetoric of humility as a means to redistribute an imbalance of power.

While we may never truly know why Sor Juana chose to use the reference to Moses in *La Respuesta*, there is a high degree of certainty that Sor Juana knew what she was doing and how she was doing it. If we remove the Moses reference, we are left with

My Lady, for in view of the favor you show me, the obstacles I described at the outset no longer seem entirely insuperable.<sup>27</sup>

While this also demonstrates a shift for Sor Juana coming to terms with her fate, it removes a significant portion of her identity as a master of rhetoric. The rhetoric of humility is not as strong

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<sup>27</sup> Sor Juana, *The Answer/La Respuesta*, 43.

because the Moses reference is removed. I suppose that part of the allure of Sor Juana is her ability to talk to the Church in its own language and using its structures and systems *and* to have the Church listen. I also suppose that there are others who gain inspiration from Sor Juana's rhetoric to talk back to the institutions that oppress them. Without the religious rhetoric, we are left with a different Sor Juana, one who does not inspire us to rebel in the same way.

Recognizing that this paper cannot do justice to a full analysis of Sor Juana's poems, I will leave these questions simply as starting points. Sor Juana writes her poems in light of her oppression, poems that can evoke feelings of despair and sadness. If we remove the religiosity of Sor Juana, we also remove a part of her oppression. What would Sor Juana's poems be without this oppression? I am not saying that she deserved to be oppressed. I wonder, though, what would her love poems sound like without this backdrop? What would Sor Juana's life narrative be without the villainous Catholic Church hierarchy? If the religious dimension does not matter, then we should also remove the image of an evil Church that wants to see Sor Juana suffer. Do we only keep this arc because it helps to define Sor Juana? Without this evil Church there is no heroine, no Sor Juana.

I am ready for the resistance I may receive for this argument, as I am sure that I have offended those who see Sor Juana as sacred; to you, I sincerely apologize. I raise these questions to get us to think about how significant the religious dimension can be, how we cannot take it for granted. We must be critical without hurting what others find sacred. For those who are following the sacred/profane model, you are right in recognizing how Sor Juana, her writing, or her life, can also be sacred. By now, I suspect you will also be able to recognize how Sor Juana can also be a center and how she can ask us to go back to the beginning.



### **Making Sense of the Sacred in Gloria Anzaldúa**

In the same way that we deconstructed Sor Juana in the previous section and were able to find the religious dimensions while recognizing Sor Juana's sacrality, we can also do this with Gloria Anzaldúa. While this paper does not allow us to do this in detail, it is helpful to shed light on how an in-depth analysis of Anzaldúa's use of spirituality—and, to a greater extent the use of spirituality as a tool of analysis within the field of Chicana Studies—can bring us back to the sacred/profane model this paper has considered.

Beyond this paper, Anzaldúa's use of spirituality is well worth analyzing, as spirituality is a central theme for the historical Anzaldúa and in Anzaldúa's writing. For our purposes here, it may be more helpful to consider a 1998 interview of Gloria Anzaldúa by AnaLouise Keating. In the interview, Anzaldúa emphasizes her need to connect to the world outside of herself, and not only to friends or family, but also to trees, sea otters, and the sky.<sup>28</sup> If we are to use the sacred/profane model, we can imagine this interconnectedness to be the center, or *axis mundi*, for Anzaldúa. She says, in fact, that she makes a conscious effort to return to this center and intentionally focuses on returning to it. She observes:

We get these messages from nature, from the creative consciousness or whatever you want to call the intelligence of the universe. It's constantly speaking to us but we don't listen, we don't look. At this point in my life it's hard for me to listen and look because there are so many things demanded of me. I need to simplify my life

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<sup>28</sup> Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 74.

and slow it down so that I have these moments of connection.<sup>29</sup>

I want to underscore Anzaldúa's need to go back to a center that consists of the world outside of herself. She indicates her awareness of a society that may not place a value on slowing down and going back to a center. Anzaldúa understands this and chooses to make this return to the center a personal goal. Further, it is in slowing down time and even stopping time that Anzaldúa is able to find the sacred: interconnectedness. The profane, in this case, is the busy-work she is asked to perform on a daily basis. The sense of interconnectedness is where Anzaldúa's concept of spirituality exists. It also in this interconnectedness that Anzaldúa can live in a world of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, *altares*, tarot, astrology, Kali, Ganesh, *Coatlícué*, and *Tlazoltéotl*. It is this interconnectedness that allows Anzaldúa to transcend notions of religion, theology, and even spirituality. Lastly, it is this ability—to transcend these categories, even for a moment—that creates a world in which recognition of the sacred and the profane can occur.

### **When the Anxiety Lessens**

My goal in writing this paper has been to encourage the field of Chicana Studies (and even Religious Studies/Theology) to consider the possibility of analyzing Chicana History through the lens of sacrality. In this way, there is a possibility of lessening the anxiety of the Chicana Studies scholars and institutions around the terms “religion,” “theology,” and “spirituality.” This approach can also shift the focus into uncharted territories in Chicana Studies by expanding the notions of what is deemed sacred. A broader goal is to make the topic of religion less taboo and in the process, perhaps, to make the religious dimension more accessible. It is possible that the anxiety discussed in this paper comes from fear, but I am not a

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<sup>29</sup> Anzaldúa, *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, 75.

psychologist; I do know that we fear what we do not know. Now, especially in Chicax Studies, is a good time to confront those fears.

As I have outlined in this essay, the theological approach to Chicax lives and communities is not the only approach, nor is it only institutionalized religions that need examining. Knowing this, it is possible to have nuanced conversations about Chicana literature or the role of the Catholic Church. It is also possible to tackle, with rigor, realms often overlooked in Religious Studies like *Santa Muerte*, Chicax Mormons, or Latinxs in the Satanic Temple. Chicax Studies may be a fertile place to foster this kind of research. Perhaps this article can help to plant some seeds.

### **Conclusion**

In time, those seeds can grow into fields that we cannot even conceive of in this moment. New courses in Chicax Studies could spring up, such as courses on “*Pochx*<sup>30</sup> Theology” or “*This Bridge Called My Back* as Sacred Text.” Maybe one day introductory courses in Chicax Studies, with 400 students, could introduce religion from a non-Christian framework. Just imagine! We are in a fruitful place. We are in an in-between moment, shedding an old self and recreating a new one; we are between the Religious Studies world and the Chicax Studies universe. I am hopeful that we can create a new center for a new approach.

Let us return to the center of this paper, the main argument. I have demonstrated the ways in which Chicax Studies can approach the religious dimension of life and thought through the sacred/profane model. I have also argued that the concepts of sacred and profane can be applied to the obviously religious (e.g., *La Virgen de Guadalupe*) and to the less obviously religious (e.g., the creation story of the Chicax Studies department at UCLA). Lastly, I have shed light on

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<sup>30</sup> A term for a Latinx person who does not speak Spanish fluently.

the importance of critically engaging with the religious dimension by deconstructing popular historical figures within Chicana Studies, like Sor Juana, to demonstrate that without their religious backdrops they lose a part of their identity.

If Chicana Studies takes seriously subjective experience like *testimonios*, it should also consider *testimonios* of encounters with the sacred. As this paper has shown, encountering the sacred can take place in different forms and in different places by everyone at any stage in their life. Having sat with these thoughts for an entire year and now taking the opportunity to make sense of them, I find that the next part of the creating process of which Anzaldúa speaks is to make space for others to take part in this conversation, in hopes of lessening the existing anxiety about the religious dimension in Chicana Studies.