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Spiritual Realities and Spiritual Activism:
Assessing Gloria Anzaldúa's *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*

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Abstract:
This study explores Gloria Anzaldúa's understanding of "spiritual activism" in her recently published, posthumous work, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. It argues that Anzaldúa's occasional ontological appeals to spiritual realism should be offset by her more process-driven and pragmatic intuitions, which foreground the function and praxis of spirituality. Such intuitions, the study shows, are ultimately more consistent with Anzaldúa's interests in personal healing and social transformation.

Key terms:
Anzaldúa; Spirituality; Spiritual activism; Spiritual mestizaje; Conocimiento; Praxis

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa (1942-2004) has been hailed as one of most important cultural theorists of the past fifty years. Her work, especially her groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) continues to animate many contemporary discourses, especially those concerned with cultural and linguistic hybridity, intersectionality, and women of color feminism. Yet, one may ask: What is Anzaldúa's distinctive contribution to contemporary discourses of spirituality and religion? In a 1993 interview, Anzaldúa herself lays bare the relative inattention that critics have given to her understanding of spirituality: "One of the things that doesn't get talked about is the connection between body, mind, and spirit—anything that has to do with the sacred, anything that has to do with the spirit. As long as it's theoretical and about history, about borders, that's fine; borders are a concern that everybody has. But when I start talking about nepantla—as a border between the spirit, the psyche, and the mind or as a process—they resist" (2000, p. 7).

Building upon the work of recent scholarship, this study takes up that challenge by reflecting on Anzaldúa's recently published, posthumous work, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015), which stands as her most mature and explicit articulation of a nepantla, or "in-between" spirituality. I will show that *Light in the Dark* offers us some important clues into the intricacies of Anzaldúa's spiritual vision. In particular, I underscore the importance of the praxis- and process-oriented dimensions of her understanding of what she calls "spiritual activism." Anzaldúa urges us to confront the destructive and violent aspects of our world through *conocimiento*, a nonbinary and transformative mode of thinking. But in doing so, she urges us "to respond not just with the traditional practice of spirituality (contemplation, meditation, and private rituals) or with the technologies of political activism (protests, demonstrations, and speakouts), but with the amalgam of the two: spiritual activism" (19). In many respects, Anzaldúa's understanding of spiritual activism significantly broadens her earlier forays into epistemology, which center around key concepts like mestiza consciousness, *la facultad*, and conocimiento.

I argue that Anzaldúa's articulation of spiritual activism in this text helps to counterpoise her somewhat conflicting stances on spiritual realism.[i] Over the course of her career, Anzaldúa wrestles with the question "Are spirits real?" Before the publication of *Light in the Dark*, she appears most often to subscribe to one of two positions: a realist position (which assumes that spirits are indeed real) and a pluralist position (which affirms that spirits are both literally and imaginally present). While *Light in the Dark* continues to echo both positions, it also introduces a third functionalist and pragmatic option that sets Anzaldúa's understanding of spirituality in a new light: what really matters, Anzaldúa suggests, is whether or not the spiritual journey makes positive changes in a person's life. In light of these three positions, I show how the functionalist

position meshes best with Anzaldúa's underlying commitment to spiritual activism as a non-reductive form of praxis, thus providing an important alternative to the cul-de-sacs of metaphysical realism.

The first section of this essay offers a brief biographical sketch of Anzaldúa that serves both to contextualize her work and to provide a frame for understanding her own connection to spirituality. "Religion, whatever it is, is man's total reaction upon life," William James once wrote (39). Having a sense of the totality of Anzaldúa's life is thus a helpful step in appreciating both her deep commitment to various forms of activism and her own heterodox experiences of spirituality. The second section will look at Anzaldúa's discussion of spiritual realism and some of the internal tensions within it. In the third section, I will show how a pragmatic reading of her mature articulation of spiritual activism provides a key to help her readers adjudicate these incongruities.

Gloria Anzaldúa: A Life Rooted in Activism

Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa was born a seventh-generation Mexican-American on September 26, 1942 in the south Texas town of Raymondsville. For the first seven years of her life, Anzaldúa lived in a ranch settlement that had no electricity or running water (Anzaldúa 2000, 23). She learned at an early age how difficult farm labor could be, an experience that "instilled in her a deep respect for farm laborers" (Day 78). Adding to this hardship, Anzaldúa was diagnosed in infancy with a rare hormonal disorder that caused genital bleeding starting at three months old and monthly menses starting at age six. This condition caused her daily pain, which she lived with for 35 years until she obtained a hysterectomy at age 38.

Though farming was time-consuming, Anzaldúa found refuge in stories and storytelling. When everyone was asleep at night after a long day in the fields, she would pull the covers over

her head, turn on her flashlight, and read into the early hours of the morning. When her sister discovered Anzaldúa's nightly habit, she threatened to tell their mother unless Anzaldúa told her a story. Thus developed Anzaldúa's gift for storytelling, a gift shared by many other members of her family, including her two grandmothers (Anzaldúa 2000, 22). When she was 11, Anzaldúa and her family moved to Hargill, Texas. For eight years, Anzaldúa grew up surrounded by Chicana/os in Hargill, having virtually no contact with Anglos. This changed, however, when she began high school. Because she had scored very well on a high school placement exam, Anzaldúa was sent to Edinburg High School, a predominantly white institution. "I was the only Chicana in all my classes except P.E., health, homeroom, and study hall. That segregation, even more, cut me away from friends because the white kids didn't want anything to do with me and the teachers weren't used to having such a bright Chicana. To keep from being bored I'd have the textbook open, but hidden under it I'd be writing in my journal. I'd make up ideas about stories and plot them" (23). Although often ignored or overlooked by teachers and students alike, Anzaldúa nevertheless ended up graduating valedictorian of her high school class.

Throughout her early years, Anzaldúa learned to cope with a sense of being different, even within her own community. Three factors contributed to her experience of difference: her recurring menstrual bleeding, her voracious appetite for reading, and her disinterest in boys. As noted, Anzaldúa began menstruating when she was only six years old. Once a month, she would also experience fevers of 106, bouts of tonsillitis, diarrhea, and vomiting. "Sometimes it would go on for seven to ten days," she recounts. "So I withdrew all feeling from my genitals; from the time I was little it was always a smelly place that dripped blood and had to be hidden. I couldn't play like other kids" (29). Anzaldúa's mother made a special girdle for her to hide her breasts, which she began developing at the age of six, and her mother made sure that a rag was placed

between Anzaldúa's legs in case of bleeding.

Anzaldúa's interest in books also set her apart from the other children. At an early age, she read "everything in the library. Everything: encyclopedias, dictionaries, Aesop's Fables, philosophy—I started reading all these heavy books. I literally went through all the shelves, book by book." Her love for books shed new light on the way that she looked at various cultures, including her own. From reading westerns, Anzaldúa saw that Indians and Mexicans "were portrayed like animals; we weren't really humans." But she also read books "from Europe and other races, which weren't as prejudiced against blacks and non-white cultures." Anzaldúa read positive stories about Eskimos, and she was enamored with *Jane Eyre*, with whom she identified because, like Anzaldúa, Eyre "was short; she was little. She was stubborn and deviant" (25).

Anzaldúa's same-sex preference was a third factor that set her apart from children in her community. As she says in an interview, "A lot of the girls in my class were knocked up by the time they got to the sixth grade." Recalling her first experiences of masturbation and having an orgasm, Anzaldúa adds: "The sexual would make me feel different from the other girls because I wasn't out there fucking behind the bushes by the lake like they were. And I didn't really think men were all that great" (29-30).

In 1962, Anzaldúa enrolled at Texas Woman's University (TWU) in Denton, Texas. Her mother did not want her to go to a college so far away: the school was 800 miles—a twelve hour bus ride—from Hargill. Yet Anzaldúa prevailed. At TWU Anzaldúa began to question her own sexuality after seeing a number of homosexual relationships, among both lesbian women and gay men. After a year, financial difficulties forced her to return home. Upon her arrival, she worked for a year and then enrolled at the nearby Pan American University (now University of Texas Rio Grande Valley). Anzaldúa put herself through college by working during the day and taking

classes at night. She graduated with a B.A. in English, Art, and Secondary Education. Anzaldúa worked for several years in the public school system, teaching grades from preschool to high school near her hometown. This was difficult work. Her students faced not only tough economic and social situations at home, but also rampant racism within the school system, which Anzaldúa experienced herself. (When she initially applied to teach high school, her job applications were rejected multiple times, likely owing to her ethnicity). She confronted the racism by committing herself to a study of Chicano culture and encouraged her students, who were mostly Mexican-American, to incorporate their personal experiences in their writing. Anzaldúa also became involved in the burgeoning Chicano Movement in the United States; in the early 1970s, she attended meetings held by the Mexican-American Youth Organization as well as other political meetings. However, the more she attended these meetings, the more disenchanted she became "because it was all guys." Women were simply not represented (45).

During the summers Anzaldúa attended graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin and obtained a master's degree in English and education in 1972. Soon after, she moved to Indiana and worked as a liaison between the public school system and the children of migrant farm workers. Anzaldúa was promoted to direct a bilingual migrant program for the state (Day 78). During this time, she also took her first creative writing course. In 1974 Anzaldúa decided that her work with the public school system did not enable her to make the kind of systemic changes she desired, nor did it allow her enough time to write. She thus returned to the University of Texas at Austin to pursue a doctoral degree in comparative literature. Through her coursework, she explored feminist theory and esoteric literature, the latter of which included a study of alchemy, astrology, I Ching, and other metaphysical wisdom traditions. In light of her critique of the patriarchal nature of various Chicano social movements, Anzaldúa's encounter

with both feminist and esoteric writings provided frameworks that enabled her to develop what one scholar aptly describes as her "multipronged theory and aesthetics of social transformation and inclusive politics" (Keating, 2014).

In 1977 Anzaldúa committed herself to becoming a published author. She withdrew from UT Austin and moved to California. From 1977 to 1981 she lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she joined the Feminist Writers Guild and led a number of writing workshops. But after serving two terms of office at both the local and national level, Anzaldúa quit due to the racism and alienation she faced from her colleagues who refused to talk about third-world women, class issues, or oppression (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 57). In 1979, she began working on what would become her first edited volume (with Cherríe Moraga), titled *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). This was a groundbreaking collection of essays, poems, letters, and personal narratives by an innovative group of thinkers who moved beyond the usual conventions of white, middle-class feminism.

Between 1981 and 1985, Anzaldúa lived on the East Coast. During this time, she began working on a poetry manuscript that was later to become *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), her acclaimed book that continues to be widely anthologized, excerpted, and cited. Here Anzaldúa interweaves history, contemporary issues, and myth, not only to shed light on her experience as a Chicana lesbian feminist but also to develop her theories of "new mestiza consciousness" and "the borderlands," exploring the therapeutic and transformative possibilities of embracing a hybrid, mestiza epistemology. These theories continue to be influential, especially for borderlands studies, intersectional studies, and decolonial thought. Similarly, her groundbreaking use of code-switching (or quick transitions between various forms of language, including standard English and Spanish, working-class English, Chicano Spanish, and Nahuatl)

has influenced composition studies, literary studies, and Chicanx studies (Keating, 2014).

In 1985, Anzaldúa returned to Northern California, where she remained the rest of her life. She published two multi-genre anthologies featuring the work of women-of-color feminists: *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990) and *this bridge we call home: medical visions for transformation* (2002). Both works document Anzaldúa's ever-expanding vision of social transformation, radically inclusionary feminism, and self-described "spiritual activism." In addition to these edited collections, she published two bilingual children's books and a collection of interviews. Anzaldúa passed away in 2004 at the age of 61 from complications related to diabetes. When she died, she was within months of completing her doctoral dissertation in literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). In 2005, UCSC posthumously awarded her a Ph.D. Her doctoral dissertation has since been published as *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro*: *Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (2015), which represents the culmination of Anzaldua's mature thought.

Spirituality and Spiritual Realities: Contributions and Internal Tensions

Gloria Anzaldúa is broadly interested in the way human beings come to know our reality and how we ascribe meaning to it. For Anzaldúa, knowledge is not limited, however, to the internal workings of the mind, nor is it always something that can easily be verified by science. While she would certainly acknowledge that we often come to know things rationally through verifiable processes of deduction and induction (for example, in the scientific method), she is more interested in what can be called the "outer boundaries" of our knowledge. Anzaldúa appears to ask: In what ways do our bodies—and not simply our minds—know? How may inferences, intuitions, dreams, and feelings be valid forms of knowledge? And, in what ways can

knowledge be creatively used to bring about social transformation?

These kinds of questions point to Anzaldúa's overriding interest in epistemology, or theory of knowledge. Later in her career, she developed the idea of conocimiento, which is central to her understanding of both epistemology and spirituality. For her, conocimiento is a nonbinary, connectionist mode of thinking that draws on non-rationalistic forms of knowing, such as sensing, intuiting, and dreaming. Conocimiento is "[s]keptical of reason and rationality," she writes. It "questions conventional knowledge's current categories, classifications, and contents" (2015, 119). Furthermore, it is deeply tied to spirituality:

> Those who carry conocimiento refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality. A form of spiritual inquiry, conocimiento is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity). Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. To understand the greater reality that lies behind your personal perceptions, you view these struggles as spiritual undertakings. (2015, 119)

As this passage demonstrates, conocimiento in its highest expression *is* spirituality: it is a "form of spiritual inquiry" that offers a "larger frame of reference" that gives us insight into "the greater reality that lies behind" our individual epistemologies. For Anzaldúa, conocimiento—which she describes elsewhere as a "politics of embodied spirituality"[ii]—should never be limited to the workings of subject-centered reason. Rather, its scope is more capacious and universal. Because experiences are embedded "in a larger frame of reference" that connects "personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet" and to "the struggles with the Earth itself," conocimiento begs cosmic and spiritual questions, deepening our perception of what is real and ushering in new ways of being in the world. Also significant is the fact that Anzaldúa links conocimiento to her aesthetics: one reaches conocimiento through creative acts such as writing,

art-making, dancing, and teaching (and one could easily add to this list ritual, prayer, and healing-practices). In this sense, conocimento is not simply a form of knowledge that one passively possesses, but rather, it demands purposeful, creative, and skilled involvement that is constantly informed by critical reflection.

Because Anzaldúa's idea of conocimiento is closely tied to her spirituality and stands as one of her central post-*Borderlands* ideas, interpreters of Anzaldúa would be well served to take note of her work in spirituality that predates her discussions of conocimiento. In doing so, one sees that Anzaldúa's understanding of spirituality not only develops and matures significantly over the course of her career, but also continues to be marked by certain unresolved philosophical tensions. While Anzaldúa herself notes that her views regarding spirituality have become "more solid" from the early 1980s to the late 1990s, a careful reading of her work simultaneously reveals that, even in her mature writings, she continues to wrestle with competing ideas of spirituality (2000, 72).

In order to see these lingering tensions, let us turn first to her early writings. In some early interviews from 1982 and 1983, Anzaldúa does not yet speak of spiritual matters in terms of conocimiento, creative acts, or political engagement. Rather, she approaches spirituality more in terms of discreet paranormal events, drawing largely on her own heterodox spiritual experiences. She recounts, for example, her earliest spiritual memory:

> My awareness of a spiritual dimension started when I began differentiating between who I was as a little kid and who my mother was, what the table was, what the wall was. When I was about three years old, I was sitting on the floor and above me, on the table, were some oranges I wanted but couldn't reach. I remember reaching for the oranges; I could feel my arms getting really long. I really wanted them, and suddenly there were three bodies, like I was three of me…. I don't remember if I really got the oranges or not. Right after that experience, I began to feel apart, separate from others. Before this point, I couldn't differentiate between myself and other things. I'd feel like I was part of the wall. (25)

In the interviews Anzaldúa describes several other out-of-the ordinary experiences, such as the time when she was tripping on mushrooms and discovered she had multiple selves (36), the feeling of connecting her multiple selves through orgasm (37-38), the experience of being immobilized during meditation by a heavy vibration (104), and the ability to see "other worlds superimposed upon this one" (104).

Such accounts have proven to be a challenge for many interpreters. How to assess such claims? If we momentarily leave aside the question of whether we can objectively verify them or not, it is first worth noting that Anzaldúa's insistence in sharing them proves significant in its own right. Knowing full well that she will be dismissed by many scholars for writing about her highly unconventional spiritual experiences, Anzaldúa nevertheless commits herself to the task. Her resolve becomes evident in the interviews with Anzaldúa from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. At the beginning of each interview, the editor of the collection, AnaLouise Keating, threads portions of a 1998-1999 interview she conducted with Anzaldúa, to then allow Anzaldúa to return to and reflect upon issues raised in the earlier interviews. The first chapter begins with this telling exchange between Keating (ALK) and Anzaldúa (GEA):

> ALK: You talk about some pretty wild stuff in this interview [with Linda Smuckler from 1982] and even more extensively in the following interview with Christine Weiland [from 1983]—[about] an "extra-terrestrial spirit," different spirits entering your body, past-life regression, reincarnation, psychic readers, and more. How do you feel about these ideas being out there, in print?
> GEA: I think it's about time for these ideas to be in print. I went to psychic readers and workshops in psychic development right after one of my near-death experiences, and these saved my life. It really helped me get in touch with who I was and what I wanted to do. I'm happy it's going to be in my interview book. People should know about this aspect of me and my life.
> ALK: Don't you think it's going to make you less respectable and less reputable—because a lot of scholars don't believe in such things?
> GEA: Tough shit! Once I get past my own censorship of what I should write about, I don't care what other people say. Some things were hard for me to reveal but my strong vocation for writing makes me more open. To be a writer means to communicate, to tell stories that other people haven't told, to describe experiences that people don't normally

find in books, or at least in mainstream books (2000, 17).

As Anzaldúa makes clear here, her calling as a writer compels her to address such unconventional issues. She acknowledges that she will likely "be ridiculed" and that "some academics will lose their respect for my work," while only a "small number -- one-half of one percent—will applaud me for talking about these things." [iii] Aware of the politics of knowledge within institutions of higher learning, she notes that "[s]cholars connected to universities—what I call the 'dependent scholars,' dependent on their discipline and their school in order to survive—will object to this material, while independent scholars like myself who aren't tied up to any institution will applaud my discussions of spiritual realities, imaginal realities, and the inner subjective life" (18).

Anzaldúa's decision to share her heterodox spiritual experiences presents an important challenge to traditional academic disciplines, Religious Studies included, which tends to distance itself from studies of esotericism and paranormal experiences. Although some leading scholars in the field like Anne Taves (2011) and Jeffrey Kripal (2014) argue persuasively for the inclusion of such studies, the discipline as a whole has a long way to go in addressing such matters. As Taves points out, under the influence of three leading theorists who distinguished between magic, science, and religion (namely, Sir James George Frazer, Émile Durkheim, and Marcel Mauss), there began a disciplinary division around the turn of the twentieth century between anthropology (which set its sights on the study of primitive cultures, including animism and magic), folklore (which studied primitive survivals among the "folk" in the modern, civilized world), and religious studies (which, still very much under the sway of Christian theology, studied "civilized" religions) (Taves, p. 298). With these divisions in place, serious studies of esotericism, the occult, and paranormal and psychical experience no longer had a disciplinary

home. Against this backdrop, Anzaldúa's interest in esotericism and the occult may be seen as a challenge to these longstanding disciplinary divisions.

When seen though a disciplinary angle, there is much to learn from Anzaldúa's attention to "spiritual realities, imaginal realities, and the inner subjective life." But digging further, one may still ask: What, exactly, does she mean by these phrases? What are "spiritual realities" and in what ways are they different from "imaginal realities" and "the inner subjective life"? Conversely, in what ways may a "spiritual reality" be coextensive with an "imaginal reality"? Furthermore, how are all of these things related to Anzaldúa's idea of "spiritual activism"?

As I read her, Anzaldúa is searching for a viable path that would allow her to approach spirits both as real and as imaginative. At times, she seems to hold contradictory positions regarding these two possibilities. In a 1982 interview, she explains how she used to reject the ideas associated with folk healing in her community. "I'd hear people say that evil spirits, mal aigre, rode the wind, and that when a person got sick it was because the bad air had gotten in." In time, however, Anzaldúa came to see things differently. "When I grew up I scoffed at these ideas," she notes, "but now that I'm older I know it's true. Bad vibrations come in the air; when someone is thinking bad about you—feeling envy, jealousy, or whatever and directing it at you—you get the evil eye; people really get sick" (2000, p. 26). Such a statement would seem to support a case for spirits as objectively real entities. A year later, however, Anzaldúa takes a different approach to the question. In light of situations in which she felt "totally isolated and totally alone," Anzaldúa explains that although she "was really fighting it," she needed to find "something outside myself that could sustain me." She then speaks of "la diosa" as "that spiritual help," but then she adds the following caveat: "or maybe it's imaginal help, as it all takes place in the imagination" (73). In light of these somewhat conflicting accounts, one may wonder: How

can a spirit, like mal aigre or the evil eye, be real, yet, at the same time, a creation of the imagination?

Written decades later, Anzaldúa's posthumous *Light in the Dark* continues to deal with similar quandaries around the "reality of spirits." In this work, Anzaldúa herself acknowledges that she struggles at times to provide an adequate framework for broaching this topic. One sees this both in her discussion of the archetypal "árbol de la vida" and in her musings on curanderismo.

El Árbol de la Vida

Early on in *Light in the Dark,* Anzaldúa recounts her mystical experience of seeing the visage of the Virgen de Guadalupe in a cypress tree. A "severe winter storm broke off a section of the Monterey cypress one February several years ago," she writes, "and the park arborist sawed off the hewn branch and the trunk's damaged flank. That day, spirits flagging, I walked toward the cypress on West Cliff along the sea." She continues:

> In the mist and the fog and the stinging wind, I suddenly saw her coming out of the hollowed trunk: It was the Virgen de Guadalupe, head tilted, arms extended, halo spread all around. From a distance, the bright live tans and browns of the raw newly cut wood and dangling trunk fibers looked like the folds of her robe. (2015, 23)

Although the physical characteristics of the tree would change over time (the "bright live tans and browns" would eventually give way to a "weathered gray"), Anzaldúa would continue to apperceive what she took to be la Virgen. "[O]nce I *saw* la Virgen emerging from the tree," she explains, "my imagination picks her out every time I walk toward her, no matter how age, storm, or sea alters the cypress's trunk" (2015, 23).

In *Light in the Dark,* Anzaldúa returns several times to a discussion of the Guadalupe tree. At one point in the text, she explains how she has turned to the tree for inspiration to assist her as a thinker and writer. She beckons the tree to help her find "a paradigm, a framework or

scheme for understanding and explaining" to her readers "certain aspects of reality" (25):

> The tree is a link between worlds. Just as the cosmic tree connects under, middle, and upper world, I'll connect this essay's sections: from the roots to the ground and up its trunk to the branches and on to the sky, a journey from the depths of the underworld that ascends to the concrete physical world, and then to the upper realities of spirit, in a constant descend/ascend movement. (25)

Indeed, the organization of her chapter mirrors this journey. Taking a cue from the post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman, Anzaldúa interprets the underworld as "the mythological style of describing a psychological cosmos," and she describes at some length one of her own her deep-seated archetypal figures, the Serpent Woman/la Llorona (25-26). Anzaldúa's treatment of the middle world appropriately includes a discussion of nepantla, "the bridge between worlds," and the role of those who occupy this middle space, including "chamanas, curanderas, artists, and spiritual activists" (31). The chapter then moves to a discussion of "upper world" themes such as ensueños/fantasies, imagination, and the reality of spirits.

As much as this tripartite schema helps Anzaldúa to organize her chapter, she acknowledges the theoretical limitations of the tree of life analogy. Immediately after introducing the three worlds as the guiding framework for her chapter, Anzaldúa concedes: "But the problem with this up/down, linear description is that these three worlds aren't separate. Interconnected and overlapping, they occupy the same place" (25). I will return to this concession and its implications later.

Curanderismo and the Reality of Spirits

A second aporia arises in Anzaldúa's discussion of curanderismo and traditional forms of folk healing. In *Light in the Dark,* Anzaldúa addresses head-on the question: "Are spirits real?" "I've been asked this question many times," she writes, "and each time the question takes me back to my childhood when I learned, witnessing las curanderas de mi mamagrande, that the

physical world is not the only reality" (29). Anzaldúa recounts a situation in which her grandmother believed that an older woman had bewitched her son (Anzaldúa's uncle), Rafa, into falling in love with her. Rafa was obsessed with this older woman. He couldn't eat or sleep and would walk around like a lost calf (“como un becerro perdido”). Anzaldúa's grandmother thus hired a curandera to heal her son. This curandera was from a small town across the border in Mexico who claimed to be an apprentice of the great folk healer Don Pedrito Jaramillo and who was known for healing people all over South Texas "with a blend of shamanism, herbs, and invocations to Catholic saints" (30). Anzaldúa describes how the curandera proceeded to heal her uncle. After sweeping Rafa's body with small branches tied together with herbs, the curandera rubbed him with herbal tea and eucalyptus leaves in order to give him a proper *limpieza* (cleaning.) The curandera then took a fresh egg and rubbed it all over his body. "El huevo, [the curandera] claimed, would absorb the disease caused by the bad spirit invading him. She cracked open the egg into a bowl and examined it for spots or marks. The spots and condition of the egg, she said, helped her divine the cause and origin of the sickness" (30). The curandera then buried the egg in the backyard. As Anzaldúa recalls, Rafa slept very well that night and ate a huge breakfast the next morning. "He was back to his spritely self," writes Anzaldúa, "y yo empezé a tenerles fé a las curanderas and the reality of spirits" (31).

Yet, one may still wonder: In what sense did Anzaldúa have "faith" in curanderos, and what, exactly, does she mean by the "reality of spirits?" In a series of rhetorical questions, she sets up what seems to be two possibilities: spirits are either a psychological figment of one's imagination or they are objectively real. She asks, for example: "Is the idea of chamanería real, or is it a work of imagination and therefore fantasy, not reality? When a chamana 'journeys,' does she move outward in her body around the Earth, or does she move inward into an altered state of

consciousness where she experiences realities outside normal perception?" Given the way Anzaldúa asks these questions, one might surmise that there are only two possible answers for Anzaldúa: either spirits are figments of the imagination or they are objectively real and occupy a place outside of the body and mind. Anzaldúa's response, however, is quite telling. "Such questions keep cropping up, but their framework is too narrow" she writes (37). What frameworks, then, does Anzaldúa propose?

Three Possible Frameworks

In *Light in the Dark,* Anzaldúa entertains three possibilities. First, she argues that "we must redefine the imagination not as a marginal nonreality nor as an altered state, but rather, as another type of reality" (37). Such a position seems to underscore Anzaldúa's defense of spiritual realism, but, unfortunately, Anzaldúa does not develop this point further.[iv] Second, Anzaldúa points out that "the stories of nonliteral realities," such as stories of chamanas's flights to other worlds, are often invalidated by western society and western science. This point mirrors her earlier critique of traditional academic disciplines that tend to reduce spirits to mere mental images. In response, Anzaldúa draws on the work of anthropologist Edith Turner and Jungian developmental psychologist Mary Watkins to argue against western forms of "intellectual imperialism" and to make a case for the self-determining and autonomous qualities of what Watkins refers to as "imaginal others." She quotes from Watkins: "There is another force influencing our thoughts, emotions, movements, and actions. One can no longer say it is a god or a spirit and yet one has those ancient feelings of possession and movement by a force that does not answer to logic of common space and time" (38). Such a position seems to give credence to the power of spirits as imaginative projections, without reducing them to mere figments of the imagination.

Anzaldúa then offers a third, novel response to the "narrow framework" of her initial questions. She rehearses her key question again, this time with reference to dreams. "Are dreams real? Do they represent a separate reality? Do we make dreams, or does something outside us originate and orchestrate them? Is imagination's nonordinary reality real?" (37) She then responds rhetorically:

> Does it matter whether the journey comes from a waking dream, the unconscious in symbolic representation, or a nonordinary parallel world? Who cares, as long as the information (whether metaphorical or literal) gained from a shamanic journey makes positive changes in a person's life. We must avoid the snares of literalism. Are spirits literally present or are they imaginally present? They are both (37).

I find these insights quite significant because they offer Anzaldúa, and those of us who read her, some new interpretive pathways forward. Instead of circumscribing spirits, dreams, and shamanic journeying to the realm of either imaginative fictions or objective realities, Anzaldúa offers here two new interpretations. One may be termed "functionalist" and the other, "pluralist." Anzaldúa's functionalism is apparent when she sidesteps the question of nonordinary parallel worlds with the simple retort, "Who cares?" What matters, says Anzaldúa, are how these ideas work in practice and how they effect "positive changes in a person's life." Anzaldúa's pluralism is evident in her defense of imaginal journeys as both literally and imaginally present. Wary of intellectual imperialism, Anzaldúa does not want to have to decide definitively between one or the other.

The functionalist and pluralist positions that Anzaldúa offers here represent two of the most compelling responses to her central quandary, but, unfortunately, she does not develop the positions further. Instead, she seems to return at times to a more realist position that asserts the objective reality of spirits inhabiting different worlds. For example, just after making a case for avoiding "the snares of literalism," she states that "for shamans the soul parts live a parallel

existence in nonordinary worlds" (2015, p. 38). Similarly, she defends spirituality as "an ontological belief in the existence of things outside the body (exosomatic), as opposed to the belief that material reality is a projection of mentally created images" (2015, p. 38).[v] Anzaldúa thus seems to defend at times a metaphysics in which there are parallel realities that comprise the world, an approach that is more than likely attributable to her reading and use of Carlos Castañeda's idea of "ordinary reality" and "nonordinary reality" (2015, p. 226).[vi] In my estimation, such an approach runs quite counter to her attempt to make a case for the interconnections and unity between all things.

As I will develop more in the next section, such appeals also draw attention away from spirituality as an active process that unfolds through creative acts. On my reading of *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa often seems caught between defending a kind of spiritual realism, on the one hand, and advocating a more functional vision of spirituality, on the other, which Anzaldúa simply calls "spiritual activism." Whereas her discussions of spiritual realism tend to center around questions of being, or ontology, her understanding of spiritual activism points in the direction of spirituality-in-action, or praxis. Certainly, there are elements of both in her writing. How, then, should one adjudicate between the two?

Toward a Spiritual Praxis

A strong case can be made for the centrality of praxis in Anzaldúa's concept of spirituality and spiritual activism. Although ontological musings about the reality of spirits pepper many of her writings, in *Light in the Dark*, one can see a clear pattern emerge in her line of thinking that culminates in the primacy of praxis. Early in the book, Anzaldúa insists that conocimiento urges us "to respond not just with the traditional practice of spirituality (contemplation, meditation, and private rituals) or with the technologies of political activism

(protests, demonstrations, and speakouts), but with the amalgam of the two: spiritual activism" (2015, 19). Praxis, understood here as purposive action, undergirds both poles: as regards "traditional practices of spirituality," it emerges as the act of imagination, whereas with "technologies of political activism" it surfaces as intentional form of doing or making, which is seen, among other places, in craft-making and artistic performance. (The ancient Greeks referred to this is "techne.") Both types of action make spiritual activism possible.

Anzaldúa's interest in the praxis of spirituality can also be seen in her nuanced critique of New Age spirituality. On the one hand, she is critical of scholars who dismiss New Age spirituality on the basis of what they take to be its "flaky language and Pollyanna-like sentiments." Anzalduá's longstanding interest in esotericism and theosophy—areas of study and practice that are commonly associated with New Age spirituality—suggests a basic affinity with New Age thought. On the other hand, however, Anzaldúa simultaneously laments the fact that many interpreters have reduced her work to a *mere* form of New Age spirituality. In her abbreviated personal notes, she writes, for example: "Why all people lump spirituality with new age—my position, stance." As AnaLouise Keating argues, it is crucial "to distinguish Anzaldúa's spiritual activism both from the mainstream 'New Age' movement and from conventional organized religions." Whereas many mainstream New Age movements focus "almost, if not entirely, on the personal and thus leav[e] the existing oppressive social structures in place," Anzaldúa's holistic approach to spiritual activism "encompasses both the personal and the systemic" (2008, 57).[vii]

As a result, as sympathetic as Anzaldúa is to some forms of New Age spirituality, she is quite critical of the way in which New Age spirituality tends to take flight from real problems of the world. Anzaldúa is not surprised that New Age spirituality strikes some of its critics as

"disconnected from the grounded realities of people's lives and struggles." She squarely acknowledges that "[m]ost contemporary practitioners in this country ignore the political implications and do not concern themselves with our biggest problem and challenge: racism and other racial abuses." It is precisely in light of the social and political shortcomings of New Age spirituality that Anzaldúa appeals directly to spiritual activism, which she describes as an "activist stance that explores spirituality's social implications" (2015, 39). This emphasis on spirituality's social implications clearly puts Anzaldúa's conception of spirituality on a different path from mainstream New Age approaches.

In many respects, Anzaldúa's spiritual activism points to a more functionalist and pragmatic approach to spirituality. Conocimiento, after all, "pushes us into engaging the spirit in confronting our social sickness with new tools and practices whose goal is to effect a shift" (19). This emphasis on "new tools and practices" that are used to "effect a shift" aligns with Anzaldúa's perennial commitment to critical form inquiry as a tool for social criticism. This concern also aligns with a more pragmatic approach to spirituality that is concerned with the *effects* of spirituality rather than its primary *causes*. If spirituality indeed has more to do with right practice than right belief (or "orthopraxy" rather than "orthodoxy," as liberation theologians might put it), then the question of how spirituality functions becomes paramount. Whereas traditional understandings of religious knowledge tend to emphasize the knowledge *of something* (such as the tenets and doctrines of faith), more functionalist and pragmatic approaches tend to emphasize the way religious knowledge *is used* for or towards certain ends. The "world of our experience is a real world," acknowledges pragmatist philosopher Larry Hickman, but the deeper question for pragmatists has to do with the way that our world is "in need of transformation in order to render it more coherent and more secure" (1992, 37). Seen in this light, religious

knowledge is more a mode of transformative engagement than it is a statement about static truths about this world or the next. For Anzaldúa, spirituality and conocimiento are valuable tools for the oppressed (2000, 72-73).

Anzaldúa highlights the importance of praxis not only in her approach to spirituality but also in her frequent discussions of the artist as chamana. As mediator, healer, and teacher, the chamana represents the very embodiment of Anzaldúa's functionalist approach, for it is the chamana who helps to bring about positive changes in a person's life. When speaking about the Guadalupe cypress tree, for example, Anzaldúa explains her own role as chamana: "When I go for walks with my friends, they don't see la Virgen until I call their attention to her. Later, they always see and point her out to their friends" (2015, 24). In this case, Anzaldúa herself serves as the conduit for her friends' new forms of knowledge.

Anzaldúa also understands herself as a chamana in light of her own role as a writer. Reflecting on her own vocation, Anzaldúa observes: "I struggle to 'talk' from the wound's gash, make sense of the deaths and destruction, and pull the pieces of my life back together. I yearn to pass on the next generation the spiritual activism I've inherited from my cultures" (10). The primary means by which Anzaldúa does this, of course, is through her writing. Referring to herself in the third person, she states: "Through the act of writing you call, like the ancient chamana, the scattered pieces of your soul back to your body…. For you, writing is an archetypal journey home to the self, un proceso de crear puentes (bridges) to the next phase, next place, next culture, next reality" (155-156).

For some, a passage like this may suggest that Anzaldúa's purpose as a writer is to arrive at that "next place" or that "next reality." Such an interpretation would certainly fall in line with Anzaldúa's many discussions of ontology and realism. However, other passages, like the

following, tell a different story:

> The aim of good writing is to decrease the distance between reader, writer, and text without "disappearing" any of these players. It's to involve the reader in the work as completely as possible without letting the reader forget that it's a work of art even as s/he interacts with it as if it were reality. In creating an identification or sympathy between reader and character and presenting an immediacy in the fiction's scenes and events, the writer allows the reader to create temporary unities and imagine/project possible wholes out of the given fragments. Both reading and writing are ensueños, willed interactions (41).

In this passage, one does not find an appeal to spatial metaphors and other static notions of place like the "next place" or the "next reality." Instead, the passage hinges on the question of willed interactions. Significantly, these interactions are active ones: they "involve" the reader deeply so that she may "create temporary unities" of her own. In addition to being dynamic, the language here is also tentative and speculative, allowing for imaginative worlds to emerge and dissolve, much like the ebb and flow of experience itself. The reader interacts with the creative work and all the ideas inherent in it "as if it were reality." The unities and wholes created by the reader are "temporary" and "possible," not eternal and fixed. A pragmatist like William James would no doubt find resonance in Anzaldúa's position here, for as James notes, words like 'soul,' 'God,' and 'immortality' "cover no distinctive sense-content whatever." It would logically follow, then, that these words are devoid of any significance. "Yet strangely enough they have a definite meaning *for our practice*. We can act *as if* there were a God; feel *as if* we were free; consider Nature *as if* she were full of special designs; lay plans *as if* we were immortal." When we enter this subjunctive ("as if") mode of thinking, "we find then that these words do make a genuine difference in our moral life" (James 56, original emphases).

Although most Anzaldúan scholarship has paid relatively scant attention to her conception of spirituality and spiritual activism, recent contributions by insightful commentators like Theresa Delgadillo (2011), Tace Hedrick (2009), and AnaLouise Keating (2008; 2015),

coupled with the publication of Anzaldúa's posthumous *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro*, are helping to set the record straight: spiritual activism is both the impetus and terminus for Anzaldúa's literary production. We get a glimpse of this in one of Anzaldúa's earliest writings, "La Prieta" (1981) when she writes: "In short, I'm trying to create a religion not out there somewhere, but in my gut. I am trying to make peace between what has happened to me, what the world is, and what it should be" (2009, p. 49). The bookend to this statement may very well be this passage, published in 2015, which speaks to Anzaldúa's sense of vocation and her emphasis on the ongoing practice of spiritual activism:

> In honoring the creative process, the acts of writing and reading, and border arte, I use cultural figures to intervene in, make change, and thus heal colonialism's wounds. I delve into my own mythical heritage and spiritual traditions, such as curanderismo and Toltec nagualism, and link them to spirituality, spiritual activism, mestiza consciousness, and the role of nepantla and nepantleras. I enact spiritual mestizaje—an awareness that we are all on a spiritual path and share a desire that society undergo metamorphosis and evolution, that our relationships and creative projects undergo transformations (44).

As Theresa Delgadillo points out, Anzaldúa's theory of spiritual mestizaje—which is only momentarily touched upon in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, yet which is so central to the text[viii]—incorporates elements of both critical reflection and directive action. Spiritual mestizaje may be understood as "the transformative renewal of one's relationship to the sacred," which is achieved both "through a radical and sustained multimodal and self-reflexive critique of oppression in all its manifestations" as well as through "a creative and engaged participation in shaping life that honors the sacred" (Delgadillo 1). On my reading, Anzaldúa's subsequent articulation of spiritual activism in *Light in the Dark* sheds further light on spirituality as a form of "creative and engaged participation." With its focus on spirituality as both an act of the imagination and as a concrete and intentional form of techne, spiritual activism illuminates the praxic dimensions inherent in Anzaldúa's earlier theory of spiritual mestizaje.

Yet, as I have pointed out, Anzaldúa's thoughts on spirituality in *Light in the Dark* also include various ontological appeals to spiritual realism, which may detract readers from the dynamic and emergentist thrust of her spiritual activism. As she makes clear in *Borderlands*, spiritual mestizaje is a "morphogenesis, an inevitable unfolding" (2007, 103). Anzaldúa's spiritual realism, with its appeal to discreet worlds and spiritual "places," tends to downplay spirituality as an unfolding and recursive process. In this respect, Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the "three worlds" of the *árbol de la vida*, which we saw earlier, can only get her so far. The spatial metaphor has its limits, as Anzaldúa herself recognizes. Her work on spiritual activism can be seen as an attempt to find a framework that helps to bring her to a process of recurring and "inevitable unfolding."

Anzaldúa's functionalism therefore deserves a full hearing. Although she does not develop this position to the extent that she develops her spiritual realism, I believe that her forays in this direction actually afford her and her readers a more straightforward path to the kind of social change that she so desires, since the focus here is on the productive ways in which experience may be qualitatively transformed. To put the matter another way, we may ask: What is ethics for Anzaldúa? Is it a search for fixed solutions or criteria that are made objectively visible once and for all, or does ethics have more to do "with method, that is, with how we can become better prepared to obtain qualitative guidance in making good decisions in the difficult and complex situations we confront" (Pappas, p. 155)? For Anzaldúa, the answer seems quite clear: "There is never any resolution," she writes, "just the process of healing" (2015, 20). For Anzaldúa, conocimiento, spiritual mestizaje, and spiritual activism serve as the needed technologies to engage this process. They are the channels through which new forms of social transformation are born.

As a chamana, artist, and writer, Anzaldúa intuitively understands her role as an intermediary, a guide, a midwife, a "daimon." In ancient Greek religion, daimons served as intermediaries between heaven and earth who took prayers up to the gods and brought back down rewards and commands. As philosopher Jim Garrison explains, the Greeks also believed that "at birth a daimon seizes each of us, determining our unique individual potential and mediating between us and our best possible destiny" (6). Anzaldúa understands herself as a daimon in two senses: both as an intermediary chamana who helps bring human beings to our best possible destiny and as a subversive and maverick "demon."[ix] Like Jane Eyre who was "stubborn and deviant" (2000, 25), Anzaldúa bucked the conventions of traditional forms of religion (thus approaching "demonic" in the pejorative sense) while still performing a therapeutic and socially transformative function ("daimonic" in the salutary sense). Both of these impulses give rise to an incredibly daring and socially conscious thinker.

As readers of Anzaldúa, how we choose to interpret the daimon and the reality of spirits matters. Are they mere figments of our imagination? Or are they actual spirits? When we search for an answer, perhaps we would do well to turn to Anzaludúa as our guide, to hear her once again intone: Will we let the snares of literalism trap us? Does it really matter that we definitively know the origins of our spiritual journey? Let us focus instead on how the spiritual journey can heal us and our world. And let us begin that journey by widening our perception of the world and transforming it through our creative actions.

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Notes

[i] Patrick D. Murphy (2009) provides a useful definition of spiritual realism as a strategy often practiced by U.S. writers of color that takes seriously alternative forms of reality (such as spiritual forces) that arise from a history of indigenous inhabitation and ecological wisdom. Such a strategy is indicative of what Murphy calls a 'paramodern' framework that is not limited by modern epistemology or postmodern ontology.

[ii] In her notes, Anzaldúa adds that "*Conocimiento* is a politics of embodied spirituality, el legado espiritual." Anzaldúa, 2015, fn. 3, p. 224.

[iii] Aside from such professional ramifications, Anzaldúa's writing has also led to several personal hardships, such as seen in the following: "My mother says I'm shameless because to me, nothing is private. Maybe that's why I became a writer." (2000, p. 81).

[iv] An earlier footnote in the chapter, however, suggests that she may be thinking of this other type of reality as a "mundis imaginalis," or world of images, which serves as a "a median and mediating place." On this point, Anzaldúa is indebted to the work of Henry Corbin, a scholar of Islamic mysticism, and James Hillman, author of *The Myth of Analysis: Three Essays in Archetypal Psychology* (1972). Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 225, fn. 12.

[v] Along these lines, Anzaldúa also writes that "A source reality exists, and both physical and nonphysical worlds emanate from it, forming a secondary reality," p. 38.

[vi] See especially fns. 23 and 24.

[vii] See also Keating (2000), p. 8.

[viii] As Delgadillo persuasively argues, "Spirituality informs every aspect of the work that *Borderlands* performs with respect to subjectivity, epistemology, and transformation…" (p. 6).

[ix] In *Light in the Dark,* Anzaldúa notes that this translation usually offered by the Catholic Church (2015, p. 220, fn. 2). Similarly, in an earlier interview from 1983, Anzaldúa speculates that it was "probably during the time of the witchburnings" that "society made 'daemon' synonoymous with 'demon,' possession, like *The Exorcist* and other popularized, trivialized motion pictures." (2000, p. 102).