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# “Matriz sin tumba”: The Trash Goddess and the Healing Matrix of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Reclaimed Womb

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One of Gloria Anzaldúa’s most important metaphors in *Borderlands/La frontera* is *La herida abierta*, the violent gash that marks the artificially imposed and fiercely policed border between Mexico and the United States. This open wound, originally sliced (*rajada*) by the act of marking the border, is “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (25). Disgusting and crusting fluids blur the initial boundaries of this slice, creating a gory region of potential healing and potential infection. This wound marks the amorphous and indeterminate nature of the colonized subject, whose imperial definition simultaneously creates and complicates such borders. Those who mark the political-sexual border—whether Aztecs, Mexicans, or US patriarchal imperialists—are disgusted by this oozing abject indeterminacy; on the other hand, those who are marked *by* the border—especially women of color who are defined within the border region—*embody* the colonizer’s disgust and often internalize it as their own being (“the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” [25]) through a process that Frantz Fanon refers to as “epidermalization” (11).

Anzaldúa refers to the healing process of confronting this internalized wound as the Coatlicue state. One privileged moment in this Coatlicue process is paying homage to Tlazolteotl, the goddess of lust and filth who figures as one of Coatlicue’s aspects or manifestations. This homage to Tlazolteotl is at the heart of a key poem in the second half of *Borderlands*, “Matriz sin tumba o ‘el baño de la basura ajena’” (158-60), or “Womb without Tomb or ‘The Bath of Other People’s Trash.’”<sup>1</sup> *Matriz*, Spanish for *womb*, derives from the Latin *matrix* (from *mater*, mother), the spatial medium out of which things are born, produced, or reproduced. The matrix, then, is the site of creativity. In a patriarchal culture, the reproductive capabilities of the womb become tools for enslaving women. In a racist culture, the (pro)creative power of the woman of color’s womb must be policed and devalued. “Matriz sin tumba” concerns Anzaldúa’s struggle against the mainstream patriarchal Anglo-American conversion of the mestiza’s womb/matrix (in all its implications) into mere trash. Reconverting the

trashed womb into a creative power, the poem stages the production of the matrix out of which Anzaldúa can provide the healing antidote to the “emotional residue” of internal and internalized colonialism in the borderlands. Anzaldúa’s poetics serve as an embodied theoretical praxis, a poetic theory in the flesh that grows out of the experiential knowledge of the oppressed.<sup>2</sup> In this matrix, writing and body implicate one another. The Coatlicue state clears a space for the writing that then creates a space for psychic and physical healing. Hence, this decolonizing poetic conversion or reappropriation marks Anzaldúa’s status as a healer—the *curandera* of conquest.

### Engaging the Poem

“Matriz sin tumba” depicts the horror and pain of the psychic process Anzaldúa refers to as the Coatlicue state. The Coatlicue state—named after the Earth Mother fertility goddess of the Aztecs<sup>3</sup>—is an inner process responding to the trauma of what (in the spirit of the poem) I call *trashing*, viewed here as the alien trash of the dominant culture. To be trashed is to be violently cast outside the limits of the colonizer’s sense of self, scapegoated and spurned as all that is loathsome and sickening in contrast to what is pure and productive—or perhaps more fittingly, pure and reproductive.

Anzaldúa develops the complex nature of this Coatlicue state by dividing it into substates such as Tlazolteotl and Coyolxauhqui. Tlazolteotl—an alternative embodiment of Coatlicue—represents the condition of filth, promiscuity, or any breach and perversion of culturally sanctioned norms of sexuality. Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue’s daughter, represents for Anzaldúa the trashed figure’s feeling of being torn apart by internalized shame and guilt from being spurned by society, embodying the contradictions of the dominant culture within one’s own being.

“Matriz sin tumba” is one of the most complicated and intriguing pieces in *Borderlands*. Perhaps the most curious thing is its title. The phrase “matriz sin tumba” or “womb without tomb” resonates with many ambiguous possibilities and purposes, but “el baño de la basura ajena” or “the bath of other people’s trash” seems even more ambiguous and intriguing. More demanding still is coming to terms with the apparent incongruity of the title’s two halves: How do wombs, tombs, baths, and trash all relate to one another? One answer lies in the speaker’s reference to the dream vision of the ritual “‘baño de la basura ajena [bath of other people’s trash]’” in honor of Tlazolteotl (158, lines 29-30). The figure of Tlazolteotl, in fact, embodies all of these otherwise disparate elements referring to birth,

death, purification, and pollution. She thus becomes the key to understanding the poem and its place in Anzaldúa's work. However, because one key element of Anzaldúa's decolonizing methodology is her attention to detail, no matter how mundane or horrifying, the poem itself must be read closely before the function of Tlazolteotl is explored.

The opening lines of the poem read: "Tendida estoy en una cama angosta / calzones empapados de sangre [I am lying down on a narrow bed, / underpants soaked in blood]" (1-2). Here Anzaldúa immediately establishes the foreign and traumatic nature of the incidents to be played out in the poem. Significantly, the speaker is lying on *a* bed, an indeterminate bed that lacks the comfort of *my* bed or even the definitiveness of *the* bed. The attention to the bed's narrowness highlights its alien quality. This also heightens the intensity of the blood-soaked underpants. Why are these underpants soaked in blood? Because of menstruation or a wounding? Is this an alienating and traumatic medical scene, perhaps a hospital or clinic room with a narrow hospital bed? While each element of the poem takes on multiple layers of significance—for example, this wounding seems at once physical, psychic, social, and spiritual—this traumatic hospital setting seems the most literal, the most obvious in comparison to the other experiences the poem simultaneously investigates. Yet this distinction between the literal and the figural itself is one of the consequences of colonization the poem seeks to undo. Body, mind, soul, and writing are intimately and intricately interwoven here just as they are in the embodied experiences of colonialism in the borderlands. The body's pain is the psyche's pain, and vice versa.

The imbrication of body and mind in the experience of pain occurs throughout critical thinking about the borderland. Critic Suzanne Bost, for example, notes: "At the beginning of *Borderlands* . . . Anzaldúa opened her body to her readers, 'staking fence rods in my flesh'. . . to express viscerally the pain of living with barbed wire fences. The first generation of 'out' Chicana lesbian writers laid down their own backs for political work like *This Bridge Called My Back*" (6). Cherríe Moraga writes, "A friend of mine told me once how no wonder I had called the first book I co-edited (with Gloria Anzaldúa), 'This Bridge Called My Back.' *You have chronic back trouble*, she says. Funny I had never considered this most obvious connection, all along my back giving me constant pain. And the spot that hurts the most is the muscle that controls the movement of my fingers and hands while typing" (*Loving v*). Even the restorative act of writing perpetuates this pain. *This Bridge* (and the community of women of color to which it gave voice) is thus in many ways the matrix out of which Anzaldúa's own matrix takes on flesh. It is here that the connections

between mind, soul, politics, art, and consciousness are explored through the matrix of the woman of color's body; this body is the site of colonial oppression and decolonial conversion yet remains unthinkable (because unembodiable) for white feminists who remain blind to the structures of oppression existing between women and men and also between white women and women of color.

In the context of this physically traumatic level, the statement "Se que yo callada no soy nada [I know that silent I am nothing]" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 158, line 3) still comes as a surprise. What roles do speaking and silence play in this scene? In what sense is silence equivalent to a loss of being? What could the speaker say at this moment to affirm her being, her selfhood, or even her existence? Given the patriarchal hierarchy that founds western medical practice—still assuming that this is a hospital or medical clinic scene—this woman's silence, her lack of speaking agency in her own treatment would not be at all extraordinary. But here speaking, singing, shouting, screaming—some form of breaking the silence—are at once necessary and denied. Any attempt at speaking is thwarted by her condition, which has yet to be identified, and her surroundings: "Desdichada, / muy lejana con boca hinchada, / vomitando algo amarillo, / revolviendo y repitiendo palabras sin sentido [Miserable, / far off with swollen mouth, / vomiting something yellow, / jumbling and repeating senseless words]" (4-7). Her mouth is out of her control in its distancing, swelling, vomiting, and jumbling repetition of senseless words. No coherent outward expression is possible. Moreover, the speaker's inner condition is also out of her control as she feels something exploding inside (9). The speaker recognizes the "dark night" (11) gravity of her condition and the possibility of her physical and spiritual loss of being, poised over the abyss of death.

Appropriate to this loss of agency and distancing of self, in the second stanza, which is visually set off by a different margin space that creates a back-and-forth pattern throughout the poem, the speaker refers to herself in the third person, as though seeing herself from the outside. She describes her physical responses to anesthesia: "Se entrega a un sabor de hierro / y al éter [she surrenders to a taste of iron / and ether]" (14-15). As she drifts off into this drug-induced sleep, "Sueña con una mujer que orina pus / y que come su propio excremento [she dreams of a woman who pisses pus / and eats her own excrement]" (16-17). These dream images point to the patient's loss of bodily control, her fluids and waste flowing from various orifices. This bodily condition, nevertheless, functions as the hinge-point between the medical, the spiritual, and the cultural dimensions of the poem, and all three are implicated in the figure of Tlazolteotl.

The speaker's internal assault and her inability to speak in response are brought up again in the third stanza as she jumbles and repeats senseless words. The trauma of this inability to speak clearly, to make herself understood, is underscored by her repetition of some form of these lines and the continual connection between her inability to speak and an explosion of "algo [something]" inside her. This internal explosion becomes exteriorized in her dreamlike sensation of an "agitado viento [agitated wind]" blowing her away "como basura [like trash]" (20). Here is the first reference to trash within the poem, and we see that the speaker *is* the trash, that she feels like refuse blown around by the wind. In addition to her physical helplessness, her body like dead matter tossed by the wind, she also perceives herself as the refuse of someone or something else's world view: "juizado / por ese buitre en la panza [judged / by that vulture in my belly]" (21-22). She has internalized the judgmental attitude of the beast that lives on dead flesh, the vulture that takes on the guise of or embodies "la bestia noche [que] entra armada con navajas [the beastly night (who) enters armed with knives]" (23).

To return from this nightmare-scape to the nightmarish medical setting, we might imagine these knives as scalpels. If so, the medical procedure being performed becomes clearer in the lines that follow: The vulture/beastly night gropes and pierces her three times: "Miro que me saca las entrañas, / que avienta la matriz en la basura— / matriz sin tumba [I see that it tears out my entrails, / tosses my womb in the trash— / womb without tomb]" (26-28). While these lines might suggest a miscarriage, still birth, or abortion—the loss of the creation within the womb—one senses here that the speaker has undergone a hysterectomy, the surgical removal of her womb. The second reference to trash in the poem is thus the identification of her womb with trash, thrown in the trash without its proper burial. The organ that brings forth new life is denied the rites of death that would consecrate this moment in its full traumatic significance as a loss of the ability to give birth. In a culture where a woman's value is associated with her child-bearing function, such a loss leaves the woman as trash to be picked at by the vulture of patriarchal culture. There is no proper burial rite for this kind of social death. Such a loss is simply swept under the rug like dirt.

For a queer Chicana who so strongly identifies with her indigenous roots, the politics of sexual reproduction and the implied multiple levels of struggle against patriarchy become complex. While all women are subject to the politics of the womb, so to speak, Anzaldúa is multiply subjected. On the one hand, as a woman of color—whatever her sexual preference—her womb will be rejected, perceived as trash by the dominant white

culture. Her womb might as well be cut out and tossed in the trash. Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith argues that the contemporary population-control movement, seeing communities of color as pollutants in the body politic, scapegoats people of color “for environmental destruction, poverty, and war. Women of color are particularly threatening,” Smith argues, “as they have the ability to reproduce the next generations of communities of color. Consequently, it is not surprising that control over the reproductive abilities of women of color has come to be seen as a ‘national security’ issue for the U.S.” (79). This scapegoating adds an additional level of alienation that white women do not suffer, Aída Hurtado adds:

In essence, women of Color, as a group, have been used primarily as laborers as well as exploited for their sexuality. Women of Color are not needed by white men to reproduce biologically pure offspring and therefore have been subordinated through rejection, whereas white women have been seduced into compliance because they are needed to reproduce biologically the next generation of the power structure. . . . The difference in access to structural power between white men and white women has to be made palatable, attractive, and rewarding; otherwise, rebellion would ensue. . . . Therefore, gender subordination, as imposed by white men, is experienced differently by white women and by women of Color. (*Color* vii-viii)

This is true for Chicanas, especially lesbians, within their own culture. Just as in Octavio Paz’s characterization of Mexican mestizos as *hijos de la Chingada* (children of the fucked indigenous woman, Malinche, and the Spanish fucker, Cortés) (59-80), Chicanas in general are seen as the weak victims of male desire. Chicanas must renounce sexual desire in order to prove themselves worthy for Chicano men. “Only femme-machos,” Hurtado writes, “who are hybrids of man/woman and not really women, can, to a certain extent, have a will. But theirs is not a *human* (therefore male) will; rather, it is an animalistic will that needs to be tamed” (*Color* 59). Neither are they, of course, seen as fit candidates for motherhood: “the ultimate violation [against sexual norms] is committed by lesbian women, who are opened by other women. Once a woman opens herself to another woman, she can never again redeem herself, not even through motherhood [because] Chicana lesbians who choose to become mothers are perceived as aberrations of the traditional concept of motherhood” (60). It is most appropriate, then, that Anzaldúa frames her poem about the loss of her womb in terms of ritual purification or sexual redemption in honor of Tlazolteotl, the goddess of sexual filth or trash.

For Anzaldúa, however, this *basura* or trashed condition encourages a tolerance for ambiguity and a welcoming of the psychic growth that can

result from the terrifying encounter with Coatlicue, the embodiment of multiple, fused identities:

*Coatlicue da luz a todo y a todo devora. Ella es el monstruo que se tragó todos los seres vivientes y los astros, es el monstruo que se traga al sol cada tarde y le da luz cada mañana. [Coatlicue gives birth to all and devours all. She is the monster who swallowed all living beings and the stars, she is the monster that swallows the sun each afternoon and gives birth to the sun each morning.] Coatlicue is a rupture in our everyday world. As the Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in darkness. (Borderlands 68)*

This darkness transforms the woman of color's rejected womb into a source of decolonizing regeneration.

### From the Surgical to the Spiritual

In the second half of the poem Anzaldúa recasts the surgical scene into the terms of Nahua ritual. Despite the overwhelmingly horrifying nature of this experience as presented in the poem, Anzaldúa's translation of the event into Nahua terms inverts the politics of *basura* by externalizing and purifying what has been presented as inner trash. As she puts it in Chapter Seven of *Borderlands*, "*La mestiza* has gone from being the sacrificial goat to becoming the officiating priestess at the crossroads" (102). When the speaker "dreams that she takes 'the bath of other people's trash' / in honor of Tlazolteotl," we see that the second half of the poem's title refers to a purification ritual in honor of the goddess of sexuality and filth. As mentioned earlier, Tlazolteotl is one aspect or manifestation of Coatlicue. This particular earth goddess of sexuality and childbirth is the eater of filth, the one to whom the defiler prays for the purification of the stench and rotteness of sexual transgression. One ancient Nahua prayer to Tlazolteotl suggests that the profaner "has come to place himself in the thongs, the snare . . . , the paralysis, / the blindness, the rotteness, / the tatters, the rags" of the Tlazolteotl condition. The supplicant begs for mercy: "Now, here, bathe him, wash him" (León-Portilla and Shorris 223).

Earlier in *Borderlands* Anzaldúa makes reference to "el baño de la basura ajena" in its ritualistic context and its conversion into the terms of chicanismo: "On December 2nd when my sun goes into my first house, I celebrate *el día de la Chicana y el Chicano*. On that day I clean my altars, light my *Coatlalopeuh* candle, burn sage and copal, take *el baño para espantar basura* [a bath for scaring away trash], sweep my house. . . . On that day I affirm who we are" (110). The trash to be bathed here refers in

part to the negativity cast upon a person by someone or something else, as in the casting of an evil spell or the lingering effects of hate, anger, or denial. This negativity is embodied as evil spirits who inhabit the air and threaten to enter a person's soul during a moment of shock, as Anzaldúa explains: "So I grew up in the interface [between western rationalism and native cosmivision] trying not to give countenance to *el mal aire*, evil non-human, non-corporeal entities riding the wind, that could come in through the window, through my nose with my breath. I was not supposed to believe in *susto*, a sudden shock or fall that frightens the soul out of the body" (60). Anzaldúa continues, "Some *mexicanos* and Chicanos distinguish between *aire*, air, and *mal aire*, the evil spirits which reside in the air" (117, n34). Her *limpias*, or ritual cleansing ceremonies, are designed to counter the *sustos* and *mal aigres* that are the psychic-physical residue of colonization on the souls and bodies of the victims of the borderlands. These *limpias* also tie her practice directly to current-day Mexicana practices on both sides of the border.

Anzaldúa has been accused of romanticizing the Mesoamerican past at the expense of indigenous people alive today.<sup>4</sup> But here she draws from her family's own traditions, which grow out of indigenous practices still very much in existence. Among current-day Nahuatl speakers of Puebla, this notion of *mal aire* remains a fundamental element of their cosmivision. In the northern region of *talocan* (the underworld), there is a region called *ehecatán* or *ehecatallán* (the place or world of the winds). Here the lord of the winds and the lord of death live. Timothy J. Knab explains:

From the caves of the winds in the northern reaches of *talocan* issue the *mal aires* or evil winds, the feared *ahmo cualli ehecat*, the *sombra de muerte* or shadow of death, *miquicihual* and the *miquiehecat*, the nortes, 'the winds of death.' All these things are sent forth on the surface of the earth by the lords of the northern reaches of the underworld to seek out the souls of the living and bring them into the world of the dead. These lords of the north must continually repopulate their domain with the souls of the living. Thus they are responsible for much of the sickness, suffering, and death on the surface of the earth. (107-08)

Anzaldúa discusses this relationship between the *mal aigres* and sickness in *Borderlands*. Jill Leslie McKeever Furst points out that in San Francisco Tecospa in the Valley of Mexico, the notion of *mal aire* is connected to illicit female sexuality: "Another type of vapor is 'woman-air,' or *yeyecatlcihuahatl* in Nahuatl, and 'garbage-air,' or '*aire de basura*' in Spanish. It is generated by illicit sexual intercourse, prostitutes, and fornicating couples. Woman-air causes blindness and other eye problems in

infants and children" (145). In Amatlán, Veracruz the *ochpantli*, or ritual sweepings, are the cure.<sup>5</sup>

Anzaldúa's ritual house cleaning, then, is no small matter. The *mal aigre* left behind in the house must be bathed, purified, and converted into good, which can be accomplished by ritual burning of sage, sweeping the house, and bathing the body (and effectively the spirit).<sup>6</sup> This stripping away or reconversion of the negative, Anzaldúa explains, allows for the vulnerable opening up of the soul to others as a way of affirming and reproducing family and community, all under the auspices of Coatlalopeuh. The communal element of this hygienic practice is critical.

In Chapter Four of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa refers to another surgical scene where the surgical experience is quickly mapped onto its spiritual correlate:

Dead  
 the doctor by the operating table said.  
 I passed between the two fangs,  
 the flickering tongue.  
 Having come through the mouth of the serpent,  
 swallowed,  
 I found myself suddenly in the dark,  
 sliding down a smooth wet surface  
 down down into an even darker darkness. (56)

The Coatlicuean implications of this surgical/spiritual passage are clear in the consuming action of the serpent. Following this passage, Anzaldúa writes: "After each of my four bouts with death I'd catch glimpses of an otherworld Serpent" (57). In addition to her own hysterectomy, Anzaldúa's hospital experiences leave her perched precariously between life and death. At this transition from the surgical to the spiritual levels of the poem, we start to see that the connections between womb and tomb, birth and death, and bath and trash fit into this single nightmare experience. This is the experience she describes in her earlier essay, "La Prieta":

Last March my fibroids conspired with an intestinal tract infection and spawned watermelons in my uterus. The doctor played with his knife. La Chingada ripped open, raped with the white man's wand. My soul in one corner of the hospital ceiling, getting thinner and thinner telling me to clean up my shit, to release the fears and garbage from the past that are hanging me up. So I take La Muerte's scythe and cut away my arrogance and pride, the emotional depressions I indulge in, the head trips I do on myself and other people. With her scythe I cut away the umbilical cord shackling me to the past and to friends and attitudes that drag me down. . . . Torn limb from limb,

knifed, mugged, beaten. My tongue (Spanish) ripped from my mouth, left voiceless. My name stolen from me. My bowels fucked with a surgeon's knife, uterus and ovaries pitched into the trash. Castrated. (203, 208)

Here is the relationship between Anzaldúa's biographical experiences and the experience of "Matriz sin tumba." In this passage we see the institutional implications of the medical in the physical, psychological, and spiritual wounds caused by internal colonialism. It takes the poem, as a poetic act of submission to Tlazolteotl, for Anzaldúa to find a way out of the abyss of her internalized self-image as the *basura* of conquest.

### The Tlazolteotl Purgation Rite

In his twelve-volume *General History of the Things of New Spain*, Bernardino de Sahagún records and translates the orations spoken during the confession and purgation rite in honor of Tlazolteotl.<sup>7</sup> The imagistic elements that make up Anzaldúa's "Matriz sin tumba" are apparent in this text. The speakers in the rite are the transgressor (usually one guilty of adultery or other sexual transgressions, although this ritual also includes verbal transgressions) and the soothsayer or confessor, the speaker who intercedes between the transgressor and the god of filth, Tezcatlipoca.<sup>8</sup> The penitent presents himself as troubled in his stench and rotteness. Through his transgressions, he has perched above a great abyss, where he might throw himself off out of guilt. The confessor chants, "And perhaps he has come to place himself in the thongs, the snare. / Perhaps he has come to take the paralysis, / the blindness, the rotteness, / the tatters, the rags" (León-Portilla and Shorris 222). Later in the oration the confessor addresses the penitent directly, again in terms we find in Anzaldúa: "Of your own volition have you wallowed in filth, in refuse. / Even as if you were a baby, a child, / who plays with the dung, with the excrement, / so have you bathed yourself, rolled yourself [in filth]." The priest's prescription is confession before Tlazolteotl: "You have consulted, you have revealed it / to the bather of people, the washer of people." The sign of healing and cleansing is the cosmic power of rebirth through sun and earth: "Now you cause the sun to appear, to come forth. / Now once again you are rejuvenated, you emerge as a child" (León-Portilla and Shorris 226). The key to this individual *limpia* for past and current Nahua practice, as for Anzaldúa, is the concomitant cleansing and rejuvenation of the community.

Anzaldúa's references to cleaning her house and herself as part of her homage to Coatlatlopeuh also has its place in Sahagún's record of the prayer to Tlazolteotl, according to which the transgressor is commanded to sweep, bathe, sing, castigate herself, and fast. Furthermore, the penitent

must perform sacred acts of self-mutilation, such as pushing twigs through her earlobes and tongue, “especially because of adultery” (Sahagún 6: 33). It should be noted here that the references to blood and piercing are far from figurative (although their ultimate symbolism could be): the actual ceremony, as Sahagún describes it elsewhere (2: 118-24), involves the beheading, skinning, and flaying of a woman who is led to believe she is about to have sex with Moctezuma. A priest drapes her freshly stripped flesh over himself and performs her part in the rest of the ceremony. The sweeping ceremony, then, marks the gory extent to which the Aztecs had rewritten the matriarchal roots of the earth mother celebrations. Anzaldúa rescues the ceremony, returning it to its matriarchal function and the implicit sense of connection between human, earth, sky, and divinity.

Given this apparent reversal and domestication of what other people see as trash, we might expect the second half of the poem to exult in its triumphant liberation from the internalized projections of racist, sexist, homophobic culture. This is not at all the case, however. The second half plunges the speaker even deeper into this nightmare world: “Detrás de ella mira una figura / tragándose el sol [Behind her she sees a figure / swallow up the sun]” (158-59, lines 31-32). Despite the possible feminist reading of this moment as depicting the goddess of night swallowing up the patriarchal sun god, Huitzilopochtli, the horror for the speaker continues unabated. The surgical has become the sacrificial, as this figure of the night “punctures her with obsidian four times, five” (33). The horror of the loss of her womb remains as the speaker continues: “¿Estoy muerta? le pregunto. / Por favor entierren mi matriz conmigo [Am I dead? I ask him. / Please bury my womb with me]” (34-35). There has still been no proper burial for her womb. While the darkness of night might be conquered by light, the light’s dispersal of the dark only complicates this process of mutilation and dismemberment: “Un relámpago perforando el cielo / dispersa la noche. / Me sangran, me sangran. / . . . Un dedo sale del cielo, y descende, / se insinúa entre mis rajadas cavidades [A lightning bolt perforating the sky / disperses the night. / They bleed me, they bleed me. / . . . A finger comes out of the sky, and descends, / insinuating itself between my torn cavities]” (36-38, 49-50), the finger invading her body like the doctor of “La Prieta.” She dreams: “Sueña de una cara tiznada, / de una boca escupiendo sangre [She dreams of a grimy face, / of a mouth spitting out blood]” (53-54). The speaker has a vision of another ritual activity often associated with the Day of the Dead: “comiendo atole de miel y chile [eating atole with honey and chile]” (55). Anzaldúa evokes cosmic sympathy between the speaker and the sky, which mimics her sliced-up abdomen: “Hacia el oriente una larga cicatriz / raja el cielo. / Le punza dos veces, tres,

siete [Toward the east a long scar / slits the sky. / It pierces it two times, three, seven]" (56-58).

The opening lines of the final stanza write the purgation ritual into an existential recognition of life as a constant purgation of death that one experiences not as relief but as endless sickness: "Padezco de un mal: la vida / una enfermedad recurrente / que me purga de la muerte [I suffer from an illness: life, / a recurring sickness / that purges me of death]" (59-61). The rest of the concluding stanza reiterates the nightmarish elements that punctuate the poem: being bled, death spilling from her mouth as she repeats words that make no sense. This vision reveals the inanity of life: "matriz sin tumba. / En un lugar interno algo se revienta / y un agitado viento empuja los pedazos [womb without tomb. / In a place inside me something bursts / and an agitated wind blows away the pieces]" (67-69). The *mal aigre* mentioned in *Borderlands* has been internalized in such a way that its literal as well as figurative senses differ little in terms of the bodily impact of this colonizing patriarchal affront to her womb.

### Preparatory Purgation

What does the rewriting of the surgical into the spiritual-mythical accomplish? Given that the movement of *Borderlands* is from sickness to health, wounding to healing, separation to integration, what role does the poem play in the development of this movement? Anzaldúa's discussion of her entry into the poet-shaman state in Chapter Six gives us one way of opening up this question.

In the section subtitled "Something To Do With the Dark" Anzaldúa writes: "*Hija negra de la noche, carnala, ¿Por qué me sacas las tripas, por qué cardas mis entrañas? Este hilvanando palabras con tripas me está matando. Jija de la noche ¡vete a la chingada!* [Black daughter of the night, sister, why do you take out my guts, why do you comb my entrails? This stitching together of words with intestines is killing me. Daughter of the night, go fuck yourself!]" (94). Just as in "Matriz sin tumba," here we have a creature of the dark, now identified as her *musa bruja* or medicine-woman muse, who also plunges her fingers into the speaker's entrails, slicing her open and tearing her apart, leaving her *rajada*. Only this time the slicing and stitching is done with words as well as flesh, word become flesh the hard way. Anzaldúa develops this notion further in the section to follow, "In *Xóchilt* in *Cuicatl*," which is the Nahuatl expression for poetry, *flor y canto*, flower and song (or perhaps just flower song).<sup>9</sup> In the third person, she discusses her struggle with the poetic process and describes the process as a kind of birthing, something trying to come out at

night while others sleep: "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" (95-96). Like the dark night of the soul in "Matriz sin tumba," she is "getting too close to the mouth of the abyss," teetering on the edge. The key section of this passage begins as follows: "Blocks (*Coatlícue* states) are related to my cultural identity. The painful periods of confusion that I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process: cultural shifts." Given the crossroads positioning of this mestiza of the borderlands, her individual psychic dynamics are part of a larger cultural movement. "The stress of living with cultural ambiguity," Anzaldúa continues, "both compels me to write and blocks me. It isn't until I'm almost at the end of the blocked state that I remember and recognize it for what it is." In a lightning bolt flash the "piercing light of awareness melts the block" and she accepts the deep and the darkness and surrenders to Tlazolteotl's purgation: "On this night of the hearing of faults, *Tlazolteotl, diosa de la cara negra*, let fall the cockroaches that live in my hair, the rats that nestle in my skull. Gouge out my lame eyes, rout my demon from its nocturnal cave" (96). Like the poetic healing transformation of the initial medical trauma of "La Prieta" and "Matriz sin tumba," this surrender to what lies in the darkness inside her is a surrender to Tlazolteotl, goddess of the black face, who will hear the poet's faults, purify her, and finally "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). This transformation of the poet into a *nahual* is the precursor to developing the capacity to transform her culture as it undergoes the painful shocks of cultural shifts and to recognize these shocks and shifts as creative change. The lightning bolts, as in "Matriz sin tumba," illuminate the darkness, not by transforming it into light, but by providing the contrasting element that reveals darkness as the internal creative power capable of transforming cultural abjection and negativity into a stimulus to growth. This internal negativity is the internalized form of the dominant culture's projections onto and into the native woman.

Such realization does nothing, however, to ease the pain. The path to this vision requires sacrifice, humility, and submission. But unlike the Spaniards' Catholic version of confession of sins, this purgation through Tlazolteotl reveals that one's sins are in fact the internalized projections of a racist hegemonic culture. The purgation lies in recognition of the imposed quality of these sins. The submission is a letting go of the self-perceptions that derive from those external racist projections. It is also

a letting go of the western ego that forces itself upon the world in order to conquer it, an ego that depends in part on the western opposition of body and spirit. The embodied, situated subject of this reclamation moves beyond this body/spirit opposition toward a position that Norma Alarcón identifies as the theoretical subject of *This Bridge*: “Consciousness as a site of multiple voicings is the theoretical subject, par excellence, of *Bridge*. Concomitantly, these voicings (or thematic threads) are not viewed as necessarily originating with the subject, but as discourses that transverse consciousness and which the subject must struggle with constantly” (“Theoretical” 365). Through the speaking-forth of this subject that “gives credit to the subject of consciousness as the site of knowledge but problematizes it by representing it as a weave” (366), the poet/shaman/*nahual* is able to conduct the poetic rites in honor of the native goddess returned to her place of power: “I sit here before my computer, *Amiguita*, my altar on top of the monitor with the *Virgen de Coatloapeuh* candle and copal incense burning. 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.” Her writing process becomes a vampire that “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.” With images, words, and stories she transforms the horrific aspect of Aztec sacrifice into a healing creative act arising “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” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 97). Piercing her tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, doing her penance as dictated by the purification ritual before Tlazolteotl (Sahagún 6: 33): such is the ancient indigenous correlate to Anzaldúa’s birthing process through the painful creative process of writing as decolonization. Writing, here and now returned to the body, has come full circle since its estrangement through western alphabetization.<sup>10</sup>

### **Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, and the Chicana’s Reappropriated Womb**

“Matriz sin tumba” must be seen in the context of Anzaldúa’s notion of the Coatlicue state, the key concept in the development of mestiza consciousness in *Borderlands*. Only by passing through the horrific process of the Coatlicue state can one develop such a consciousness and enter the painful yet liberating process of decolonized self-knowing.

Anzaldúa explains that Coatlicue is related to Tlazolteotl. In fact, Coatlicue becomes the embodiment of the female principle. Even before the conquest, the Aztecs had begun dismembering the goddess figure, the earth mother. In the move toward a patriarchal culture of war, the Aztecs increasingly saw the feminine as loathsome, as something to be expelled and overcome for the health and manhood of the culture. The goddesses who had shared an underlying identity (through fusion in the meeting of various cultures) split off from one another and became polarized in a process later solidified by the Spanish imposition of the Christianized split of womankind into virgin and whore, Guadalupe and Malinche. Anzaldúa notes, "They desexed *Guadalupe*, taking *Coatlalopeuh*, the serpent/sexuality, out of her" (*Borderlands* 49). On the way to this ultimate splitting off of sexuality (and by extension the control over one's womb) Coatlicue became separated from Tlazolteotl, Coatlalopeuh (Guadalupe), Cihuacoatl, Tonantsi, and so on.<sup>11</sup>

Anzaldúa's development of the notion of the Coatlicue state reunifies the mangled goddesses, thereby reclaiming sexuality and power for women. Coatl or Serpent, Anzaldúa explains, is 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). Coatlicue is figured as the earth mother whose "cavernous womb" gives birth to all and devours all—"da luz a todo y a toda devora" (68). This devouring, which here refers to the Coatlicue state—spiritual death and rebirth—is necessary for the process of germination and growth required to overcome or recognize and reframe the power of patriarchy.

Tlazolteotl is the goddess of the crossroads and thus figures in the Coatlicue state, in which "every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again" (70). Thus, she is also the goddess of those who live in the borderlands, who continually cross back and forth across the line that separates them from mainstream Anglo-American life. Anzaldúa describes this crossing over as "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." Gaining a new perspective and making connections beyond the contradictory nature of the Coatlicue state, the crosser who is afraid of the crossing finds that resistance only "forces her into the fecund cave of her imagination where she is cradled in the arms of *Coatlicue*, who will never let her go" (71). Overcome by a physical

captivation like that in “Matriz”—“A tremor goes through my body from my buttocks to the roof of my mouth. . . . Shock pulls my breath out of me. The sphincter muscle tugs itself up, up, and the heart in my cunt starts to beat”—she finds herself surrounded by a light “so intense it could be white or black or at that juncture where extremes turn into their opposites” (73). The unleashed social forces of opposition, insurrection, anger, rebellion, and hope split open the rock that contains Coatlicue, fusing ego and Coatlicue into a new collective agent:

And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man’s or the colored man’s or the state’s or the culture’s or the religion’s or the parents’—just ours, mine.

And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. *Completa*. (73)

This passage explicates in great detail the terrifying process of the poetic-shamanic Coatlicue social transformation. The forceful wind tossing the speaker around like trash is none other than Coatlicue herself: “For me, *la Coatlicue* is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche. *Coatlicue* is the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb. Goddess of birth and death, *Coatlicue* gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes.” Having lost her womb in the surgical process depicted in the poem, the speaker gains her spiritual womb, her imagination. This beastly surgery in a sense delivers her from the socially imposed biological mandate to use her womb to reproduce the power structures of multiple cultures at whose crossroads the speaker exists: “Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. The soul uses everything to further its own making. Those activities or *Coatlicue* states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself” (68). Anzaldúa gains a creative faculty—the womb of the imagination, akin to Emma Pérez’s decolonial imaginary<sup>12</sup>—that promises to give her the transformative power of the *naguala*, the shaman who can use the system against itself (using the serpent to heal the serpent-inflicted wound).

This new womb is a transformative matrix that allows the speaker—as well as Anzaldúa herself—to transform the trash she perceives inside herself into regenerative power; Anzaldúa, like Moraga, finds a power of creativity that pushes beyond the heterosexist reproduction of patriarchal

motherhood to the earth-motherly birthing of *la fuerza femenina*, the feminine force through which the moon eclipses the sun and gives birth to a Chicana future generation (Moraga, *Last Generation* 7, 74). This trash, this internalization of her colonized status in mainstream culture—especially her indigenous roots—allows her to remake herself in her *own* image, to give birth to herself *through her own womb* as a writer and a visionary. The word *Chicano* originally carried the connotations of trash—the poor, “dirty” Indian whose *basura* status frightens and embarrasses those who glorify their whiteness. The racialization of class—a process we also see in the expression “white trash”—separates Chicanos from constructions of Mexican American whiteness. The transformation of Mexican Americans into Chicanos involved exactly this imaginative rebirth of Indian trash into indigenous pride.

This trash matrix is what Tlazolteotl, the goddess of trash, makes possible. Anzaldúa's version of the Tlazolteotl purgation process is unique in that, unlike the patriarchal cultures of Aztecs and Spaniards—who present the Coatlicue state as a sign of inner degradation and spiritual filth, having separated consecrated sexuality from profane promiscuity—Anzaldúa presents the Coatlicue condition as the result of internalized conquest, of Mesoamerican, Mexican, and US societies' rejection of their internal contradictions in the form of woman, Chicana, Indian, and homosexual—all forms of an alien other.<sup>13</sup> The scapegoat is thus *la basura ajena*: the embodiment of what other people see as trash.

Nevertheless, this condition of Coatlicue monstrosity, the dark night of the soul, is the necessary precondition for the development of mestiza consciousness through artistic and spiritual activity.<sup>14</sup> The Coatlicue state is the state of *la Rajadura*, of being sliced up the middle as the *herida abierta* that marks the borderlands condition in the mestiza's flesh and soul—a condition graphically rendered in “Matriz sin tumba.” Like Coyolxauhqui, this *mujer rajada* has work to do, as Anzaldúa explains:

I have to take myself apart and then put myself together. This is the Coyolxauhqui metaphor, and it's very painful, this dismemberment, burial, and then having to look for all the hidden parts of you that have been scattered throughout. And when you reconstitute yourself, or when I reconstitute myself, it's a different me that I reconstitute, and that's where the transformative aspect comes in. But it's also like tearing apart your innards, your entrails, and it's physically very painful, and emotionally painful, and psychologically painful. (“Coming” 15)

The poem itself, as theory-in-the-flesh praxis, begins the healing of this split being and the reappropriation of the creative faculties of the womb-

without-tomb.<sup>15</sup> The poet is thus the *curandera* of conquest. Therefore, in this trash matrix—the poem itself—the lost womb can finally receive its proper burial and its imaginative rebirth.

## Notes

1. All translations of Anzaldúa's work are my own. I thank Amanda Nolacea Harris for her invaluable help with this process. Any problems remaining with the translations are due to my not always taking her good advice.
2. For more on theory in the flesh, see Cherríe Moraga, "Theory in the Flesh"; Aída Hurtado, "Theory in the Flesh: Toward an Endarkened Epistemology"; Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands/La frontera*"; and Yarbro-Bejarano and Diana Paulin.
3. For more on Coatlicue and other Amerindian gods and goddesses, see Miguel León-Portilla.
4. See, for example, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (259-90).
5. See Jill Leslie McKeever Furst (146), Burr Cartwright Brundage (216-18), and Bernardino de Sahagún (2: 19-20, 118-26, 189).
6. In a study of Spanish-speaking mestizo villagers in Erongarícuaro, Michoacán, Richard L. Currier relates *aigre* to the classical medicinal notion of the bodily humors. The notion of *aigre*, presumably transported over the millennia from Greece to North Africa to Spain and then to the Americas, is associated with cool air or wind and is the cause of various maladies due to an imbalance of hot and cold bodily systems. Currier writes that headaches are attributed to when the "coolness of mist or of the night air, called *aigre* . . . penetrates the head" while paralysis indicates that a "part of the body is 'struck' by *aigre*. Stiffness, considered a partial, temporary paralysis, is ascribed to the same cause" (253-54, 262 n3).
7. See Sahagún (6: 29-34). I quote from the modernized English translation found in León-Portilla and Shorris (222-29).
8. In Sahagún's account, the oration appears to be chanted before Tezcatlipoca (6: 29 n1), who may have then presented these words to Tlazolteotl (6: 34).
9. "Flower song" could be the literal reference to visionary utterances while under the influence of hallucinogenic flowers such as datil, consumed specifically for this purpose by the *tlamatinime*.
10. On the relationship between the development of the alphabet and the rejection of bodily knowledge, see David Abram.
11. For a discussion of this split of woman into virgin and whore after the Conquest, see Norma Alarcón, "Traddutora, Traditora."
12. By "decolonial imaginary" Emma Pérez means the process whereby peoples of color actively engage in the decolonizing moment (rupture) between the colonial imaginary construction of otherness and the presumed postcolonial inscrip-

tion of liberated agency. The decolonial imaginary, she explains, "is that time lag between the colonial and the postcolonial, that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated" (6).

13. Yarbro-Bejarano discusses the multiple subjectivities of oppression in "Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera*" and their articulations in Chicana lesbianism in *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherrie Moraga*. See also Paula Moya and Chela Sandoval. For a critical assessment of this strain in Chicana feminism, see Amanda Nolacea Harris.

14. According to Anzaldúa, writing is "a way of getting away from the pain, from the agony of creating. And maybe it's just me, maybe other writers don't have such a hard time, but with me it's literally like tearing myself apart. It's like Coyolxauhqui. It's just agony" ("Coming" 21).

15. Anzaldúa posits: "The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts . . . collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war" (*Borderlands* 102).

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