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Making Room for Guadalupe

By Jason Stern

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* is a divided text that affirms the complexity of living in the psychic, social, and cultural terrain somewhere between México and the United States. The author negotiates her identity by making her own space through the deconstruction of societal norms and conventional history, reinventing both parts to create what she calls "the new *mestiza*" (Anzaldúa 101), a new race contradicting conventional notions of race. It is through her fragmented reinterpretation of pre-colonial traditions that Anzaldúa further develops a *mestiza* consciousness, a highly politicized and particular vision that moves beyond phallogocentric, Eurocentric, standard thinking (Pérez 88)—a mode that draws upon her experience as a chicana queer. As "*una de las otras*" (Anzaldúa, "To(o) Queer" 263), the author affirms that her fragmented text will help break identity boundaries and create more fluid cultural landscapes.

But despite various reinterpretations and alternative perspectives, one thing remains clear: Gloria Anzaldúa implicitly reclaims the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe as the sole holistic embodiment of a queer Chicana sensibility in her work. That is to say, the representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe does not just speak to one aspect of Chicana queerness, but to all aspects: the sexual, social, cultural and political parts. Thus, Anzaldúa's fear of losing her identity or of misplacing it is reconciled and grounded in the Virgin (González 57); she reshapes Mexican history and projects her identity onto the patron saint, where it becomes safeguarded in its totality. Anzaldúa does a lot of shifting, in fact, making room for her identity in the Queer Virgin and, in addition, making room for the Virgin within the dialect of queer theory.

According to Anzaldúa, the Virgin Mary appeared before Juan Diego, a poor native American boy on December 9, 1531, where the Aztec goddess Tonantsi had been worshiped (Trujillo 214). The fusion of both female icons into that of Guadalupe—along with a strong sense of Mexican nationalism—raised the status of *la Virgen* to "eclipse all the other male and female religious figures in México, Central America and parts of the U.S. Southwest" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 51). Today, *la Virgen* remains a powerful figure in Mexico, revered by most as both a religious and national icon. She is a figure who has been replicated in a variety of ways and in different contexts: "[in] churches, chapels, schools, houses, home altars, earrings, scarves, refrigerator magnets . . ." (Trujillo 215). And so through this observed eclecticism, it comes as no surprise that Guadalupe is used by Anzaldúa to embody a consciousness which one might consider non-normative; after all, *la Virgen* was used by Zapata and Hidalgo to symbolize their revolution in pursuit of democracy, and she has been adopted by other marginalized Mexicans (like artists and musicians) time and time again (Trujillo 215).

Guadalupe's being illustrates theoretical discourse on gender and sexuality, as she often acts or functions in a variety of arbitrary contexts. She can be a religious woman one day and an army fighter the next, thereby undoing the strong "essentialist" assumptions regarding the gender identity of a heterosexual, devout woman. Indeed, according to theorist Judith Butler, if gender transformations "are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts," then Guadalupe does not particularly occupy one gender space or one sole function (Butler 900). She is absorbed by a continuum of far-ranging and diverse identities that subverts more traditional identity

politics, specifically the more traditional Mexican binary of strong woman/weak woman. Guadalupe can be strong or weak, neither or both, depending on what “project” she undertakes and how she is constructed by specific cultures and societies.

Mexican-American Catholics, for example, view Guadalupe in a variety of ways, as an intercessor, miracle worker, mother to all, etc (Anzaldúa 51-52). Mexican-American Protestants, however—and especially those on the border—often view *la Virgen* as a politically engineered Mexican icon used to control an impoverished society (Gonzalez 70). Thanks to queer theorists and the work of other poststructuralists, Anzaldúa is able to question assumptions about the unitary or stable identity of the Virgin through deconstructing the icon and later reconstructing her on multiple levels. By making room for various interpretations of Guadalupe, Anzaldúa can more comfortably come to terms with—and make room for—her own shifting identity.

And just as *la Virgen de Guadalupe* remains the “single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 52) by holding various identities, she also embodies various modes of Chicana lesbianism, first and foremost through her celebration of womanhood. Anzaldúa discusses *la Virgen* as typifying the “good woman,” directly in opposition to subjugated and sinful characters such as *la Malinche* of Mexican colonial history or Eve of traditional Judeo-Christian teachings (Trujillo 215). She is a symbol of female power and benevolence and she has a prominent and stable place within society. Furthermore, as an autonomous and authentic woman not dependent on reverence by the Chicano male, *la Virgen* represents the Chicana queers’ own “validation without the benediction of men, the pope, or any of his supporters” (Trujillo 227). Guadalupe is not considered a “*mujer mala*,” yet she need not answer to any man, a quality that Chicana lesbians wish to attain.

In fact, popular manifestations of Guadalupe tie her independence back to interpretations of the Virgin Mary herself. According to the Gospel of John, part 19:25-27, for instance, when Jesus is talking to his disciple, he says, pointing to Mary, “Behold, your mother.” Many Catholics take this scripture to mean that Mary is not just Christ’s mother, but everyone’s mother; she is not tied to any one specific person, especially not to any one man, though her oneness and authentic motherly qualities extend over all humanity. Thus, *la Virgen*—who is a virgin and presumably a heterosexual one; although like the Chicana lesbian, her sexuality has also been silenced by society—occupies a definitive spot in Anzaldúa’s consciousness. Despite their presumed difference in sexual orientation, both women are linked by not abiding to male authority.

As Butler notes in her discussion of gender, Simone de Beavoir once claimed, “One is not born, but rather, *becomes* a woman” (Butler 900); indeed, if both Guadalupe and Anzaldúa are both women—and queer woman at that— they unite through the appropriation and reinterpretation of various acts that challenge the phenomenological traditions of womanhood (Butler 902-903). Guadalupe is not one person’s mother, but everyone’s mother. Similarly, Anzaldúa chooses not to be mother but recognizes the influence of two mothers on her identity. The two females also link through various performative strategies that hold cultural survival as an aim. Guadalupe expands the dialectical notions of what it means to be a “Virgin Mother” through corporeal style, changing the limits and conditions of her body’s presence that transform gender. She enters—or perhaps *penetrates*—all of humanity in order to be remembered. And

Anzaldúa does the same, choosing to tap into her “*mestiza* consciousness” and Shadow Beast (a capacity to see deep phenomena below the surface of one’s identity) and write about them in order to advance and promote her gender identity (Anzaldúa 61).

These similarities, which demonstrate the process of gender identity performance, ultimately allow the author to create her “own feminist architecture” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 44), a united female front in which all women are connected to Guadalupe and may resist dominant gender paradigms. Such a connection—another type of continuum—is a central component of Chicana queer theory. Anzaldúa wants for herself—and for her female alliance—what *la Virgen* embodies, not only an unlimited social and gender space, but an accounting with all three cultures: white, Mexican and Indian. In fact, in her essay “Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory,” Deena Gonzalez addresses this desire of Anzaldúa, a desire which she calls “lesbian terrorism”(Gonzalez 47). Anzaldúa, she claims, presents readers with the fundamentally queer notion of identifying with a “wide range of group ideologies and identity politics” (48), one that would help bridge women together and form a sense of solidarity. Anzaldúa works toward building this critical alliance between all women without devaluing the inherent differences among them, just as she believes Guadalupe does. This system, as Belgian philosopher and theorist Luce Irigaray points out, is feminist in that it seeks to undo the commodification of women and queer in the sense that an all-female infrastructure is extremely homosocial (Irigaray 800-801).

In her article “Women on the Market,” Irigaray points to the exchange of women as the result of a dominant phallogocentric culture. The subordination and further exploitation of females not only creates a “ho(m)mo-sexual male monopoly,” but also an exclusive, subverted alliance between women (Irigaray 800). By inverting the nature of women into dominant figures, Anzaldúa also inverts the economy of exchange—no longer is the male responsible for giving value to the female body; the female is responsible for herself. Hence, in Anzaldúa’s consciousness, the virginal woman—who, as Irigaray notes, was once “pure exchange value” and was said to derive no personal pleasure—now has her own capital in identity-politics and is able to reinterpret broad social systems (Irigaray 804).

Guadalupe’s reclamation of self-worth or value suggests a rather atypical relationship with men; hence, she is able to reinterpret common Catholic belief sets. When Mexicans generally refer to Jesus, for example, they refer to Him as “El Niño Jesus,” as the object possessed by the motherly figure. This is strikingly different, however, from the rest of the world, which focuses primarily on Jesus and regards Mary as His Mother. Both systems are essentially the same and do not hide the parent/child relationship, yet Guadalupe is able to define her primacy irrespective of any man. Guadalupe forces practitioners to identify Jesus as Her baby, however.

And author Gonzalez agrees, saying that *la Virgen* “unites people of different races, religions, languages” without obscuring the realities of each person; she does so by never diminishing her capital over others (58). It is this mixed alliance—the symbolic weight that Guadalupe has to unite the community—that is considered so appealing to the Chicana queer. *La Virgen* is the vehicle in which all marginalized people may enter back into mainstream society and not be subjected to hide in the shadows.

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Moreover, *la Virgen* herself embodies mixing. As the fusion of both the old Aztec culture and the new Spanish one, *la Virgen* is symbolically progressive. She is the synthesis of “the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 52). Thus, as a conqueror, she empowers Anzaldúa to dominate conventional gender norms and cast herself in the limelight as a Chicana lesbian. For the author states, “I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent)” (41). She is empowered to disregard her culture’s standard values and assume a more liberal identity, a progressive desire which forms the basis of her *mestiza* consciousness.

As someone conquered, the author finds herself at the mercy of her family, her culture, and her community, all which expect “women to show a greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system of men” (39). The duality of Guadalupe’s nature parallels that of the Chicana queer, both are “the embodiment of the *hiernos gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within;” both are on an ambiguous path that “continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts” (41). Anzaldúa is thus forced to both repress and liberate her sexual identity in different contexts, taking into consideration how others label and perceive her. Specifically, it is on this path that the Chicana lesbian, as a conquered woman, most often deal with an unsupportive family and the fear of going home.

The fear of going home and of dealing with homophobia, as Anzaldúa explicitly mentions, is essentialized in Chicana queer theory. She must confront both standard cultural conventions and the beliefs espoused by the Catholic church when at home. But Anzaldúa particularly emphasizes the difficulty in confronting her own mother and the pain felt when leaving her: “To this day,” she writes, “I’m not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother ...”(38). So to fill this void, Anzaldúa appropriates Guadalupe, the symbol of motherhood in Christianity, as the mother of the Chicana queer; again, she reinterprets traditional history.

As Carla Trujillo notes, Guadalupe’s question to Juan Diego—“Am I not here, your mother?” (a sort of spin-off reference to Biblical interpretations of Mary)—has been universalized in *Borderlands* so that she becomes part of the Chicana queer’s family (216). Like Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, another Chicana lesbian/writer/theorist, has also reinforced the unequivocal centrality of family in the queer community; she notes in her own scholarship how many gay men and lesbians must “make *familia* from scratch” after they are rejected and disowned by their real families (qtd. in Trujillo 223). So, Anzaldúa appropriates Guadalupe—the embodiment of unmitigated love and an endless capacity to endure pain and suffering in Christianity—as the protector of the Chicana queer. This icon, both all-loving and all-accepting, fulfills a new duty by becoming a mother outside the realm of the church of state. Anzaldúa does not exclude Guadalupe from her role on a more local level. She becomes henceforth a “symbol of hope and faith” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 52) through which Anzaldúa proposes that the Chicana queer may be sustained and ensured survival. Guadalupe, as she illustrates, is the only mother who has not abandoned her, the only one left to embrace.

This embrace, however, only goes so far. One must keep in mind that Anzaldúa reconstructs *la Virgen* as a symbol of Chicana queerness and lesbianism and not as a model by which Chicana queers should live by (Trujillo 219-220). While she does possess power and while she is a symbol of liberation and hope and while she has come to be identified as a motherly figure,

Guadalupe is still in some way defined by her position among male icons, Jesus Christ and the Holy Father. One cannot simply overlook this fact. While they may not dominate over her, her historical and religious existence is nevertheless contingent upon their existence, a concept which Anzaldúa recognizes and does not incorporate into the formation of her queer *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, "To(o) Queer" 265-266). As many women concede, men rendered imagery of Guadalupe for the purpose of patriarchal religious indoctrination:

Not a single image of any woman-saint, Mary, scriptural, or apocryphal figure-was designed or created by a woman. The images we must deal with are images provided for women by men. They

formulate and reflect a culture designed by men for the benefit of men. Images of women are men's images of women. (Trujillo 219)

While indeed the historical/religious Guadalupe may be contingent upon the male identity, her autonomy and her relationship with men do not negate the fact that she holistically represents the Chicana queer. In fact, many Chicana queers are defined in relation to male family members. What becomes clear, however, is that Guadalupe cannot be accepted by the Chicana queer as a static icon, defined by her passive obedience. Chicana queer women are not passively obedient; they are active and transgress boundaries.

Gloria Anzaldua notes the transgressive and transitive nature of the Chicana queer community in her work--- its members constantly shift their values, beliefs and features to conform with changing "conventional" and "acceptable" notions of identity. "To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture...[others] push unacceptable parts into the shadows..." Anzaldua notes (Anzaldua 42). And still others engage in conversation with the "reigning order of heterosexual males" (Anzaldua 42) in attempt to clearly project a discernable, queer identity.

Throughout *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa demonstrates just how much Chicana queer women are women of action and not women of silence. She cleverly reinvents Guadalupe to espouse her own progressive left-wing vision for an identity revolution, breaching the gap between the Chicana queer and mainstream society. It is through the adaptation of a recognizable community icon that Gloria is able to articulate her Chicana queer sensibility, a sensibility often overlooked in Latin American social and political discourse, marked as being "patriarchal" and "conservative" (Anzaldúa, "To(o) Queer" 271). It is through her non-exclusionary techniques, such as essentializing her queer sensibility, that the author is able to unmask multiple voices and visions in both prose and poetry. In doing so, she moves herself away from a homogenized, censored identity (Pérez 89) toward one replete with irreducible, non-stigmatized characteristics.

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