

Essays

Gloria Anzaldúa's Mestiza Pain: Mexican Sacrifice, Chicana Embodiment, and Feminist Politics

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ABSTRACT: Gloria Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness has been celebrated by critics of diverse methodologies and applied to discussions of hybridity, borders, and difference around the world. Lost in these wide and varied applications are the conquest and rape, and the regulation of national and individual boundaries, that are the historical origins of mestizaje. I focus on an aspect of Anzaldúa's work that is often overlooked and that has become even more significant since her recent death: her writings on physical pain. I examine the relationship between these representations and her theories of mestiza consciousness, tracing her references back to Aztec sacrifice rituals and Spanish Catholicism and concluding with a forward-looking analysis of the Chicana feminist political potential of Anzaldúa's body in pain.

My whole life was nothing but pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Interviews/Entrevistas*

Gloria Anzaldúa has given me trouble in my study of the significance of pain in Chicana feminist texts. Usually in literature, pain is projected onto characters, fictitious bodies through which authors imaginatively project their ideas, but in the case of Anzaldúa the pain is written all over the author's own body. It is impossible to talk about this aspect of her work without trespassing boundaries between biography and criticism, private and public, author and text. Yet these are boundaries that her work asks us to trespass, involving the personal in the political in a fashion so literal as to trouble the contours of literary criticism.

Anzaldúa's death in 2004 troubled these boundaries more radically, as her passing and the suffering from diabetes that preceded it shifted to the center of discussions about her. The passionate mourning that has followed shows how her lifework and her life are themselves "open wound[s]" (Anzaldúa 1987, 3) that still bleed into the words of those who have incorporated her ideas and the strength of her rebellion. Inés Hernández-Avila describes her own grief as a gradual embodiment of Anzaldúa's absence: "My body is reluctantly registering in every cell that you are physically no longer with us" (quoted in Gonzales and Rodriguez 2004). At an online "altar" of memorials for Anzaldúa (<http://gloria.chicanas.com>), Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes: "Her passing is extremely personal and painful to me (as it is, I'm sure to many of us), and feels like a loss of a higher part of myself." Elana Dykewomon's offering at the same site also captures this dispersal and incorporation of the author: "She is everywhere in the many borderlands we inhabit." True to Anzaldúa's theories of borderlands consciousness and mestiza ambiguity, critical applications of her work transgress the boundaries of her texts and of her individual body. At the beginning of *Borderlands* (her first single-authored text), Anzaldúa opened her body to her readers, "staking fence rods in my flesh" (1987, 2) 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* (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). This modern-day human sacrifice caused Moraga "constant pain" when using "the muscle that controls the movement of my fingers and hands while typing" [Moraga 1983, v], and led Anzaldúa to describe her mestiza feminism as a painful process involving "cultural collision" (Anzaldúa 1987, 78), "rupture with oppressive traditions" (82), and stretching one's body out to others with open arms (88). Mourning for Anzaldúa has adopted this corporeal metaphor.

My premise about Anzaldúa has been that her writings on pain and illness reveal an expansive body, that her diabetes reinforced her thinking about the open and shifting *conciencia* of mestiza feminism.¹ In her 2002 essay, "now let us shift . . .," for instance, Anzaldúa proposed a revolution in the way we think about identity, and this particular redefinition followed her acceptance of the effects of diabetes on her own self: "you've chosen to compose a new history and self . . . Your ailing body is no longer a hindrance but an asset, witnessing pain, speaking to you, demanding touch. Es tu cuerpo que busca conocimiento; along with dreams your body's the royal road to consciousness" (558–59). Anzaldúa's "ailing body" opened new avenues of consciousness and new ideas for ways of being in the world.

The risk in this assertion is in its apparent endorsement of diabetes as a medium of perception. This risk is greater now that diabetes has led to Anzaldúa's death. I want to make very clear, then, that I am not celebrating pain or illness. This is not a hagiography that elevates the suffering of a lost martyr or valorizes sacrifice. Rather, I want to show how the pain that framed much of Anzaldúa's experience also framed her ideas. In order to understand her work, I argue, we must take seriously the perspective offered by pain and the avenues of thought down which it led her. Her attitude toward pain, in my analysis, emerges from the Mexican cultural frameworks that underlie her writing and is directed toward particular Chicana and feminist political ends.

Anzaldúa's *conciencia de la mestiza* is built on a foundation of violence, cross-cultural penetration, and internal fragmentation—from the conquest and rape of Native America at the hands of European colonizers (which first produced *mestizaje*) to racial and sexual marginalization and the personal illnesses and abuses of the author's own body. Postmodern critics have celebrated the “uprooting of dualistic thinking” that mestiza hybridity enables, and feminists and postcolonial critics have celebrated the ideal conclusion Anzaldúa proposes to this breakdown of binary opposition: “the end of rape, of violence, of war” (1987, 80–81). Yet the painful components of mestizaje are often elided in these celebratory applications because pain puts a damper on the transracial fluidity and post-essentialist utopianism that is so often extrapolated from Anzaldúa's work. The demonization of pain and illness in “Western” culture has led critics to assume that viable models for identity must not be painful. I will return to this assumption, ultimately, to question whether Anzaldúa would have us rethink pain as a viable practice or whether her references to pain are merely intended to keep the violence of history and the materiality of bodies in mind. To evaluate this question in all of its dimensions, this article traces the ways in which pain has been read out of Anzaldúa's work, analyzes the significance that Anzaldúa attributes to her own body's pain, and outlines the Mexican cultural symbolism that enables her to assign pain a productive role in the formation of mestiza consciousness.

Mestiza Reception

In her influential study *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry describes how involving the physical body lends “an aura of ‘realness’” to ideologies enforced through war and torture: “The physical pain is so incontestably

real that it seems to confer its quality of “incontestable reality” on the structures of power that produce the pain (1985, 27).² Anzaldúa’s references to pain have this effect of grounding her theories in “real” history, “real” bodies, and “real” geographies. The most frequently quoted passages from *Borderlands* (1987) locate pain at the center of Anzaldúa’s borderlands mestizaje:

1,950 mile-long open wound
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
 running down the length of my body,
 staking fence rods in my flesh,
 splits me splits me
 me raja me raja (2)

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifebloods of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. (3)

In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. (79–80)

All three of these passages encode borderlands identity and mestizaje as processes of “intense pain.”³ Yet, in the fifteen years of Anzaldúa’s critical acclaim, few critics have analyzed these wounds or the splitting, bleeding, and severing that turn up repeatedly in her work. As these passages are quoted time and again in studies of hybridity across cultures, the pain seems to make critics uncomfortable. The violence that haunts the border is denied its “incontestable reality” when these theories are uprooted from the *herida abierta* and applied universally to any negotiation with difference.

Anzaldúa’s theories have been adopted around the world and described in terms of postmodernism, post-identitarianism, diaspora, *différance*, and divinity. Critics who love Anzaldúa’s work credit mestizaje with revolutionary potential to solve a variety of critical problems, but in their desire for a feminist border hero they often overlook the particular context in which Anzaldúa delineates mestizaje. In 1994, Judith Raiskin read *Borderlands* as a postmodern text, and her anti-essentialism idealizes mestizaje as a critique

of racial and sexual “categories of identity along with the modernist nostalgia for an imagined lost innocence when everyone knew, or could know, her or his place” (159). From a postmodern perspective, Raiskin dismisses unitary subjectivity, racial and sexual coherence, and nostalgia for a place of belonging as bygone modernist relics rather than material realities dismantled by forced miscegenation, colonialism, and war. Raiskin attributes to Anzaldúa a “postmodern appreciation for the chaos that inevitably results from racist and sexist categories and from their dismantling” (169). Yet this chaos, in the case of Anzaldúa, is not just theoretical, and her dismantling of categories is not postmodern as much as it is historically enforced.⁴ Celebrating this chaos risks romanticizing sites of continued oppression, such as the borderlands.⁵

Juan Velasco idealizes Anzaldúa's conception of the border to the extent of eschewing conflict: “As an alternative to the theory of the metaphor of the Border as ‘conflict’ ... Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) not only redefines the space of the Borderland as a more inclusive and conciliatory utopia but also reinvents a different hero, the new ‘mestiza’” (1996, 224). Yet even as she delineates a “new mestiza,” who is indeed heroic, Anzaldúa enmeshes her hero in conflict and posits utopia as a goal that is always on the horizon, always shadowed by the “thin edge of barbed wire” (1987, 3) that makes home on the border more painful than conciliatory. In her essay on homophobia in *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa states that “though ‘home’ permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am afraid of going home” (21). Lynda Hall quotes this statement, but her reverence for Anzaldúa's theories and her search for a model “home” space that is “both livable and habitable” for lesbians of color lead her to minimize the final clause (1999, 110–11). In my reading, rather than claiming a comfortable lesbian space, Anzaldúa's sentence makes the body itself a fearful place. If Anzaldúa is afraid of going home, and home “permeates every sinew and cartilage” in her body, does this statement not imply a fear of inhabiting her own body?

From a different critical perspective, Robert Con Davis-Undiano describes Anzaldúa's theories of *mestizaje* as a “retrieval of a scandal,” originating in violation but reframed as a “powerful position” (2000, 123–24). In contrast to Raiskin, Davis-Undiano shores up this revolutionary identity by selectively quoting phrases from Anzaldúa and pairing them with essentialist claims. For instance, “since the mestiza herself is defined by the situation of ‘straddling ... two or more cultures’ in her own nature, the task at hand [of breaking down paradigms and tolerating contradictions] and

the mestiza's innate orientation are symmetrically matched" (124). Davis-Undiano describes this "orientation" as "innate" to solidify his celebratory claim that Anzaldúa's new mestiza possesses the key to liberation. Yet nothing is so simple in *Borderlands*. Indeed, the phrase Davis-Undiano quotes immediately follows the third passage quoted above, in which Anzaldúa insists that "mestiza consciousness" is "a source of intense pain"; she goes on to say that the future "*depends on the straddling of two or more cultures*" to alter our perception of reality (1987, 80, emphasis added). This passage does not describe an identity already formed, but rather a painful process upon which the future depends. Anzaldúa's emphasis on pain resists easy identification or ready-made solutions, but the impact of her work is so powerful that both essentialists and anti-essentialists credit *la conciencia de la mestiza* with these revolutionary properties.

Embodying Mestiza Pain

Recently published interviews with Anzaldúa—the collection entitled *Interviews/Entrevistas*, by AnaLouise Keating, and Ann E. Reuman's interview in *MELUS*—reopened *Borderlands* for us with several clarifications by the author. In Reuman's interview, Anzaldúa describes her response to her critical reception:

I try and get copies of reviews and copies of papers that are given, and conferences about my work and people who are working on theses or dissertations, and so I have a lot of these papers in my file. And I think that for the most part what was missed in their reviews and interpretations was the spiritual/mystical/poetic aspects of my writing ... I think what makes them uncomfortable is that I'm practicing what I'm preaching. (2000a, 7)

One aspect she consistently stresses in the interviews—and one site where she literally "practiced" her theoretical ideas—is her own "body in pain." Since her writing about this body is intensely personal, spiritual, and often supernatural, critical studies that remain safely within the realm of "rational" inquiry often exclude this important influence. In a 1998–99 interview with Keating, Anzaldúa emphasizes the role of her body in shaping her identity and her politics: "My resistance to gender and race injustice stemmed from my physical differences, from the early bleeding and my early growth spurt" (2000b, 288). Her diabetes, moreover, informed the obsession with fluctuation and balance in writing about identity formation:

I get dizzy and mentally foggy when I'm having a hypo [episode of hypoglycemia, or low blood sugar]. I lose my equilibrium and fall. Gastrointestinal reflex has me throwing up and having diarrhea ... Things like these change your image of yourself, your identity ... The whole thing with diabetes is having a balance in your blood sugar. (289–90)

That which is abstract in the essays of *Borderlands*—juggling the different racial “bloods” that are internal to the mestiza—receives grounding in the author's body and personal story in these interviews. Anzaldúa's theoretical impulse to synthesize bloods becomes concrete, imperative, and immediate with syringes and gastrointestinal processes.

The body Anzaldúa describes in a 1982 interview with Linda Smuckler is, like the mestiza identity she theorizes, open to and contingent upon external forces and thus in a constant state of material transformation: “As a little kid I was wide open—like a sponge; everything came in” (2000b, 26). In the more personal medium of the interviews, then, Anzaldúa describes what it would be like to live the theoretical strategies of *Borderlands*' “new mestiza,” for whom “nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (1987, 79). This opening of boundaries and the image of border-crossing are the paradigms from *Borderlands* that are most often celebrated (even though *Borderlands* poems like “*El sonavabitch*” and “To live in the Borderlands means you” describe the historical violence of such crossings).⁶ The image of the spongelike child in the Smuckler interview clarifies the actual dangers attendant upon permeable boundaries. Anzaldúa keeps her body open to the world around her: “I feel a real unification with people, real identification with someone or something—like the grass. It's so painful that I have to cut the connection. But I can't cut the connection, so instead of putting a shield between myself and you and your pain, I put a wall inside, between myself and my feelings” (2000b, 26–27). Rather than reinforcing external boundaries between self and other, she fragments herself internally. Anzaldúa maps onto this autobiographical body the *conciencia* that has been in danger of evaporating into postmodern abstraction, recuperating the painful ambivalence of border-crossing and materializing potential strategies for living with this ambivalence.⁷

Blood forms a key link between Anzaldúa's theories and actual racialized and sexed bodies. She describes her first awareness of difference as a product of her heavy menstrual periods, which began for her at a very early age: “The bleeding was the main thing. It made me abnormal” (27, 29).⁸ Anzaldúa suggests that her “abnormal” menstruation—which gave

her “raging fevers,” cramps, and tonsillitis—was the product not just of hormonal imbalance but also of an “extraterrestrial spirit” that entered her body when she was three months old (1981, 24; 2000b, 34). This extraterrestrial being literalizes the excess that marked her body as pathological. Since her periods were earlier, more painful, and more bloody than that which a “normal, healthy,” well-individuated body could contain, she required a suprahuman explanation: “I mean, the stuff that was going on with me is like seeing a movie or reading a science fiction book, you know?” (2000b, 35). She invokes extraterrestrial beings, spirits, and science fiction to describe an identity that exceeds “Western” paradigms of humanity, rationality, and logic. Anzaldúa reports that doctors ultimately “solved” her medical condition with a hysterectomy, but “until the hysterectomy, . . . my whole life was nothing but pain. Pain. Pain. Pain” (34). This procedure, significantly, removes not just the source of reproductive female sexuality, but also removes her pain, her excess, her “illogical” and alien difference. It normalizes. It reflects the struggle of an individual with cultural standards of health and embodiment. Here we are probing the borderlands of embodiment, questioning what is and what is not one’s body, internalizing outside influences and externalizing parts of the self (by adopting medical treatments and having organs removed). This extraterrestrial encounter, too, illustrates a lived *mestizaje*: embodying impurity, incorporating alien elements, and exceeding boundaries.

Anzaldúa emphasizes the friction between the spirit that moves into her body and her body itself: “I always think of this spirit as masculine, because he didn’t like my body” (34). Both this encounter and the hysterectomy demand a feminist response: they represent masculine, medicalized intrusions on a body that enacts an excess of female sexual processes. In “La Prieta,” she describes the hysterectomy as a violent expression of colonizing misogyny: “The doctor played with his knife. La Chingada ripped open, raped with the white man’s wand . . . My bowels fucked with a surgeon’s knife, uterus and ovaries pitched in the trash. Castrated” (1981, 203, 208). Misogynist fantasy and medical power work in tandem here to disarm and to disembowel the female sexed body, here represented as a modern-day Malinche, “La Chingada” who is “fucked” by Conquest.⁹ The illnesses Anzaldúa describes in her interviews reflect the violation and pathologization of the bodies of women of color in America. Her pain and her blood are considered inappropriate and impure. But Anzaldúa’s *mestiza* consciousness appropriates the inappropriate and the impure: embracing otherness and contradictions, extraterrestrial spirits, menstruation in

children, identification with grass. Indeed, the boundaries of “the proper” are culturally relative, and adhering to more than one cultural tradition (as *mestiza/os* do) might render them fluid, or at least contested. Is Anzaldúa suggesting that these painful, excessive, and paranormal embodiments are proper to the *mestiza*? Would refusing the hysterectomy, keeping the pain and the blood, be a proper feminist response? The risks of seeming to advocate pain, the supernatural, and “pathological” menstruation as proper embodiments—particularly for women of color, who were often stigmatized by racist mythology as excessively reproductive or less sensitive to pain¹⁰—might explain critics’ avoidance of this aspect of Anzaldúa’s work, along with the interviews and poems that give body to this pain.

It is important to recognize these painful embodiments as more than markers of victimization and racial/sexual oppression. Pain, as Anzaldúa describes it, is an extension of *mestiza* agency, a process of incorporating and dis-corporating different elements in the formation of a fluid, nonunitary subject. Her last and least talked-about essay, “now let us shift . . .,” makes overt her controversial argument about the productive potential of pain. By the time of this essay, she had accepted the effects of diabetes as part of her growth as a writer and a thinker: “By seeing your symptoms not as signs of sickness and disintegration but as signals of growth, . . . by using these feelings as tools or grist for the mill, you move through fear, anxiety, anger, and blast into another reality” (2002, 552). Refusing to demonize her illness, and the depression that resulted from facing a lifetime of pain, Anzaldúa ultimately rejected dominant thinking about physical and mental health: “Though modern therapies exhort you to act against your passions (compulsions), claiming health and integration lie in that direction, you’ve learned that delving more fully into your pain, anger, despair, depression will move you through to the other side” (553). Instead of health and integration, “now let us shift . . .” values the upheavals that constantly remake the body and expand consciousness.

The body that emerges from Anzaldúa’s later thinking is by no means passive, static, or essentially victimized. Her pain reflects her response to external conditions, social interaction, and cultural context. This body is not only open and fluid but also shape-shifting: “I become the jaguar. I become the serpent, I become the eagle” (2000b, 284), embodying the mobility of sacred Aztec totems. This is not, therefore, the pain that “the body” of some theoretical or medical writings experiences as an abstract, universal, or culturally neutral constraint.¹¹ For Anzaldúa, pain highlights the inscription of her particular Chicana *mestiza* lesbian diabetic identity:

all these categories are historically produced and culturally contingent. Her individual pain also marks the intersection of private and public experiences of embodiment: personal feeling and public judgment, individual experience and the shared “suffering” of a racial or sexual community. This perspective on identity responds to current theoretical concerns— about identity politics, shifting foundations, postmodernism, and resistance to hegemony—but also refers to a much longer history of Mexican body politics.

Cultural Referents for Mestiza Pain

As for this you will run
[sticks through your
tongue]: not only to
deserve benefits, but
to cast off the dirt,
the trash. You will make
the staves bloody, you
will tear the lower part
of your tongue, you will put them
through the front part ... Thus
you will lose your sins, your evil
acts, your faults.

—*The Florentine Codex*

Mira estas llagas, que nunca llegarán aquí tus dolores. Este es el camino de la verdad.

—Santa Teresa de Jesús, *Obras Completas*

When pain theorist David Morris writes that “modern” pain is “now officially emptied of meaning and merely buzzing mindlessly along the nerves” (1991, 4), his claim does not capture the full range of pain experience. In many cultures, pain is not empty of meaning. Pain carries a particular significance for women of Mexican descent based on Mexico’s dual spiritual inheritance, indigenous and Catholic. In both contexts, pain is sometimes perceived as having transcendent meaning—cleansing sins or revealing truth, as in the epigraphs above.¹² Morris argues that all such meaning has been negated by modern medicine:

The secular, scientific spirit of modern medicine has so eclipsed other systems of thought as almost to erase the memory that pain—far from registering its presence mostly in meaningless neural circuits or in the sterile, living-death of hysterical numbness—once possessed redemptive and visionary powers. (125)

Anglo American, secular, rationalist domination of medicine has reinforced the perception that pain is merely a neural stimulus that should be eliminated. Any other valuation of pain, emerging outside of these conventions, has been stigmatized as irrational, “Old World,” or perverse. Yet many people—including those who practice traditional Native American pain rituals, those who find pleasure in pain, and Catholics who offer up their pain for other causes—still experience pain as productive, though the dominant culture does not validate these experiences.

In the essay “*La herencia de Coatlicue*,” we can see how Anzaldúa comes to view physical pain as a “redemptive and visionary power” in the delineation of mestiza identity. As a child she wonders what is pulling her body/self apart—why life scratches, hits, and debones her (“la vida ... me araña y me golpea, me deshuesa”). But ultimately she claims these painful dislocations as the shape of her mestiza lesbianism:

Despierta me encuentra la madrugada, una desconocida aulleando profecías entre cenizas, sangrando mi cara con las uñas, escarbando la desgracia debajo de mi máscara ... Alone with the presence in the room. Who? Me, my psyche, the Shadow-Beast? ... And there in the black, obsidian mirror of the Nahuas is yet another face, a stranger's face. Simultáneamente me miraba la cara desde distintos ángulos. Y mi cara, como la realidad, tenía un caracter múltiple. (1987, 44)¹³

This provocative image internalizes the other and exteriorizes the self: she believes she is prying out something shameful that has gotten under her skin, and the “Shadow-Beast” in the room is “me, my psyche.” When she scratches at the mask, she bloodies her own face, and this painful self-revelation illuminates a crucial mestiza ambivalence. After looking at her face from different angles and scratching away at her skin, she realizes the interior and exterior alien as components of her multiple (*múltiple*) self, claiming stigmatized categories like “half and half,” mixed, or *atravesado* that position her in two places at once.¹⁴ At first she says “quiero contenerme,” but then she rejects the impulse to contain, to assimilate, or to choose one side of the border: “desbordo,” spilling out of the boundaries of her own skin (44). Skin resonates with racialized meaning, so uncovering layers of skin would expose the transracial conflicts and conquests that mestizaje embodies.

The face-scratching seems ripe for a psychoanalytic reading: the speaker is awakened (by a dream, by pain) to an unconscious presence in her own psyche and is forced to come to terms with the multiple layers of identity and the potential conflicts between the ego's perception and reality. There is always another self repressed behind one's public identity, waiting to be found out. This passage has a Catholic confessional aspect, too: probing and then attempting to purge one's sinful inner drives, making them visible to God/priest. Yet the most prevalent references here reflect an Aztec worldview. As Anzaldúa writes elsewhere in *Borderlands*, "I know things older than Freud" (26). The view of "strangeness" is provided by the "obsidian mirror of the Nahuas,"¹⁵ and a literal interpretation of the layers of skin has grounding in the Aztec fertility god Xipe Totec ("the flayed one"), who represented the cyclicity of life and death and was honored by a ritual in which priests flayed sacrificial victims and donned their skins.¹⁶ This meeting of skins reflected the intersection of life and death and was charged with regenerative power.

Although Anzaldúa risks minimizing the reality of the Aztecs' violent imperialism in Mesoamerica, idealizing the significance of Aztec goddesses, and essentializing a Chicana/o inheritance of Aztec experience,¹⁷ her use of Aztec culture extends embodiment beyond "Western" corporeal limitations and the demonization of physical pain. She opens identity to continual restructuring in the process she names the "Coatlicue state," in honor of the "serpent-skirted" Aztec goddess of fertility and death. Coatlicue makes life from destruction, breaking down binary oppositions by embodying both ends of the life cycle.¹⁸ Rituals dedicated to Coatlicue sometimes included decapitation, and she is represented with serpents' heads in place of her own and a necklace of skulls (Markman and Markman 1992, 221). As mother, Coatlicue required the destruction of one being before giving birth to new life. Roberta and Peter Markman distance Coatlicue from the misogynist devouring mother of European mythology since "these seemingly contradictory roles made sense in a culture that saw death as the necessary precondition for birth, a culture that saw bones as seeds" (190).

Coatlicue states, according to Anzaldúa, present a productive engagement with pain and destruction, using crisis to rebirth the self: "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. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are" (1987, 46). Anzaldúa thus theorizes identity as an

open-ended process in which we continually become “more.” Coatlicue helps her to accept physical pain as a necessary part of this process: “Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape ‘knowing,’ I won’t be moving” (48). The new context of each crossing transforms the self, but this transformation requires pain to cross psychological, corporeal, and geographic borders. “Sweating,” with a “headache,” “voy cagándome de miedo,” Anzaldúa describes “allowing myself to fall apart” as she proceeds through the Coatlicue state (48). Ana Castillo suggests that “Anzaldúa’s spiritual affinity for Coatlicue serves as a resonant reflection of her desire for disembodiment that would free her from a tremendous physical and emotional anguish” (1994, 173). While Castillo sees Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue state as a desire to escape from her body, I would argue, instead, that these passages indicate the ability of—and the need for—bodies to mutate in the process of life-making, like the serpent with which Coatlicue is associated. The aching body that falls apart in Coatlicue states feels pain as a materialization of increased awareness and expanded embodiment.¹⁹ Awareness of Anzaldúa’s suffering with diabetes gives new meaning to this process and suggests that it is more than just metaphorical.

The most obvious and most terrifying use of pain in Aztec culture was human sacrifice. The continuation of life, according to an Aztec worldview, required public sacrifice by humans to the gods, exchanging death for life. Spilling blood and scattering bones on the earth represented a promise of fertility (Markman and Markman 1992, 180–81). David Carrasco describes the Aztecs as “a people obsessed with the structured nearness of death” (1999, 190), and central to their power and dominion throughout Mesoamerica was their ability to control death, to call down gods during public sacrifice rituals, and to channel these forces toward the vitality of the community.

The sensation of pain, in this context, would signal the regenerative power of the sacrificial victim. Ancient Nahuatl bloodletting rituals, which were practiced more regularly than human sacrifice, were seen as a means of communication with the spirit world (López Austin 1988, 381). “The object of flesh piercing and bloodletting was to cause physical pain and to obtain the vital fluid to offer the gods” (380). This description reflects an economy of exchange, trading blood for strength, moral purity, or favors from the gods. Some forms of bloodletting, however, seem to be aimed at more than equivalence or barter, valuing the experience itself.

Yolotl González-Torres writes that “pensamos que este estado de unión con lo sobrenatural era logrado más profundamente a través de la pérdida de la sangre, del dolor de la herida, a lo que iban unidos los ayunos y la ingestión de yerbas alucinantes” (we think that this state of union with the supernatural was achieved most profoundly through the loss of blood, through the pain of the wound, to which was joined fasts and the injection of hallucinogenic herbs) (1985, 118). In this way, the psychological states produced by pain collapsed into the spiritual realm. “Throughout Mesoamerica the bleeding of ears, tongues, and genital organs by members of the priesthood was a daily ritual occurrence,” often involving protracted torture, such as passing cords up to fifteen or twenty yards long through the penis (Markman and Markman 1992, 180). The purpose of bloodletting in these prolonged rituals obviously exceeded the function of producing a quantity of blood. Pain must have been valued in its own right. If Aztec society was structured around death, any affirmations of life would have been achieved in combination with the forces of destruction. Perhaps pain signified this tension, the experience of destruction in life, the presence of the divine in the human.²⁰

Certain Catholic valuations of pain are strikingly similar. According to Morris, the pain of medieval saints was read as a sign of contact with the divine and was “transform[ed] from a private sensation into a public spectacle” (1991, 48–50). Conferring honor on martyrs used the pain of individual bodies to solidify, metonymically, the body of Catholic ideology. In the case of the Spanish saint Teresa de Avila, later known as Teresa de Jesús, Johanne Sloane argues, “Receiving this privileged signifier of pain [one of the nails from Christ’s crucifixion] was a guarantee of Teresa’s empowerment as an individual, allowing her to exceed the dictates of nature, including the ‘obstacle’ of her femininity” (1999, 125). Christ’s nail, in this way, converts the mortal female body into a symbol of divine power.²¹

Writing just after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Teresa, who later became one of the most influential saints in Mexico, describes the “exceeding beauty” of God’s love in terms of pain. Her poem, “¡Oh hermosura que excedéis ...!” embraces pain as the condition for that love: “¡Sin herir dolor hacéis, / y sin dolor deshacéis / el amor de las criaturas!” (Santa Teresa 1988, 716). She describes her raptures as physical and painful:

No se puede encarecer ni decir el modo con que llaga Dios el alma y la grandísima pena que da, que la hace no saber de sí; mas es esta pena tan sabrosa, que no hay deleite en la vida que más contento dé. Siempre

querría el alma, como he dicho, estar muriendo de este mal. [One cannot exaggerate or even say the way in which God wounds the soul and the tremendous pain that this gives, which makes the soul not know itself; but this pain is so delightful that there is no pleasure in life that gives greater happiness. The soul would always want, as I have said, to be dying of this illness.] (176)

Her narrations of her own experiences with pain, rapture, and illness reflect not a denial of the flesh but a celebration of these corporeal dimensions of her spirituality. Her body is the site where her faith is mapped out.²²

After her death, Saint Teresa's miraculously unperished body—still radiant and free of decay, her clothes soaked in her still-fresh blood and magical fragrance—was disinterred and cut into fragments. These relics were distributed throughout the realm as symbols of the power of (Spanish) Catholicism to transcend death. According to Carlos Eire, Teresa's imperishable corpse “blurred the lines between heaven and earth or, perhaps even more, served as a nexus between the two spheres . . . In brief, her body itself *was* heaven” (1995, 504–5). This symbol of transcendence correlates with the Aztec tradition of displaying dead bodies to link this world to the spirit world and to symbolize the imbrication of life and death. Both the Catholics and the Aztecs used the bodies of sacred sufferers as political tools to strengthen their empires. As Aztec and Spanish Catholic cosmologies syncretically fused to form a mestizo cosmology in “New Spain,” during the same time period that pieces of Saint Teresa's body were circulating throughout “Old Spain,” the association of pain and death with divinity and life presented a powerful point of convergence for the two traditions and potentially rationalized the simultaneous death of one empire (Aztec) and birth of another (Spanish).²³

Anzaldúa acknowledges Teresa de Avila as a model of sacrificial power in her poem “Holy Relics,” which ultimately fuses this cultural reference with Aztec ones.²⁴ “Holy Relics” retells not the life of the saint but the posthumous dismemberment and “theft” of Teresa's corpse by greedy priests and competing convents—focusing on the dead body as an object of worship. In Anzaldúa's poem, auctioning off Teresa's fingers, bone fragments, teeth, and “pinched off pieces of her flesh” reflects more than a violation of the saint's body for church profit (1987, 158). It also demonstrates the intensity of her worshippers' commitment to her flesh and the ability of her dead bones to inspire, to build community, and to incite rivalrous passions. Teresa's bones thus held creative, generative powers, an idea reminiscent of Aztec beliefs. Indeed, in “Holy Relics,” the “mysterious smell” of her

disinterred corpse cures one monk's malaria (157–58). By the end of the poem, the saint's body is left with "a gaping hole where her heart had been ripped out" (159), suggesting that the rituals of the devoted priests mimicked the Aztecs' human sacrifice rituals.

The other poems in the second half of *Borderlands* echo this theme of corporeal sacrifice, and several ("Poets have strange eating habits," "Letting Go," "*La curandera*," and "Creature of Darkness," for example) invoke pain as curative.²⁵ Most of these poems contain autobiographical details, and subtle cross-referencing between the poems intertwines author with "characters." "*Nopalitos*" describes the painful friction between an educated Chicana and the community/traditions she has left behind: while trying to prepare *nopalitos* (a mestizo dish of cooked cactus), she gets "thorns embedded" in her flesh and her eyes sting from the burning mesquite (113). "*Cihautlyotl, Woman Alone*"—a block-shaped poem filled with gaps and fissures—reflects the pain of fitting individual bodies into cultural norms. In this poem, Anzaldúa describes her ambivalence toward her community ("*Raza / father mother church your rage at my desire*"). She sees their acts as amputation, aimed at rejecting any deviance from the ideal (such as lesbianism): "you hacked away / at the pieces of me that were different." In order to mold an identity apart from identity politics ("of the herd, yet not of it"), she had to "cleave flesh from flesh," and in the process of severing herself from the community, "risked us both bleeding to death" (173).²⁶ Another self-reflexive poem, "that dark shining thing," describes the author—"the only round face, / Indian-beaked, off-colored / in the faculty lineup, the workshop, the panel"—allowing an unspecified "you" (perhaps *la raza*, again, if this second-person address is the same as in "*Cihautlyotl*") to dig fingernails into her flesh and to chop off her hand. The "life or death" cause in the poem is that of the Chicana lesbian writer, the one who must name "that dark animal" inside the "colored, poor white, latent queer," the repressed "black," "numinous thing" to which "everyone says no no no" (171–72). This poem, too, fuses Spanish and Aztec cultural references, comparing the author to the Spanish saint whose body is sacrificed to a political cause: "the hand you chop off while still clinging to it" recalls both "*Cihautlyotl*" and the wrist that Padre Gracian severed from Saint Teresa's arm, "hugging her hand to his body," in "Holy Relics" (155). Yet the speaker in "that dark shining thing" also has an Indian beak, picks at masks, and is described as a "woman-god" who must give birth to that "dark shining thing" (172)—which returns us to the image, with which I began this section, of the author scratching away at the darkness

inside her. The pain in these poems reflects the internal differences and competing alliances that jar within the mestiza, and it is validated through an intersection of Spanish and Aztec frames of reference.

Although psychoanalysis and postmodernism help to illuminate the multiplicity within the identities Anzaldúa describes, as well as the transgressions of corporeal, spiritual, cultural, and historical boundaries, these challenges to singular subjectivity and the pain associated with them take on very specific connotations in the context of Mexico's mestizo cultural frameworks. To appreciate Catholic and Aztec identities—both separately and mixed within *mestizaje*—we must have a conception of human life that includes death, that does not fear physical fragmentation, that respects the intertwinement of this world and the heavens, and that incorporates other bodies, animas, and spirits within the individual. Anzaldúa's investment in this tradition takes us outside modern taboos surrounding pain and fluid embodiment.

Rethinking Body Politics

Wounding is a deeper healing.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, "Poets have strange eating habits"

Pain is the way of life.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, "*La herencia de Coatlicue*"

Pain signals a threat to the system, a challenge to that which we perceive as "normal" corporeal stasis. Psychoanalyst Thomas Szasz, in his 1957 study *Pain and Pleasure*, describes pain as "the affect referring to ego-body relations" (77). "The experience of pain is fundamentally associated with the ego's orientation to the body. And, further, pain may be regarded as a signal warning the ego of a certain (dangerous) state of affairs concerning the body" (54). According to Morris, "To be in pain is to be in a state of crisis. It is a state in which we experience far more than physical discomfort. Pain has not simply interrupted our normal feeling of health. It has opened a huge fault or fissure in our world" (1991, 31). Crisis is often productive of new ways of thinking and new types of relationships. In a sense, learning depends upon crisis. When the ego perceives a new relationship between body and context (to paraphrase the psychoanalytic characterization of pain), or when our perception of the world has been challenged (to

paraphrase Morris), we are forced to think, to investigate, to develop new models. Pain sometimes provides “access to vision so alien from our normal consciousness that it can only be called prophetic, utopian, or revolutionary” (126). Since developments in modern medicine have redefined pain as a matter of nerves to be numbed and ill to be eradicated, the insistence upon returning to an original state of “health” cuts off any productive potential involved in pain and enforces stasis. Pain opens up questions; modern medicine closes them, fears the otherness of illness, and institutes normative embodiments.

Assuming that pain is no more than a signal of broken tissue overlooks the world in which pain is produced, and therefore often fails to eliminate its cause. Theories of pain that reduce the body to tissue isolate the body from its context; they ignore power dynamics, cultural specificity, gender, affect, individual perception, and social contexts in which pain might carry affirmative meaning (support groups or the discourse of saints and martyrs, for instance). Moreover, the medical perception of pain as enemy reproduces a potentially destructive rhetoric that seals off the individual from external elements and reinforces binary thinking about health/illness, good/bad, inside/outside. Bill Burns, Cathy Busby, and Kim Sawchuk’s introduction to *When Pain Strikes* (1999) describes the militaristic framework that medical discourses of the body perpetuate:

Pain figures as a force invading the fortress body, smashing against its walls like the hammer that hits the head in a classic Bufferin advertisement from the mid-seventies. The skin is presented as a thick black line with a definite interior and exterior, rather than a permeable border that continually opens out and into the world ... Blockades are deployed to keep pain at bay and to reestablish symbolically the solid black line, that generic picture, of the walled body. Pain in this schema must not only be minimized for the subject but it must also be prevented from escaping one body and moving on to another. (xx–xxi)

The implication of this rhetoric is that bodies, like modern nations, must shore up their boundaries because everything outside (other nations, other people, even the air itself) is dangerous and must be fought off aggressively.

Perhaps a conception of bodies that incorporates pain could produce a rhetoric of openness and a politics more suited to feminist equality and mestiza inclusiveness. Since women’s bodies do not fit the militaristic ideal (based on biological and psychological studies of their greater openness, permeability, and receptivity to pain²⁷), we need a model, such as that offered by Anzaldúa’s *mestizaje*, that does not require closure for vitality or

agency. Anzaldúa's representations of pain embrace corporeal fluctuations and displace the rhetoric of fortresses, defenses, and weapons. A theory of permeable identity—one that includes pain, death, and contact with otherness—would have no need to be so defensive. Opening subjectivity in this way could have positive political implications. Margrit Shildrick argues for a feminist, postmodern ethics based on “leaky bodies.” In resistance to the “illusory closure” defended by biomedical convention, undoing “the binary of order/disorder must result in a very different ethic ... in which normalisation would be meaningless” (Shildrick 1997, 214). “The experience of illness or disability” or, perhaps, pain “might constitute new subject positions not just resistant but excessive to the norms of the Western logos,” exceeding patriarchal norms that stigmatize all who are “different” (215). Anzaldúa affirmed this kind of thinking in her last publication:

Although all your cultures reject the idea that you can know the other, you believe that besides love, pain might open this closed passage by reaching through the wound to connect. Wounds cause you to shift consciousness—they either open you to the greater reality normally blocked by your habitual point of you or else shut you down ... Using wounds as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others means staying in your body. (2002, 571–72)

Staying in a body in pain and using wounds as openings to others—to “trigger compassion,” she writes (572)—defies all conventional wisdom about affect, sensation, and safety, but perhaps that is because such “wisdom” has been governed so long by the competitive, defensive, and scientific/anaesthetic sensibility of modern nations.

Anzaldúa's representations of pain and shape-shifting critique current Euro-American norms of physicality. “Medical consumerism” has turned bodies into sites for capitalist exploitation, manipulation, and standardization. (The language of health “management” reflects medical corporations' control over individuals' bodies.) Morris notes, in a recent article in *Narrative*, “Health (or an appearance of health) has become a prized commodity, as proudly displayed as a new SUV, while illness is an evil warded off with multivitamins and gym memberships” (2001, 59–60). Given current levels of medical and pharmaceutical intervention in the United States, the unhealthy or pained body represents a breakdown in defense for the medical engines; it is unruly, unstandardized, traitorous. Favoring identity processes that are built around pain not only presents an affront to the capitalist medical system, but also reveals fractures in the myth of a healthy American society. Rather than submitting docilely to

militaristic body mythology, the hemorrhaging, diarrhetic, or spongelike body points out the limits of the dominant medical system by inhabiting its outside. People on the margins, people without wealth, people of color, queer people, and any others who do not fit the dominant norms are less likely to receive adequate medical care, more likely to be “sick,” and also more likely to be excluded from the national image. If the security and prosperity of the nation are reflected in the bodies of its people, making pain visible presents an affront to the sanitized, white, middle-class, misogynist, commodity-invested self-image of the United States: “Because we do not fit *we are a threat*” (Anzaldúa 1981, 209, emphasis in original). Anzaldúa’s writings focus on medical trouble rather than healthy resolution. Her continual pain, bleeding, disequilibrium, and corporeal metamorphosis resisted medicalized closure and mythic postoperative perfection. Even after medical procedures, her body was ruptured and fluid.

This not-healthy embodiment is terrifying to consider as an identity. Most Americans regard pain as something to be eliminated, illness as something to be cured. In this way, our bodies are oriented toward an endpoint of fixity. Indeed, Lynda Hall reads Anzaldúa in this manner, within a framework of “ameliorography”: “Anzaldúa connects the act of writing with desires to heal the self and [with] attempts to relieve personal pain as an ‘othered’ person” (2000, 113). Yet the quote she selects from *Interviews* to support this statement describes “making meaning of pain” (Anzaldúa 2000b, 276), rather than healing. I interpret Anzaldúa’s phrase as evidence of the potential meaningfulness of pain as a suspended state of being rather than as an attempt to eliminate pain or to repair the “othered” body. The body that Anzaldúa depicts continually elides such stasis as well as any false illusions of ultimate security. This deferral of health is a political gesture that asks us to rethink the way we interpret certain sensations. It asks us to respect fluidity in defiance of conventional wisdom that seeks to maximize stability. Or, in Norma Alarcón’s interpretation, Anzaldúa’s mestiza feminism “risk[s] the ‘pathological condition’ by representing ... [a] break with a developmental view of self-inscription” (2003, 362). Never fully “inscribed” or “whole,” the mestiza “becomes a crossroads, a collision course, a clearinghouse, an endless alterity who ... appears as a tireless peregrine collecting all of the parts that will never make her whole” (367).²⁸ This is a “peregrination” with no final destination or fulfillment, always bleeding and open.

Of course it is dangerous to discuss pain—particularly the pain of women of color, which historically has been inflicted through racism,

sexism, and colonialism—as a viable alternative to health.²⁹ Yet perhaps it is more dangerous not to discuss this pain or the identities that have been founded on pain. Cassie Premo Steele suggests that ignoring pain indirectly inflicts it:

Anzaldúa's writing shows that healing comes through the acceptance of pain as a sign. She demonstrates that in order to heal, one needs to recognize the wound and to see what it can teach; one needs to feel the pain in order not to inflict further violence as a way of denying the pain. (2000, 152)

Steele also analyzes Anzaldúa's work through a rhetoric of healing, but she describes healing as an ongoing engagement with trauma and wounding, “not a vision of a utopian end to suffering but ... a process that continues without end” (143). Rather than presenting a healed or assimilated surface, Anzaldúa highlights the friction of power inequality, the pain of conquest, and the corporeal contortions required to fit racial, national, and sexual ideals. She questions what counts as healing. She confronts the dominant with the violence of its own institutionalized norms, and ideally this exposure will inspire a transformation of the context that violates certain bodies. But there is no guarantee. Anzaldúa's diabetes and chronic pain, as well as her mestiza political commitment to be open to otherness, left her body eternally vulnerable. “*I'm not invincible, I tell you. My skin's fragile as a baby's I'm brittle bones and human, I tell you. I'm a broken arm*” (1981, 204, emphasis in original). If all people were to embrace this openness and brokenness in themselves—as many of Anzaldúa's mourners have—there could be a radical reconfiguration of physical interaction, but the dominant logic is still to defend, to erect boundaries, to demand repair.

Pain presents more than a shock to one's identity or an affront to homogeneity; it also forms a political position. In “Injury, Identity, Politics,” Wendy Brown analyzes the nature of identities that are organized around states of injury—discrimination based on race, sex, sexuality, age, weight, personal appearance—for the purpose of demanding political rights. She notes that, paradoxically, an identity that calls attention to suffering in order to demand an end to suffering “at the same time becomes invested in its own subjection,” “predicated on and requiring its sustained rejection by a ‘hostile external world’” (Brown 1996, 159). To sustain its critique of the system, a body in pain must, paradoxically, remain in pain. The problem with these identities based on injury, Brown argues, is that they do not “subject to critique the sovereign subject of accountability that liberal

individualism presupposes, nor the economy of inclusion and exclusion that liberal universalism establishes” (159). Anzaldúa’s investment in pain, however, demands not inclusion within the status quo but a rethinking of the relationship between bodies and worlds. Indeed, she has already done what Brown proposes at the end of her essay: “What if we sought to supplant the language of ‘being’—with its defensive closure on identity, its insistence on the fixity of position ...?” (163). Anzaldúa supplants it not with “wanting,” as Brown would have it (an impulse that is still based on individual demands), but with interaction and openness. “Neither the physical self nor the physical body is the totality of a person,” Anzaldúa explains. “We’re going to leave the rigidity of this concrete reality and expand it. I’m very hopeful” (2000b, 285). This hope challenges the subjects and objectives assumed in current biomedical studies (as well as the public policies, stigmas, and exclusions supported by these studies). Designating “the person” as something more than “the physical body” expands currently assumed limits of bodies and identities. From this perspective, pain and illness do not annihilate the person but, rather, show how she bleeds beyond the boundaries of her own tissue.

When, in the midst of this writing, I injured my neck and found myself plunged into not only the process but also the content of my work, Anzaldúa’s writings spoke to my perception of my body as having swollen up to fill any room that I entered, as an audibly buzzing force whose noise filtered my sense of everything: reading, writing, thinking. Pain made me realize how much my mind/body have been infiltrated by my reading (and vice versa). My injury also made more visible the places in this essay where my own interpretive desires have strained to pull certain political gestures out of Anzaldúa, and made me more aware than ever that pain is not a thing to celebrate. In *The Body in Pain*, Scarry sees pain only as an expression of negation and annihilation, and certainly her claim that pain is “world-destroying” is more obvious than any affirmation of pain’s creative powers (1985, 29). Scarry opposes pain to imagination, suggesting that pain contracts and negates, while imagination is expansive and explores alternative realities (168–69). I am grateful that Anzaldúa’s response to physical pain defied this binary opposition. Not celebrated or rejected, the pain and destruction in her writing are, literally, expansive, leading to the creation of new forms of being, following Catholic and Aztec traditions of re-gensis and cyclicity. Anzaldúa’s life and work have consistently overflowed the boundaries of normative expectations—a transgression that surely must hurt. Her seemingly counterintuitive acceptance of pain, as well as the

intellectual taboos she risks crossing, strengthen the oppositional power of her lifework and truly shake up the system. Her philosophy is responsive to fear, faith, personal sensation, and "irrational" explanation. Her revelations provide a template for politics built on intersubjectivity (rather than individualism), materiality (rather than abstraction), openness (rather than defensiveness), feeling (rather than sterility), and the friction between differences (rather than institutionalized norms). Complacency feeds status quo; pain makes trouble.

Notes

1. Though discussions of pain often distinguish between physical and mental pain, I would argue that pain always has cultural, psychological, and corporeal dimensions that mutually define each other. Anzaldúa writes, "Though your head and heart decry the mind/body dichotomy, the conflict in your mind makes your body a battlefield where beliefs fight each other" (2002, 549). When her body manifests her thinking, and when her "body's illness has taken residence in all [her] thoughts" (551), she demonstrates what it would mean to live without this dichotomy. David Morris, too, critiques the attempt to separate physical from psychological pain (1991, 9).

2. Scarry's most cited conclusion about pain is that it "resists objectification in language ... because it takes no object" (1985, 5). Pain emerges in Scarry's study as an extralingual, individual phenomenon that cannot be communicated adequately. The problem with this theory is that it provides an excuse for the failure to account for pain. Rather than allowing pain to remain outside language, Anzaldúa announces its presence within her body, her theories, and her writing.

3. "Borderlands" are the site for the formation of the "mestiza consciousness" that Anzaldúa theorizes, and the two terms are inextricably linked. The body split with fence rods and the border itself provide the material foundation for her theories of *mestizaje*. Removing *mestizaje* from this wound between the United States and Mexico and applying it cross-culturally thus detaches the theory from its material foundations.

4. See Bost (2003) for a comparative analysis of *mestiza* consciousness and postmodernism.

5. Paula Moya also critiques the romanticization of marginality in postmodern formulations of Chicana identity: "If we choose the postmodernist approach, we run the risk, for example, of theorizing Chicana identity in terms of ambiguity and fragmentation so that the *Chicana* becomes, in effect, a figure for marginality and contradiction in the postmodern world" (2001, 479).

6. "*El sonavabitch*" describes the ways in which migrant workers who are "illegal aliens" are terrorized and exploited in the United States (Anzaldúa 1987,

124–29). “To live in the borderlands” describes mestiza identity as being “caught in the crossfire between camps,” “stopped by *la migrá* at the border checkpoints,” where “the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off / your olive-red skin” (194–95).

7. While one might protest that there is a limit to how much symbolism we can read into narratives presented as lived experience, the boundary between biography and literature, between history and subjective representation, is blurred in genre-crossing writings like Anzaldúa’s. As her texts move between personal narrative, philosophy, history, and poetry, she encourages readers to see the bleeding between disciplines and enacts a cross-pollination of their different reading practices. Even if one could isolate a textual moment as “pure” history, Anzaldúa would still have us “close read” it: “I look for omens everywhere, everywhere catch glimpses of the patterns and cycles of my life” (1987, 36).

8. In “La Prieta,” Anzaldúa writes, “When I was three months old tiny pink spots began appearing on my diaper,” and the doctor declared her a “throwback to the Eskimo” whose “girl children get their periods early” (1981, 199). In *Borderlands*, she writes about this experience in the third person and links it again to her indigenous heritage: “The bleeding distanced her from others. Her body had betrayed her. She could not trust her instincts, her ‘horses,’ because they stood for her core self, her dark Indian self” (1987, 43). This menstrual mark is thus specifically racialized, in addition to its sexual referent.

9. La Malinche is the Mexican/mestiza name for Malintzin, the legendary “Indian princess” who was sold as a slave to the Aztecs, supposedly to secure the inheritance of her mother’s son by a second marriage, and then given to Hernán Cortés as a translator. Contemporary Chicana feminists often return to La Malinche, examining the tremendous power and the overdetermined stereotypes surrounding the mother of mestizaje, who is often regarded as a passive victim or a betrayer of her culture. See, for instance, Tafolla (1993) and Moraga (1983).

10. David Morris notes that slaveholders, in order to justify their cruelty, often accepted as “a paradoxical article of faith . . . that slaves did not feel pain”; similarly, the myth that Native Americans “were inherently insensitive to pain” was used to justify the suppression and genocide of native peoples (1991, 39).

11. In her preface to *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler describes how she “kept losing track of the subject” in her antifoundationalist identity theories, which were beginning to reveal that “movement beyond their own boundaries . . . appeared to be quite central to what bodies ‘are.’” When resistant feminist critics demanded “What about the materiality of the body, *Judy*?” Butler ultimately challenged the “the” in their assumptions about bodily being (1993, ix). “The body,” as it is commonly invoked, implies that corporeality—across races, genders, sexes, cultures—can be reduced to an already given, universally shared, circumscribed, neutral entity. Like Butler, Anzaldúa challenges the possibility as well as the desirability of such closure.

12. The quotation from the *Florentine Codex*, a sixteenth-century account of Aztec society by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, is from the translation that appears in López Austin (1988, 381).

13. It is significant that the sentences describing the speaker’s encounter with

the mask, multiplicity, shame, prophecy, and blood are in untranslated Spanish, reserving these spiritual or metaphysical references for Spanish-language readers.

14. In the interview with Smuckler, Anzaldúa similarly describes finding “other faces” behind her own when looking in the mirror, and she developed a theory of “Gloria Multiplex,” or “the Multiple Glorias” (2000b, 36–37). (Significantly, she made this discovery while tripping on mushrooms, a source of inspiration that she attributes to Aztec healing rituals.) In *Borderlands*, she celebrates “half and half” as a supernatural embodiment of both male and female, defying binary opposition (1987, 19), and claims *atravesados* [cross-eyed, cross-bred, stretched across, pierced, treacherous, or wicked] as inhabitants of the borderlands (3).

15. According to ancient Nahuatl cultures, all beings incorporate different animistic forces (like *tonalli*) that shadow their identities and potentially cause dangerous imbalances. A confrontation with one of these animas can lead to a transformation in identity, sometimes even shape-shifting (often referred to as *nahualism*).

16. According to Roberta and Peter Markman (1992, 175), the feast in honor of Xipe Totec symbolized “the dead covering of the earth in the dry season of winter ... giv[ing] way to the new vegetation bursting forth in spring.” This festival was celebrated immediately before the time of sowing, and the ritual donning of sacrificial victims’ skins demonstrates the release of spirit that occurs with death and produces new life: “The ritual thus makes clear that the return of spirit, now separated from matter, to the realm of the gods is one of the primary functions of sacrifice. That return is the ritual acknowledgment of the essential cyclicality of life” (176).

17. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano responds to critics who cite Anzaldúa’s invocation of goddesses as essentialist or as a distortion of Mexican history by suggesting that she uses these figures for “imaginative appropriation and redefinition ... in the service of a new mythos” (1998, 19)—meaning that Anzaldúa is not true to history, and that in the distance between history and poetry lies a critique of Aztec culture, history, and essence.

18. References to smoking mirrors and heart excision at the beginning of *Borderlands*’ chapter on Coatlicue also link the Coatlicue state to the Aztec ceremony of Toxcatl, in which a captive warrior was sacrificed to the “god of gods,” “Lord of the Smoking Mirror,” Tezcatlipoca (Anzaldúa 1987, 41; Carrasco 1999, 118). Since this ceremony occurred during the dry season, Coatlicue’s link to fertility and life cycles is relevant here.

19. Anzaldúa uses the term *nepantla* to explain the liminal crossing out of the Coatlicue state where one loses one’s location as a subject. In a 1994 interview with Debbie Black and Carmen Abrego, she says: “When you come out of the Coatlicue state you come out of nepantla, this birthing stage where you feel like you’re reconfiguring your identity and don’t know where you are. You used to be this person but now maybe you’re different in some way. You’re changing worlds and culture and maybe classes, sexual preferences. So you go through this birthing of nepantla” (2000b, 225–26). For additional discussion of Coatlicue and nepantla, see Anzaldúa’s 1991 interview with AnaLouise Keating (2000b, 176).

20. López Austin states that the Nahuatl term for agony, *atlaza*, literally means “to cast off the crown of the head,” signifying the passing of the agonized person’s

spirit or *tonalli* from his/her head and its ascension to the spirit world (1988, 224). It was believed that the person could then live for a short time without his/her *tonalli*, experiencing this otherworldly communication without death. Agony thus provided a temporary intersection between realms.

21. Josef Breuer is famous for his charge that “the patron saint of hysteria, St. Theresa, was a woman of genius with great practical capacity” (Breuer and Freud 1957, 232). If we agree with the analysis that hysteria is the embodied expression of personal desires and anxieties, Saint Teresa’s martyrdom allowed for the realization of her genius and manifested her desire for the power traditionally reserved for men in Catholicism. Her status as recipient of Christ’s “favors” (most of which were felt by her as pain) endowed her with vicarious power as Christ’s “bride” and earned her the authority to teach other nuns, to expand the Carmelite order, and to found convents according to her own religious model.

22. Indeed, Saint Teresa openly rejected “any system of mysticism that would demand setting aside the corporeal for the sake of mounting to the spiritual” (Kavanaugh 1987, 28). She writes that the faithful should not “huir tanto de cosas corpóreas” (Santa Teresa 1988, 456). Such an approach to religious communication coincides with feminist concerns about the erasure of women’s bodies in patriarchal religions.

23. Some interpretations suggest that the Aztecs perceived the Spanish conquest as the destruction of the Quinto Sol (Fifth Sun) and the rebirth of a new era; see Moraga (1983, 100).

24. Anzaldúa dedicates “Holy Relics” to two lesbian feminist writers, Judy Grahn and Vita Sackville-West, saying, “We are the holy relics, / the scattered bones of a saint, / the best loved bones of Spain. / We seek each other” (1987, 154–59). Each poet embodies the relics/bones/poems of her foremothers, and each is cut to bits by the conflicting expectations and critical interpretations of sexual and cultural communities.

25. In “Poets have strange eating habits,” Anzaldúa writes that “wounding is a deeper healing” (1987, 140). “Letting Go” sexualizes the Coatlicue state as a process of “plung[ing] your fingers / into your navel, with your two hands / split open.” This process is ultimately credited with promoting fertility as the contents of the body spill out—flowers, lizards, toads, spring rain, and young ears of corn (164). In “*La curandera*,” Juan Dávila’s “pain crawl[s] to where [the speaker’s dead body] had lain” and brings it back to life (177). And in “Creature of Darkness,” thinking “stirs up the pain / opens the wound / starts the healing” (186). Like the interviews, the poems often present more radical visions of identity and embodiment, making overt the covert themes inscribed within the more frequently discussed essays.

26. Anzaldúa’s personification of *la raza* in “*Cihautlyotl, Woman Alone*” is a common address in Chicano nationalist writings. This poem critiques the ways in which the Chicano movement, though racially mestizo, often rejected other types of heterogeneity in the process of solidifying a nationalist identity. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian writes, “It is ironic that while we live in a period which prizes the multiplicity of identities and charts border crossings with borderless critics, there should be such a marked silence around the kinds of divergent ethnic pluralities

that cross gender and classed subject within the semantic orbit of Chicana/o. So powerful is the hegemonic reach of the dominant culture that fixed categories of race and ethnicity continue to be the foundation, the structuring axis around which Chicana/o identities are found" (1994, 273).

27. See, for example, Fillingim and Ness (2000).

28. Norma Alarcón links the "polyvalent" naming of Anzaldúa's "feminine"—*La Chingada*, Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl, Guadalupe (Alarcón 2003, 361), and, I would add, *Saint Teresa*—to the continual "hunger" of this open-ended identification. "Such a hunger forces her to recollect in excess, to remember in excess, to labor to excess, to produce a text layered with inversions and disproportions, which are effects of experienced dislocations, vis-à-vis the text of the Name of the Father and the Place of the Law" (367). Continual dislocation shifts the names of her model.

29. In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz claims that Mexicans have a terror of physical openness, and he grounds his claims in the conquest of the Aztecs and the Spaniards' supposed violation of La Malinche, *la chingada*, the "mother" of Mexican *mestizaje*. To avoid future violation, "El mexicano puede doblarse, humillarse, 'agacharse,' pero no 'rajarse,' esto es, permitir que el mundo exterior penetre en su intimidad" (The Mexican can stoop/bend, humiliate himself, yield himself, but not split open, that is, permit the outside world to penetrate his intimacy) (1947, 29–30). When Anzaldúa writes, at the beginning of *Borderlands*, that the border splits her—"me raja me raja" (1987, 2)—I believe it is a direct response to Paz. The wounding and splitting of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness is that which enables the incorporation of new elements, tolerates ambiguities, and "breaks down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (80). Paz ties this marking of women as "*rajada*" and "*herida*" to the engendering of the "suffering woman" ideal in Mexico. Kaja Finkler, too, considers this mythic suffering woman in her study of gender and morbidity in Mexico: "The culturally legitimated ideology of the suffering woman pervades Mexican society and is continuously reinforced by women's experience in their daily life. In fact, the ideology of sacrifice sustains women in their daily lives, even in the face of physical abuse by their husbands" (1994, 56). Claiming pain as a normative, indeed valorized, identification for women corresponds to misogynist mythology designed to ensure women's submission. Paz's writings doom *mestizas* to shame and disempowerment and demonize the openness that they represent. Anzaldúa's response was to accept the historical fact of Mexican pain as the foundation of her own Chicana identity but not as a justification for the status quo. Unlike the suffering woman, Anzaldúa took pain as the starting point for her theory of agency, the shock that disrupts passivity and propels one forward. She made openness politically progressive.

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