

The New *Mestiza* and *La Nepantlera*

Borders—barbed-wire, wooden, sometimes invisible—separating, constraining, restricting. Seeing, sensing anew. Borderlands—where cultures, ideas, norms, selves are remade, reconfigured, where pain mingles with uncertainty, fear, anxiety, creativity, and new possibilities. The new mestiza lives there. The shadow beast is her strong will, unfreezing her so she can take a stance, so she can change. The new mestiza is the shadow that walks hand in hand with the words on these pages, leading us away from tidy, unified selves. It is good company.

In this chapter, I discuss Gloria Anzaldúa's explorations of selfhood, in particular her account of the new *mestiza*,¹ one of Anzaldúa's most important contributions in her celebrated text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, a deeply intersectional text that has been influential in various disciplines, including border studies, literary studies, women's studies, queer studies, and many others (Anzaldúa 1987).² Given this text's tremendous appeal, the force of the ideas in it, and the fact that it has become canonical in some circles, it is important for me to approach it with caution as I wish to remain respectful of Anzaldúa's words but also to have a reflective, critical edge as I engage with them.³

My first reading of *Borderlands/La Frontera* was a powerful experience. Anzaldúa's words touched me deeply; they moved me in a way that few texts had done before. Her profound awareness of the intersecting, intermeshed nature of her multiple oppressions and her moving *autohistoria*, what I would call her lived-theory, pierced me.⁴ Reading about her struggles in the borderlands struck me intellectually and viscerally, given my own experience as a Latina who felt displaced and who often wondered about the question of home ever since revolution transformed my life, and many other Nicaraguans' daily lives in the summer of 1979. My family and I thus traveled to a new land, to new worlds, without economic means and

without the ability to speak English—not knowing that we would not step on the familiar streets of Managua for a long, long time.

Along with so many others who experience life at the borderlands, not just geographically but also culturally and metaphorically, I find myself in the words that Anzaldúa so vividly crafts. Reading *Borderlands/La Frontera* felt like reading my own story, my struggles as I felt myself caught between the Nicaraguan and US worlds, between a language that sounded sweet—yes, sweet like the wonderful tropical fruit such as *nancites* and *jocotes* that I could no longer have—and a language that erased me because it was not mine. Anzaldúa's powerful writing, filled with pain but also with possibilities for personal, political, and spiritual transformation, has inspired so many inhabitants of the borderlands—it is no wonder that there are altars made in her honor.⁵ She transforms the border, what limits and constrains, to the borderlands, an in-between space of possibilities and creation. I read all those words—about edges of barbed wire, cultural clashes, homeland, movements of rebellion, blood sacrifices—and found them magnetic, pulling me toward deeper reflection and sensation about what it means to reside in a liminal space. Her work had and continues to have a tremendous impact on me emotionally and intellectually, both opening and healing wounds and also granting me new possibilities of theorizing.

In this chapter I pay particular attention to Anzaldúa's understanding of selfhood. In the first section I discuss her various characterizations of the self, including those in *Borderlands/La Frontera* and in later writings. While Anzaldúa offers various descriptions of selfhood, the new *mestiza* became representative of her view despite her and her critics' recognition of the problems associated with her choice of *mestizaje* as the leading metaphor for the self in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.⁶ This section points out some key characteristics of the new *mestiza*, including her embodiment and situatedness in an in-between space, what Anzaldúa described as borderlands and *nepantla*, and her tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction. It also notes some of the criticisms of this important notion of the self. In the chapter's second section I engage with Anzaldúa's texts so as to show the tremendous struggle that Anzaldúa goes through as she tries to explain both the multiplicity and oneness of the self.⁷ I conclude the chapter by pointing to the fact that Anzaldúa offers a *mestizaje* of both multiplicity and oneness, a paradoxical position that acknowledges that the self has a lived experience that encompasses multiplicity in terms of her various social identities and oneness in the sense of being an "I." Although perplexing, this position captures Anzaldúa's complex vision of the self in the borderlands. It also inspires my own view of multiplicitous selfhood that, as we will see, attempts

to capture the individual and existential sense of oneness of the self as well as the self's multiplicity given her social locations and her being-in-worlds.

She Seeks New Images of Identity

The path of Gloria Anzaldúa's explorations on selfhood and identity is difficult to grasp because her understanding of these notions goes through various reconfigurations and transformations.⁸ While she is most known for her view of the new *mestiza*, she also explains other visions of self, such as *la nepantlera*, new tribalism, *nosotras*, geography of selves, and *la naguala*. Some months before Anzaldúa passed away from diabetes complications, she wrote,

I'd like to create a different sense of self (*la nepantlera*) that does not rest on external forms of identifications (of family, race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality), or attachments to power, privilege, and control, or romanticized self-images. But can we talk about ourselves in ways that do not rest on some notion of identity when identity is the means by which we (both individuals and groups) attempt to create a sense of security and belonging in the midst of a fast paced, ever-changing world? (Anzaldúa 2009, 302)

In this passage, Anzaldúa refers to one of her later visions of selfhood, *la nepantlera*. Anzaldúa defines *nepantleras* as "boundary-crossers, thresholders who initiate others in rites of passage, activists who, from a listening, receptive, spiritual stance, rise to their own visions and shift into acting them out, *haciendo mundo Nuevo* (introducing change)" (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 571). She describes a self that lives on the borders but that can cross them and facilitate passages across worlds, a self that does not form self-understandings based on race, sex, gender, or other forms of what Anzaldúa describes as external forms of identification, a self that acknowledges an unmapped common ground: the humanity of the other" (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 570).

An important aspect of this later description of self is Anzaldúa's rejection of what she calls an "oppositional form of identity politics." Anzaldúa regrets the manner in which identity politics becomes dependent on forging political alliances by virtue of a shared identity, be it race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and so forth. In her view, the oppositional aspect

of such identity politics stems from the fact that binaries are created in the process of forging identities—for example, us/them, gay/straight, able/disabled, and so on—and groups find themselves opposing the other side of the binary. Anzaldúa rejects this establishment of binaries and notes that identity politics sets itself up for failure. Rather than transforming institutions, it tries to reclaim power only from the very institutions that made it powerless in the first place. Given Anzaldúa's concern for a more inclusive understanding of identity, an "interconnectivity," especially in her later writings, she is wary of oppositional identity politics (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 569).

Yet, as Martín Alcoff notes, identity politics is a complex notion that has had multiple meanings. While a common understanding of it, especially by critics, sees identity politics as appealing to homogeneity within a group as well as to separatism, this is a mistaken understanding of the notion. Martín Alcoff takes the Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" as the locus classicus of identity politics and points out that according to the writers of the statement identity politics is connected to the general relevance of identity in politics (Martín Alcoff 2006, 15; Combahee River Collective 1979). They do not assume that groups are homogenous, and they do not call for a separatist stance. Rather, they wish to underscore the importance of identity in their personal experiences of doing political work. Keating also points out the complexity of the collective's statement and the fact that it calls for a multipronged approach against racial, sexual, and class oppression, a complexity that, according to Keating, is missing in some of the more recent versions of identity politics (2013, 92–93). As understood by early proponents, identity politics is complex and not the narrow politics that appeals to homogeneity and calls for separatism.⁹ In her understanding of identity politics, Anzaldúa herself falls for this problematic understanding, and thus tries to forge an altogether different vision of identity not based on specific external forms of identification.

However, despite her appeal to a new understanding of selfhood that does not rely on external forms of identification, in the same passage Anzaldúa recognizes the need to appeal to identity so as to get a sense of security and belonging in this "fast-paced, ever-changing world." The passage illustrates Anzaldúa's struggle regarding selfhood and identification, a struggle that can be seen throughout her writings. Anzaldúa recognizes the importance that claiming her Chicana identity, her queerness, and her other social identities has had for her as she attempted to find some sense of comfort in the midst of the "intimate terrorism" caused by life at the borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987, 20). At the same time, she recognizes the

narrowness and confining nature of what she calls “identity boxes” and thus calls for a radical shift, what she calls “a different story (of mestizaje) enabling you to rethink yourself in more global-spiritual terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career” (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 561) and appeals to a “new tribalism” and a “retribalizing of mestizaje” (2002, 560).¹⁰

Interestingly, a great deal of the power of the notion of the new *mestiza*, one of Anzaldúa’s most important contributions and her most celebrated account of self as described in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, is that it is derived from Anzaldúa’s lived experience in what she calls the *herida abierta*, the open wound, of the US-Mexico border, an experience that is defined in terms of identity based on race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as opposition to whites, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans and their norms. Anzaldúa’s writing in the *Borderlands/La Frontera* period, what Keating calls Anzaldúa’s “middle writings” (2009, 11), highlights oppositional identity in terms of the way in which Anzaldúa understands herself in opposition to the traditional norms held by these groups. Her work in the early and late periods contests such identifications and calls for more inclusive visions of self and identity, such as *la nepantlera* as well as a “new tribalism,”¹¹ what she describes as an “expanded identity” (Anzaldúa 2009, 283).¹² When describing this new tribalism in her later piece, “(Un)natural bridges, (Un) safe spaces,” Anzaldúa states,

Our goal is not to use differences to separate us from others, but neither is it to gloss over them. Many of us identify with groups and social positions not limited to our ethnic, racial, religious, class, gender, or national classifications. Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include—what I call the new tribalism. (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002, 3)

In the later writings Anzaldúa also appeals to the wider notion of *nos/otras*, a play on the Spanish word *nosotras*, which means “us.” Anzaldúa inserts a slash between *nos* and *otras*; while *nos*, Spanish for the feminine “we,” underscores our coming together or “us,” *otras* refers to otherness. Anzaldúa states in a 1996 interview,

We are mutually complicitous—us and them, white and colored, straight and queer, Christian and Jew, self and Other, oppressor and oppressed. We all find ourselves in the position of being

simultaneously insider/outsider. . . . Hopefully sometime in the future we may become *nosotras* without the slash. Perhaps geography will no longer separate us. We're becoming a geography of selves—of different cities or countries who stand at the threshold of *numeros mundos*. (Anzaldúa 2000, 254–255)¹³

Nos/otras, then, signifies an understanding of ourselves as insider/outsider. It appeals to the possibility of our being together while at the same time recognizing differences. As Keating notes, *nos/otras* affirms collectivity, while at the same time it recognizes difference and divisiveness and also allows for the possibility of healing by understanding that “we contain the others, the others contain us” (Keating 2006, 10).¹⁴

According to Keating, in her later work Anzaldúa proposes this more “expansive” theory of subjectivity by appealing to the notions of new tribalism and *nos/otras* that move beyond oppositional identity categories, thus problematizing her appeals to identity in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In a 1983 interview Anzaldúa states,

I use labels because we haven't gotten beyond race or class or other differences yet. When I don't assert certain aspects of my identity like the spiritual part of my queerness, they get overlooked and I'm diminished. When we come to a time when I don't have to say, “Look, I'm a dyke,” or “I'm spiritual,” or “I'm intellectual,” I'll stop using labels. That's what I want to work towards. But until we come to that time, if you lay your body down and don't declare certain facets of yourself, they get stepped on. (Anzaldúa 2000, 77)

In 2002 she writes,

Today categories of race and gender are more permeable and flexible than they were for those of us growing up prior to the 1980s. *This bridge we call home* invites us to move beyond separate and easy identifications, creating bridges that cross race and other classifications among different groups via intergenerational dialogue. Rather than legislating and restricting racial identities, it tries to make them more pliant. (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 2)

We can see that Anzaldúa is constantly struggling with the idea of social identities as it is clear that she recognizes their importance in our politi-

cal struggles, but she also considers them as labels that lead to exclusion. In addition, Anzaldúa wavers from appeals to a radical transformation in which there will be no room for identity categories at all to appeals for a reconfiguration of previous labels, what she calls “separate and easy identifications” and oppositional identities, to a more “pliant” sense of identity—in other words, there are different ways in which *nos/otras* becomes *nosotras*.¹⁵

While I understand Anzaldúa’s concern regarding the narrowing, essentializing, and homogenizing aspect of identity categories, I wonder about her desire for a time when we do not have to appeal to our racial identities or other types of identities.¹⁶ Will this vision promote a belief in race neutrality when such neutrality is not really in effect? After the US election of President Obama, much has been said about race neutrality and a postracial time. However, pervasive racial oppression remains, and this oppression needs to be acknowledged rather than covered over by rhetoric about race neutrality. When discussing what she considers a dangerous postracialism, Crenshaw states,

It is a trick room whose welcoming spaciousness belies the gradual closing of the four walls, a closing that represents a synthesis between colorblindness that simply denied the structural reproduction of racial power and post-racialism that seeks to minimize its effects. Escape seems impossible until an off switch can be found. (2011, 1347)

Where do we find an off switch? Is the notion of new tribalism or *nos/otras* that will lead to a new “geography of selves” part of this switch?

It is interesting to note that even in one of her earlier writings, “La Prieta,” Anzaldúa had an inclusive vision that she called *El Mundo Zurdo*, or the Left-Handed World, an inclusive community in which members of different groups are able to form coalitions regardless of their different ideologies and affinities (Keating & González López 2011, 14). This world is, according to Anzaldúa, “a network of kindred spirits, a kind of family” that works for change (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983, 209). What allows them to form alliances is their condition of not fitting in society or being the “queer groups” that don’t belong anywhere.¹⁷ As she notes,

We are the queer groups, the people that don’t belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within our own respective cultures. Combined we cover so many oppressions. But the overwhelming oppression is the collective fact that we

do not fit, and because we do not fit we are a threat. Not all of us have the same oppressions, but we empathize and identify with each other's oppressions. . . . In *El Mundo Zurdo* I with my own affinities and my people with theirs can live together and transform the planet. (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983, 209)

Anzaldúa's account of self and identity is complex and in process—it progresses, evolves, circles, and encompasses various related visions of selfhood such as the new *mestiza*, *la nepantlera*, new tribalism, and *nos/otras*. Her recognition of the importance of identity categories for political purposes and her desire to have an altogether different kind of self and identity that does not rely on external forms of identifications (e.g., race, sexuality, etc.) create a productive tension in her discussions of selfhood.¹⁸ The trajectory of Anzaldúa's understanding of self is not simply linear, as if it were possible to neatly arrange the trajectory from new *mestiza* to *la nepantlera* to new tribalism. A more inclusionary account of self was already at work in the early writings (Anzaldúa 2009, 11). As pointed out previously, Anzaldúa's recognition of the importance of identity categories is also a concern even in the later writings.

The New *Mestiza* in *Nepantla*

Anzaldúa is acutely aware of the difficulty of the task of providing an account of self that captures the complexities of her lived experience in the borderlands. While cognizant that in her later work she emphasizes a much more expansive vision of selfhood, here I would like to highlight some main characteristics of the new *mestiza*, because I consider these features to be of great importance when attempting to provide an account of selfhood that goes beyond traditional accounts that emphasize unity and undermine the multiplicity of the self. Anzaldúa's discussion of the new *mestiza* includes an appeal to identity, but not an identity that is easily categorized as oppositional. As noted earlier, *Borderlands/La Frontera* includes an oppositional sense of identity as Anzaldúa situates herself against the norms of Chicanos, whites, and Mexicans. She also wishes to find the “true” Chicana faces, a desire that places her dangerously close to an essentialist view of identity (1987, 87). However, as Elena Ruiz-Aho notes, Anzaldúa writes about her own concrete lived-experience, and other *mestizas* may or may not relate to it (Ruiz-Aho 2011, 357). Moreover, in the very same account of the new *mestiza*, Anzaldúa already provides a more expansive, inclusive view since she highlights the new *mestiza's* ability to be on “both shores at once” or

to “cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory” (Anzaldúa 1987, 78–79). As she says, “I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question” (1987, 87). Despite her seemingly essentialist remarks about the new *mestiza*, Anzaldúa is already working with elements for a more expansive identity.¹⁹ It is thus important to keep in mind the tensions regarding identity that run through Anzaldúa’s work.

In this section, I first explain some of the main features of the new *mestiza*, such as her situatedness, her state of in-betweenness or being in the borderlands and *nepantla*, and her tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction. These tensions are helpful in understanding alternatives to traditional understandings of selfhood and subjectivity that miss the importance of the multiplicity of the self. I also discuss the way in which these three characteristics of the new *mestiza*, characteristics that are also part of Anzaldúa’s later visions of selfhood such as *la nepantlera*, are key for transformation and resistance to oppression.

As a lover of the written word as well as images, Anzaldúa appeals to myths and metaphors that might perhaps disclose what overly theoretical accounts of self that rely on traditional ways of thinking about self, identity, and subjectivity cannot even begin to capture—thus Anzaldúa forms a vision of a new self, the new *mestiza*, that is to reveal the agonizing but also rewarding struggle of life in the borderlands. *Mestizaje*, or race-mixing, particularly between Europeans and Amerindians, has a long history, from its early uses when the Spanish arrived in the New World to José Vasconcelos’s understanding of it as he developed the idea of a *raza cósmica* to Chicano contemporary understandings of a “critical *mestizaje*,” a *mestizaje* that understands itself as “embedded in a legacy of colonial struggle and moving through new configurations of resistant identities” (Pérez-Torres 2006, 45).

Even though *mestizaje* is generally understood in terms of racial mixing, Anzaldúa’s use of the concept is not one that prioritizes this racial dimension. For Anzaldúa, the “new *mestiza*” is a notion that is more inclusive than racial *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa 2009, 205; 2013, 104). Interpreting the term as primarily signifying a racial identity is problematic because that would suggest that Anzaldúa’s notion captures only the *mestiza* identity of Chicanas. While her account of the new *mestiza* is anchored in her lived experience as a Chicana living on the US-Mexico border and prioritizes this experience—one must not overlook the material, economic (Saldívar 1991, 83), and geographic conditions of the new *mestiza*—Anzaldúa’s account captures both material as well as metaphorical aspects of a life in the borderlands. The metaphorical and theoretical aspects of Anzaldúa’s account,

however, cannot be considered as the most important ones, either, as they might lead to theories that lack specificity and materiality, thus allowing for the erasure of the importance of the actual conditions of those who inhabit the borderlands.

The new *mestiza* is a self inhabiting the borderlands, a self in-between the United States and Mexico, who experiences a lived struggle because she is split between cultures, races, languages, and genders, all tugging at her, pulling her to one side or the other, demanding alliances or setting down rules, continually pushing her to choose one or the other, to suffer from “an absolute despot duality” (Anzaldúa 1987, 19). Anzaldúa rejects such dualities and binaries and, instead, finds that in the borderlands the new *mestiza* occupies another space, a liminal space of *nepantla* or in-betweenness.²⁰ According to Keating, *nepantla* is an extension or elaboration of her theory of the borderlands and the *Coatlicue* state, the state in which the new *mestiza* becomes paralyzed but that is also necessary for transformation and change (Keating 2006, 8). She quotes Anzaldúa’s discussion as to why she chooses to use *nepantla* instead of “borderlands”:

I found that people were using “Borderlands” in a more limited sense than I had meant it. So to elaborate on the psychic and emotional borderlands I’m now using “nepantla.” . . . With the nepantla paradigm I try to theorize unarticulated dimensions of the experience of the mestizas living in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities—psychological, sociological, political, spiritual, historical, creative, imagined. (Qtd. in Keating 2006, 8)

Nepantla is an unstable, precarious, and unpredictable space, “*tierra desconocida*” (unknown land) and a “bewildering transitional state” that is disorienting and displacing and leads to dissociation of identity (Anzaldúa 2009, 243,180). It is a space of constant displacement that leads to an uncomfortable and alarming feeling but that is also the “home” of the *new mestiza* (Anzaldúa 2009, 243). As such, it is also a space of healing and meaning-making that encompasses spirituality and political activism (Román-Odio 2013, 54). While being in this space, the new *mestiza* develops a *mestiza* consciousness that, according to Anzaldúa, can reflect critically and see from different perspectives. Consequently, it is a space rich with possibilities not only of critique but also of transformation. It is a space in which new identities can be forged:

Nepantla is the Náhuatl word for an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity. (Anzaldúa 2009, 180)

In *nepantla*, the new *mestiza* experiences “Coaticue states,” what Anzaldúa describes as ruptures in the everyday world that include a double movement, including moments of fear and inability to move but also moments of creativity and transformation, of crossing and acquiring a new identity. In these crossings, the new *mestiza* acquires a *mestiza* consciousness, or a “consciousness of the Borderlands” (Anzaldúa 1987, 77). *Mestiza* consciousness is a “plural consciousness,” as it requires the negotiation of multiple ideas and knowledges (Mohanty 2003, 80). Thus for Anzaldúa such consciousness implies a “multiplicity that is transformational” (Anzaldúa 2009, 246). *Nepantla* is both the space that makes possible the new *mestiza* consciousness as well as the space that becomes “home” to the new *mestiza*, in which she can further develop her critical abilities and continue to transform herself. *Nepantla* represents actual borderlands, a theoretical space, but also “states of mind.” As Anzaldúa says, “I associate *nepantla* with states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another” (Anzaldúa 2009, 248).

As a liminal subject that lives in *nepantla* between cultures, races, languages, and genders—as a subject with various in-betweens—the new *mestiza* can question, mediate, translate, negotiate, and navigate these different locations and thus be able to form a critical stance. Such a critical stance allows for the possibility that the new *mestiza* will become resistant. Commentators such as Lugones rightly point out that *nepantla* constitutes a theoretical space for resistance (Lugones 1992, 31). Key to her ability to be critical and thus resistant and to her ability to transform herself is the new *mestiza* consciousness’s tolerance for both contradiction and ambiguity:

Because I, a *mestiza*,
Continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan
Simultáneamente. . . .

The *new mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. . . . Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa 1987, 77, 79)

The tolerance for ambiguity and contradictions is for Anzaldúa absolutely necessary for the new *mestiza's* possibility for transformation and resistance. The interesting question is how the experience of contradiction and ambiguity leads to transformation and even resistance rather than keeping the new *mestiza* in a state of intimate terrorism, without the possibility of change. Different interpreters provide different explanations for the formation of the new *mestiza's* critical stance. Edwina Barvosa, for example, finds that the critical abilities of the new *mestiza* are generated by the intersections of her multiple identities and worlds. Such overlaps are, according to Barvosa, the basis for inner tensions and critical vantage points in the sense that the new *mestiza* can analyze her knowledge and identities vis-à-vis each other as she goes back and forth between her social spheres (2008, 89–96).²¹

Lugones sees the possibility for resistance arising out of the new *mestiza's* tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction but also from her transgression of rigid conceptual boundaries and her breaking of the unitary aspect of new and old paradigms that lead her to create a new value system through the uprooting of dualistic thinking (1992, 34). As opposed to other commentators who see the new *mestiza's* resistance as social, Lugones points out that, for Anzaldúa, crossing-over is a solitary act, “an act of solitary rebellion,” that emphasizes the inner life of the self and the psychology of oppression and liberation rather than a “sociality of resistance” (Lugones 1992, 36). Such a sociality of resistance, which, in Lugones’s view can be developed from Anzaldúa’s text, is of the utmost importance since “unless resistance is a social activity, the resister is doomed to failure in the creation of a new universe of meaning, a new identity, *a raza mestiza*” (Lugones 1992, 36). While I agree with Lugones that there is an emphasis on the individual character of Anzaldúa’s voyage of resistance and transformation, I also see the social as playing an important role in Anzaldúa’s account. Both the individual and the social are linked in her development of resistant practices.

Lugones and Barvosa rightly capture the connection between the possibility of acquiring a critical stance derived from a life in *nepantla* and the possibility of transformation and resistance. It is in the cracks between worlds in which meanings and ideas overlap that the new *mestiza* can inter-

pret these meanings vis-à-vis each other and find points of commonality and divergence that might help her provide a more critical interpretation than if she just had access to knowledge and meanings in separate spheres. As Anzaldúa states in a 1996 interview, “Navigating the cracks between the worlds is difficult and painful, like going through the process of reconstructing a new life, a new identity. Both are necessary for survival and growth” (Anzaldúa 2000, 255).

Situatedness, in-betweenness, and tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction remain crucial in Anzaldúa’s account of the new *mestiza* and in her later characterizations of self. They attest to the deeply phenomenological aspect of her account as they capture her lived experience in the borderlands or *nepantla*. Through a passionate engagement with her own experience of inhabiting the US-Mexico border, her deep sense of being liminal, and her recognition of the ambiguous and contradictory aspects of her life that produce intimate terrorism as well as transformation, Anzaldúa offers a moving Latina feminist phenomenological account. This account serves as an inspiration for those who wish to move beyond traditional understandings of the subject or of selfhood that do not take into consideration the importance of situatedness, liminality, ambiguity, and plurality. Even philosophical phenomenological views of self that take into consideration situatedness and ambiguity can benefit from Anzaldúa’s vision so as to do justice to the lived experience of those who inhabit the borderlands.

The Perils of *Mestizaje*

While Anzaldúa’s account of the new *mestiza* is extremely helpful in providing possibilities for accounts of selfhood that are more attuned to situatedness and multiplicity, it is important to remember that the term, as well as Anzaldúa’s use of it, might be problematic. For example, Debra A. Castillo and María Socorro Tabuenca Córdoba criticize Anzaldúa for providing an account of the borderlands that is overly metaphorical and is defined and narrated from a “first world” perspective (Castillo & Tabuenca Córdoba 2002). While Castillo and Tabuenca Córdoba’s critique picks up on possible pitfalls of Anzaldúa’s account given the importance of the metaphorical there, the new *mestiza* needs to be understood as anchored in specific material conditions, as a situated, embodied being. Anzaldúa’s Latina feminist phenomenology is at its best when describing her embodied experience in situated contexts in the precarious life of the borderlands. Anzaldúa’s descriptions emphasize the new *mestiza*’s struggle in the US-Mexican borderlands as it is felt in the flesh rather than as an intellectual exercise:

Wind tugging at my sleeve
 feet sinking into the sand
 I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
 where the two overlap
 a gentle coming together
 at other times and places a violent clash. . . .

I walk through the hole in the fence
 to the other side.
 Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire
 rusted by 139 years
 of the salty breath of the sea. . . .

this “Tortilla Curtain” turning into *el río Grande*
 flowing down to the flatlands
 of the Magic Valley of South Texas
 its mouth emptying into the Gulf.

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. . . .

In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures.
 (Anzaldúa 1987, 1–2, 81).

As Jacqueline Martinez reminds us, readings and applications of Anzaldúa’s account of the new *mestiza* cannot overlook this struggle in the flesh that Anzaldúa describes, the “gut-wrenching struggle” from which her theory of the new *mestiza* arises (Martinez 2000, 81). Indeed, the account of the new *mestiza* is a “theory in the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983, 23). It is a theory in the flesh that is mindful of the intersecting or intermeshed nature of social identities such as gender, race, sexuality, class, nationality, religion, and other identities. Castillo and Tabuenca Córdova’s critique underscores the metaphorical import of the notion of *mestizaje* in Anzaldúa’s work and undertheorizes the various ways in which Anzaldúa’s account is not just metaphorical but explicitly appeals to embodied, material experience.

The second criticism, the view that Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* is narrated from a "first world" perspective, carries more weight—and this is a reason why Anzaldúa's discussion is criticized for being overly metaphorical. It is indeed the case that if we think about the border from the perspective of those who are on the Mexican side, it is impossible to miss the specific material geopolitical situation Mexicans face. From the point of view of the United States, however, it becomes more possible to minimize this geopolitical situation and underscore the metaphorical aspect of the border; it becomes easier to think abstractly about the border (Castillo & Tabuenca Córdoba 2002, 16). After all, a number of academics residing in the United States and occupying spaces in academic institutions informed by and promoting privilege do not need to actually cross the border to survive, to get educated, to sell goods, and so on. In this sense, Anzaldúa's narrative has elements that can be understood as deriving from a "first world" perspective; for example, the very fact that Anzaldúa writes and publishes on her experience at the borderlands is a sign of privilege. Not only that—Anzaldúa's own understanding of her spatial location is informed by her identity as a Mexican American residing in the United States. Moreover, as Mexican scholar Tabuenca Córdoba notes, Anzaldúa herself does not appeal to Mexican writers or provide a perspective from the Mexican side (Tabuenca Córdoba 1995–1996).

As readers and admirers of Anzaldúa's work, we need to be aware of this "first world" point of view that informs Anzaldúa's depiction of that open wound that is the US-Mexico border. It is important that we do not ignore the problematic issues in Anzaldúa's account. We are not in the business of creating gods, or goddesses, here—at least I hope not—or of excusing our favorite thinkers' missteps or mistakes.²² We should thus be keenly aware of the manner in which her writing betrays a "first world" point of view. Nonetheless, when considering this particular criticism, it is important that we remain attuned to the way in which a point of view from "the first world" does not unquestionably point to privilege. That is, to be a Chicana residing on the border confers certain privileges and points of view or horizons through which experience is understood. However, this perspective is also one that has a glimpse, and if not a glimpse, a deep, vivid perception of what it means not to be privileged, of what it means to be marginalized. I consequently take seriously Anzaldúa's description of the borderlands and her description of her many puzzling, painful, but also transformative experiences, with the understanding that her discussion is in need of the inclusion of a point of view from the other side of the border.

In addition to the criticism that Anzaldúa's account is overly metaphorical and narrated from a "first world" perspective, her choice of metaphor is also criticized, even by Anzaldúa herself. In a late 1980s interview she states,

Identity is sort of like a river. It's one and it's flowing and it's a process. By giving different names to different parts of a single mountain range or different parts of a river, we're doing that entity a disservice. We are fragmenting it. I'm struggling with how to name without cutting up. . . . I was trying to do that with the *new mestiza*. I was trying to get away from just thinking in terms of blood—you know, the *mestiza* as being of mixed blood. The *new mestiza* is a mixture of all these identities and has the ability, the flexibility, the malleability, the amorphous quality of being able to stretch, and to go this way and that way, add new labels or names which would mix with the others and they would also be malleable. But it's hard to articulate. I am trying to find metaphors—like the mountain range, the river, the *mestiza*—but they're not quite what I want. (Anzaldúa 2000, 132–133)

Unfortunately, the metaphors fail to capture Anzaldúa's vision and lead to various complications. Yarbrow-Bejarano rightly points to the importance of the tension found in *Borderlands/La Frontera* between "*mestiza* consciousness as an activity or process of the non-unitary subject and the crystallized production of the 'name' *mestiza* consciousness" (Yarbrow-Bejarano 1994, 17). Once named, this self is given boundaries, specific interpretations that limit it, when in fact it needs to be understood in terms of its being a process that is in the making and that is open to numerous possibilities for creating and reinterpreting itself. Hence Anzaldúa compares the new *mestiza* to a *nagual*, a Nahuatl term for a shape-shifter. As she notes, "We shift around to do the work we have to do, to create identities we need to live up to our potential" (Anzaldúa 2009, 211). However, the new *mestiza*, what Anzaldúa considered a term more inclusive than the racial *mestizaje*, becomes the most prominent metaphor for the self in *Borderlands/La Frontera*.

In my view, this choice of *mestizaje* as the leading metaphor for her primary account of self in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is both highly problematic and constructive. That there is a contradictory aspect to Anzaldúa's account of self is not surprising, as the notion of contradiction plays a crucial role in Anzaldúa's view of the new *mestiza*. Contradictions can be used

productively—I have learned from Nietzsche as well as Anzaldúa on this matter. Nevertheless, another criticism of Anzaldúa is worrisome. According to Saldaña-Portillo, a serious problem with Anzaldúa's appeal to the new *mestiza* and her connection to Aztec goddesses is that while it romanticizes the indigenous past, it actually silences present indigenous peoples and their concerns, ultimately keeping aspects of indigenous culture as “ornamentation” (Saldaña-Portillo 2001, 420). This is a serious charge, indeed, that cannot be ignored. I still remember that, when reading Anzaldúa for the first time and being incredibly moved by her analysis of a life pulled in multiple directions, I was sometimes perplexed by her references to indigenous deities from which I was far removed except for the occasional Mexican history lesson in high school. It was not clear to me how her appeal to Aztec goddesses connected to me, to present-day Chicanas/os, and to indigenous peoples in the United States and Latin America. Yet, I would like to suggest that taking seriously Anzaldúa's view of the new *mestiza* does not preclude the possibility of understanding present indigenous populations or of activism denouncing the numerous problems and afflictions of these populations. It does mean, however, that we must be vigilant about the ways in which her position might undermine such populations and leave us with a romanticized vision of indigenous identity. It is necessary to keep a critical, reflective stance when appealing to Anzaldúa's account of *mestizaje*.

Furthermore, this critical stance needs to take into consideration Cristina Beltrán's strong critique that *mestizaje* should not be seen as always yielding an antiessentialist, liberatory, transgressive identity. She points out that in order for Anzaldúa's notion of the new *mestiza* to replace the overly nationalistic rhetoric of the early Chicano movement's appeal to Aztlán, to move from homeland to borderland, Anzaldúa needs to maintain a “hierarchy of hybridity” (Beltrán 2004, 600). That is, Anzaldúa needs to exalt the importance of the indigenous heritage in opposition to whites/Westerners and to privilege the indigenous side of *mestiza* identity. According to Beltrán, Anzaldúa's project of offering a notion of multiple, fluid subjectivity fails. As she states,

Anzaldúa's theory celebrates ambiguity and the tearing down of dichotomies, yet she continually constructs a dominant narrative of subjectivity in which some subjects represent multiplicity and insight while others signify unenlightened singularity. . . . Chicano hybridity is created in opposition to the unquestioned existence of autonomous self-contained subjects. (Beltrán 2004, 604–605)

Beltrán thus claims that for Anzaldúa's theory to work, she must posit a vision of white, Western Europeans as monolithic.

I agree with Beltrán's claim that a *mestiza*, or what she calls a hybrid identity, should not necessarily be regarded as always progressive and liberatory. Liminality is not a sufficient condition for liberation. Given the role that marginalization plays in Anzaldúa's understanding of the development of *la facultad*, the epistemic privilege conferred to the new *mestiza* should not be seen as automatically deriving from the experience of liminality or from sharing an indigenous heritage. We are already familiar with the pitfalls of early standpoint theories that in effect essentialize the marginalized and reify their epistemic privilege (Harding 2004). Anzaldúa herself makes comments regarding Chicanas/os and the new *mestiza* that do have an essentialist tone, despite the fact that the very notion of the new *mestiza* in *nepantla* counters simple dichotomies and essentialisms. This is one of the obvious tensions in the text that, in my view, illustrates Anzaldúa's struggle as she recognized both the political import of claiming an identity and the essentializing, homogenizing impulse brought about by such claims. As noted earlier, Anzaldúa's own vision of identity politics can be rather narrow.

Beltrán is rightly attuned to the oppositional aspect of Anzaldúa's account. Yet I wonder if she is correct in stating that in Anzaldúa's vision those who are on the other side are Western whites. Anzaldúa questions not only norms, practices, and epistemologies arising from the US or European white tradition but also from Mexican and indigenous tradition (as she retells and refashions indigenous myths). Beltrán, however, wishes to show that Anzaldúa's version of *mestizaje* is ultimately dependent on a narrow vision of whites, which allows her to portray the *mestizola* identity as fluid, multiple, and resistant. Ultimately, according to Beltrán, Anzaldúa essentializes Chicanos as well. Again, there are passages in *Borderlands* that support this criticism. Yet, as noted earlier, Anzaldúa's project is much more complex. Reading her descriptions of the new *mestiza* in *Borderlands* along with her 2002 account of *conocimiento* shows just how difficult it is for the new *mestiza* to cross or to become a "bridge" to the other side (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 540–578). It is not the case that Anzaldúa unproblematically confers epistemic privilege to the new *mestiza*.

Anzaldúa herself comments that she was not born in Tenochtitlan in the ancient past or in a contemporary Aztec village and states, "Beware of el romance del *mestizaje*, I hear myself saying silently. Puede ser una ficción . . . but I and other writers/artists have invested ourselves in it" (Anzaldúa 2009, 181). While Saldaña-Portillo's critique must be kept in

mind, as well as other criticisms of Anzaldúa's view such as Sáenz's accusation of an unacceptable nostalgia for old gods (Sáenz 1997), it is important to understand, as Anzaldúa notes, the investment that Chicanas and other Latinas have in the notion of the new *mestiza*. This investment is due to the numerous possibilities of transformation that the notion of the new *mestiza* offers. As noted, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* consciousness is "a multiplicity that is transformational" (Anzaldúa 2009, 246). It is both transformational personally for the *mestiza* herself and for readers, scholars, and followers as they struggle to understand the experience of marginalization and possibilities of transformation and resistance. I thus embrace Anzaldúa's visions of selfhood while taking into consideration the complexity and multiplicity of her text and her quest to understand herself from her location in the borderlands and while also being aware of the dangers of her choice of *mestizaje* in creating and representing Latina subjectivity. As Gregory Velazco y Trianosky notes, the central challenge for those advocating a theory of identity on the notion of *mestizaje*, is "to do so without being drawn into the essentialist quagmire (Velazco y Trianosky 2009, 286).

La Nepantlera Way: Later Visions of Selfhood and Transformation

The possibility of transformation runs not only through Anzaldúa's vision of the new *mestiza* but also through the visions of self that, as discussed previously, are associated more with her later writings, such as *la nepantlera*. In the later 2002 essay, "now let us shift . . . the path of *conocimiento* . . . inner work, public acts," Anzaldúa emphasizes the work of *las nepantleras*:

Las nepantleras must alter their mode of interaction—make it more inclusive, open. In a to-and-fro motion they shift from their customary position to the reality of the first one group then the other. Though tempted to retreat behind racial lines and hide behind simplistic walls of identity, las nepantleras know their work lies in positioning themselves—exposed and raw—in the crack between these worlds, and in revealing current categories as unworkable . . .

When you're in the place between worldviews (*nepantla*) you're able to slip between realities to a neutral perception. A decision made in the in-between place becomes a turning point initiating psychological and spiritual transformations, making

other kinds of experiences possible. (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 567, 569)

Like the *new mestiza*, it is in the cracks between worlds that *la nepantlera* forms a more critical stance that may lead to transformation.

In this same 2002 text, Anzaldúa tackles the questions of how one acquires *conocimiento*, her term for a particular kind of intuitive knowing or “spiritual inquiry” that prompts one to action and transformation (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 542).²³ She also emphasizes spiritual activism and the personal or inner struggle connected to the possibility for change:

When and how does transformation happen? When a change occurs in your consciousness (awareness of your sense of self and your response to self, others, and surroundings) becomes cognizant that it has a point of view and the ability to act from choice. When you shift attention from your customary point of view (the ego) to that of *la naguala*. . . . When you include the complexity of feeling two or more ways about a person/issue. When you're in the place between worldviews (*nepantla*) you're able to slip between realities to a neutral perception. A decision made in the in-between place becomes a turning point initiating psychological and spiritual transformations, making other kinds of experiences possible. (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002, 568–569)

Despite her awareness of the relational aspect of identity, of the fact that identity doesn't depend on individuals alone but on those with whom one interacts (Anzaldúa 2000, 242), when discussing the question of transformation, Anzaldúa emphasizes the personal, inner journey that in her view is necessary for other types of transformation. As she says, “The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. . . . Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (Anzaldúa 1987, 87). Her interest and emphasis on inner transformation, however, should not be interpreted as one sided or as precluding a sociality of resistance. While Anzaldúa highlights personal, inner struggle—this is one of the most powerful aspects of her writing—she is deeply committed to social change. Possibility of collective transformation, reconfiguration, and creation of norms that defy oppression runs through her work. As Keating explains,

Anzaldúa develops a holistic worldview that synergistically combines social activism with spiritual vision, creating what she calls