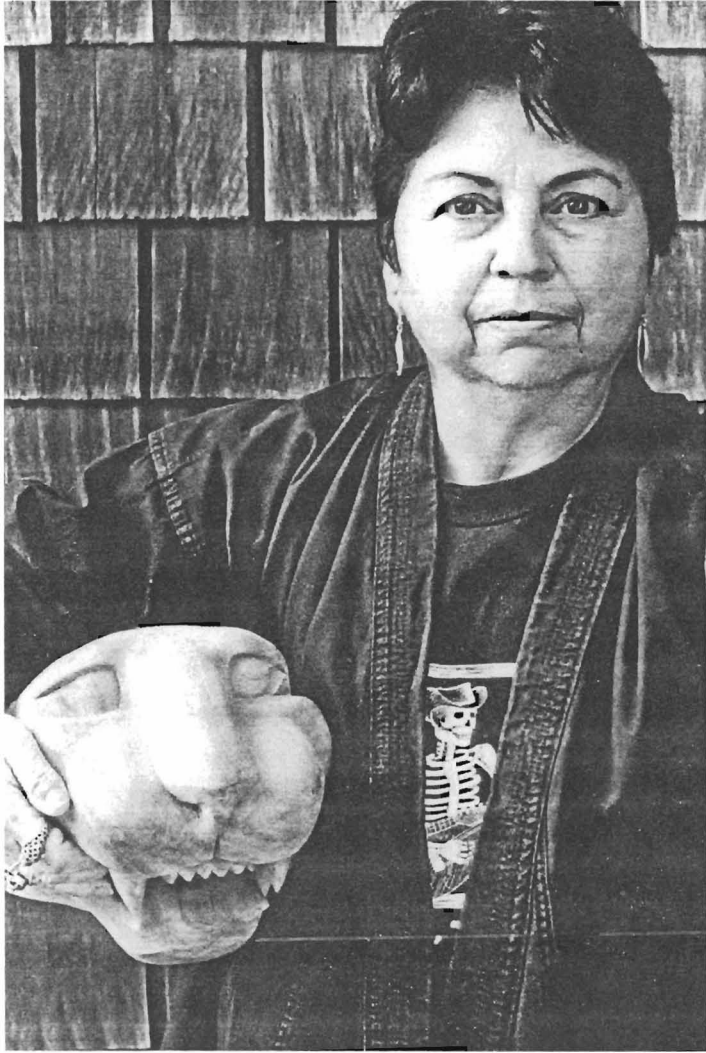


The book cover features a warm, orange-toned background. On the right side, there is a close-up portrait of Gloria Anzaldúa, looking slightly to the right. In the bottom left corner, a pink piggy bank is visible. A dark brown rectangular box is centered on the left side, containing the title and editor information in white text.

The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader

EDITED BY
AnaLouise Keating



GLORIA E. ANZALDÚA

The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader

AnaLouise Keating, editor

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frontispiece: photograph of Gloria Anzaldúa
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Para almas afines,
for everyone working to create
El Mundo Zurdo

Contents

Editor's Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: Reading Gloria Anzaldúa, Reading Ourselves . . .	
Complex Intimacies, Intricate Connections	1

Part One "Early" Writings

TIHUEQUE	19
To Delia, Who Failed on Principles	20
Reincarnation	21
The Occupant	22
I Want To Be Shocked Shitless	23
The New Speakers	24
Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers	26
The coming of el mundo surdo	36
La Prieta	38
El paisano is a bird of good omen	51
Dream of the Double-Faced Woman	70
Foreword to the Second Edition (of <i>This Bridge Called My Back</i>)	72
Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Body: An Interview with Linda Smuckler	74

Part Two "Middle" Writings

Enemy of the State	97
Del Otro Lado	99
Encountering the Medusa	101
Creativity and Switching Modes of Consciousness	103
En Rapport, In Opposition: Cobrando cuentas a las nuestras	111
The Presence	119
Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman	121
Haciendo caras, una entrada	124
Bridge, Drawbridge, Sandbar, or Island: Lesbians-of-Color Hacienda Alianzas	140
Ghost Trap/Trampa de espanto	157
To(o) Queer the Writer—Loca, escritora y chicana	163

Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera 176
On the Process of Writing *Borderlands / La Frontera* 187
La vulva es una herida abierta / The vulva is an open wound 198
The New Mestiza Nation: A Multicultural Movement 203

Part Three *Gallery of Images* 217

Part Four "Later" Writings

Foreword to Cassell's *Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol
and Spirit* 229
How to 232
Memoir—My Calling; or, Notes for "How Prieta Came to Write" 235
When I write I hover 238
Transforming American Studies: 2001 Bode-Pearson Prize
Acceptance Speech 239
Yemayá 242
(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces 243
Healing wounds 249
Reading LP 250
A Short Q & A between LP and Her Author (GEA) 274
Like a spider in her web 276
Bearing Witness: Their Eyes Anticipate the Healing 277
The Postmodern Llorona 280
Speaking across the Divide 282
Llorona Coyolxauhqui 295
Disability & Identity: An E-mail Exchange & a Few
Additional Thoughts 298
Let us be the healing of the wound: The Coyolxauhqui
imperative—la sombra y el sueño 303

Appendix 1: Glossary 319
Appendix 2: Timeline:
Some Highlights from Gloria Evangelina Anzaldúa's Life 325
Bibliography 337
Index 351

Editor's Acknowledgments

The act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the quest for the self, for the center of the self, which we women of color have come to think of as “other”—the dark, the feminine. Didn't we start writing to reconcile this other within us? We knew we were different, set apart, exiled from what is considered “normal,” white-right. And as we internalized this exile, we came to see the alien within us and too often, as a result, we split apart from ourselves and each other. Forever after we have been in search of that self, that “other,” and each other.—GLORIA ANZALDÚA, “Speaking in Tongues”

Where to begin? With Gloria Anzaldúa, of course. Perhaps it goes without saying, but my biggest debt and greatest thanks is to Gloria herself. Gloria, the alchemist. Gloria, the nepantlera. Thank you, comadre, for your relentless acts of making soul, for your tireless quest for the self, for your other—which resonates so deeply with so many others, with our selves. Plunging so deeply into your work—sacrificing so much in the process—you give us lifelines enabling us to find ourselves and each other. Your words build community. Their intimacy reverberates with me, as with so many others, assisting us as we heal our own internal splits and self-alienation, assisting us as we transform ourselves and the world. Thank you for your writing, Gloria. And, on a more personal note, thank you for your friendship, mentorship, and support.

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a constant presence in our lives, and you have had to share me—first with Gloria, my friend, the flesh-and-blood person, and now with her writings and writing projects. In my obsession to finish this project (and so many others), I've been an absent presence, at times. You have bolstered my spirits and energized me, and I lack the words to truly express my gratitude. And finally, as always, I thank the spirits, orishas, and ancestors.

Introduction

Reading Gloria Anzaldúa, *Reading Ourselves* . . .

Complex Intimacies, Intricate Connections

It's not on paper that you create but in your innards, in the gut and out of living tissue—organic writing I call it. . . . The meaning and worth of my writing is measured by how much I put myself on the line and how much nakedness I achieve. —GLORIA ANZALDÚA,

“Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers” (1981)

Whenever I listen to my students or other readers as they engage with Gloria Anzaldúa's writings, whether they're discussing her poetry, fiction, or prose, I am struck by the profound ways that her words resonate with so many different types of people—not with everyone, of course, but with a surprisingly wide range, including many who do not self-identify as Chicana, Latina, feminist, lesbian, and/or queer. They are shocked by the intimacy of Anzaldúa's insights; they feel like she's speaking directly to them, like she's describing their own deeply buried secrets and beliefs. They acknowledge the many differences between their embodied locations and Anzaldúa's—differences including but not limited to her campesino¹ upbringing in South Texas; the specific forms of alienation and oppression she experienced due to her health, color, culture, gender, economic status, and sexuality; and/or her complex relationship to language. But when they read Anzaldúa they feel a sense of familiarity more intense than that experienced with most other authors.

I attribute Anzaldúa's ability to generate such complex intimacies at least partially to her willingness to risk the personal,² to put herself “on the line” and strive for an extreme degree of “nakedness,” as she asserts in “Speaking in Tongues,” quoted in the epigraph to this chapter. Anzaldúa performs radical acts of self-excitation; stripping away social masks and conventions, she bares herself in her writings. By plunging so deeply into the depths of her own experiences, no matter how painful those experiences might be, and by exposing herself—raw and bleeding—she externalizes her inner struggles and opens possible connections with her readers.

The oldest child of sixth-generation mexicanos from the Río Grande Valley of south Texas,³ Anzaldúa interacted with people and ideas from a number of divergent worlds yet refused to be contained within any single group, belief system, or geographical/political/psychic location. Thus in her early autohistoria,⁴ “La Prieta,” she defiantly maintains multiple allegiances and locates herself, simultaneously, in multiple worlds:

“Your allegiance is to La Raza, the Chicano movement,” say the members of my race. “Your allegiance is to the Third World,” say my Black and Asian friends. “Your allegiance is to your gender, to women,” say the feminists. Then there’s my allegiance to the Gay movement, to the socialist revolution, to the New Age, to magic and the occult. And there’s my affinity to literature, to the world of the artist. What am I? *A third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings.* They would chop me up into little fragments and tag each piece with a label.⁵

Although each group makes membership contingent on its own often exclusionary set of rules and demands, Anzaldúa refuses all such terms without rejecting the people or groups themselves. Instead, she moves within, between, and among these diverse, sometimes conflicting, worlds. She positions herself on the thresholds—simultaneously inside and outside—and establishes points of connection with people of diverse backgrounds:

You say my name is ambivalence? Think of me as Shiva, a many-armed and -legged body with one foot on brown soil, one on white, one in straight society, one in the gay world, the man’s world, the women’s, one limb in the literary world, another in the working class, the socialist, and the occult worlds. A sort of spider woman hanging by one thin strand of web.

Who, me, confused? Ambivalent? Not so. Only your labels split me.

Anzaldúa’s bold assertion illustrates her personal integrity, holistic politics, and provocative challenges to conventional thinking. Whereas many progressive social-justice activists and theorists in the late 1970s and early 1980s were banding together into identity-specific groups, Anzaldúa was not. She rejected the demands for monolithic identities and exclusive, single-issue alliances and invented new forms of relational, inclusionary identities based on affinity rather than social categories.⁶ As she explains in one of her final essays, “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces,” “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.”⁷ In this passage, as in much of her work, Anzaldúa models a flexible process for personal and collective identity formation, ethical action, and alliance building.⁸ I want to underscore the radical implications of Anzaldúa’s approach. Generally, identification functions through exclusion: we define who and what we are by defining who and what we are not. By shifting the focus from exclusion to inclusion, Anzaldúa invites us to reconfigure identity in open-ended, potentially transformative ways.

Shortest bio GEA: Feminist visionary spiritual activist poet-philosopher
fiction writer—GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *Journal* (2002)

Although generally defined by others as a “Chicana lesbian-feminist” author, Anzaldúa described herself more broadly. As the above ultra-short biographical statement indicates, she viewed herself in extremely expansive terms. Rather than emphasize her racial/cultural identity, sexuality, gender, or class, she foregrounds her thinking and writing, her spirit-inflected politics and texts. As I will explain in more detail later, this collection builds on and showcases Anzaldúa’s complex, unconventional self-definition.

A versatile, award-winning writer,⁹ Anzaldúa published poetry, theoretical essays, short stories, innovative autobiographical narratives (or what she calls *autohistorias* and *autohistoria-teorías*),¹⁰ interviews, children’s books, and multigenre anthologies. She is best known for *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a hybrid combination of poetry and prose, which was named one of the 100 Best Books of the Century by both *Hungry Mind Review* and the *Utne Reader*.¹¹ Anzaldúa’s published works also include a number of essays and several short stories, a handful of poems, as well as the following books: *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981), a groundbreaking collection of essays, poetry, and letters coedited with Cherríe Moraga and widely recognized by scholars as a premiere feminist text; *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists-of-Color* (1990), a multigenre edited collection of feminist theorizing by self-identified women of colors;¹² two bilingual children’s books: *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (1993) and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman/Prietita y La Llorona* (1995); *Interviews/Entrevistas* (2000), a memoir-like volume of her interviews; and *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (2002), a multigenre transcultural collec-

tion (which she co-edited with me) that calls for and enacts new modes of feminist/womanist theorizing, social-justice movements, and spiritual activism.

Anzaldúa was a prolific, full-time author, and these diverse publications represent only a small fraction of her extensive work. For the last twenty-seven years of her life, she made writing her primary focus. When she moved from Texas to California in 1977, she resolved to dedicate herself entirely to the writing, and for the rest of her life she did so, refusing to take full-time jobs or to do anything else that might detract from what she called “la musa bruja” and her work. She paid a large price for this commitment, sacrificing her health, her family, and her friends whenever this “witch-muse” called.¹³ At the time of her passing, Anzaldúa had completed or was nearing completion on many projects, including (but not limited to!) a variety of essays, several collections of short stories and books of poetry; a novel-in-stories; a writing manual; a book of daily meditations; a young-adult novel; a play in poetic verse; a book-length exploration of imagination, creative writing, and social change; and a co-edited multi-genre collection. A number of these manuscripts are complete and had been thoroughly revised. While I cannot know for sure why Gloria did not publish more of her work, I believe that her chronic illness,¹⁴ coupled with her perfectionist sensibilities and issues related to racism and betrayal, made her extremely cautious.

This collection contains a representative sampling of Anzaldúa’s work covering a thirty-year span of her career. My selection process was guided by three primary interrelated goals. First, I wanted the book to be useful for a wide variety of readers, ranging from those who are entirely unfamiliar with Anzaldúa and her writings to scholars who have studied her works for years. Second, I wanted to showcase Anzaldúa’s diversity in topics, genres, and approaches so that even the most “expert” readers might be startled by her range and gain insights into the diverse, intertwined layers of her work. And third, I wanted to respect and remain true to Anzaldúa’s carefully considered aesthetics, stylistic preferences, complex self-definition, and holistic vision.

These goals shaped the volume in significant ways. In addition to a wide range of Anzaldúa’s published and previously unpublished work, a detailed index, and brief introductions to each piece, the *Reader* contains several appendices: a glossary of common Anzaldúan theories and terms, a timeline with some highlights from Anzaldúa’s life, and a bibliography of primary and secondary publications. I have included many of Anzaldúa’s

best-known published writings, as well as some frequently overlooked publications. Originally, I had hoped to reprint two very different chapters from *Borderlands*: “La conciencia de la mestiza/Towards a Mestiza Consciousness” and “La herencia de Coatlicue/The Coatlicue State.”¹⁵ While the former is one of Anzaldúa’s most frequently quoted, discussed, and reprinted pieces, the latter is rarely excerpted in anthologies or examined in Anzaldúan scholarship. Given its provocative linkages between spirituality, sexuality, revisionary myth, and psychic experience, it’s not surprising that scholars rarely examine “La herencia de Coatlicue.”¹⁶ However, these issues were crucial to Anzaldúa herself and represent some of the most innovative, visionary dimensions of her work.

I also include pieces designed to highlight Anzaldúa’s interests in the visual arts and education, as well as her role in the genesis of queer theory. As a child, Anzaldúa painted, drew, and did other forms of art. As she explains in *Interviews/Entrevistas*, she seriously considered a career in the visual arts before deciding to focus on literature. In this volume, “Border Arte: Nepantla, El Lugar de la Frontera,” “Bearing Witness: Their Eyes Anticipate the Healing,” and Anzaldúa’s own drawings (in the gallery of images) reflect her intense interest in this area. Throughout her life, Anzaldúa explored education-related issues; she had her teaching certificate and taught a wide variety of students, ranging from prekindergarten to doctoral.¹⁷ Two previously unpublished pieces, “The New Mestiza Nation” and “Transforming American Studies,” as well as the interview with Linda Smuckler, illustrate some of her pedagogical interests. I selected “La Prieta,” “To(o) Queer the Writer,” and “El paisano is a bird of good omen,” as well as previously unpublished poems like “The Occupant” and “The coming of el mundo surdo,” to emphasize Anzaldúa’s formative role in developing queer theory, a role that theorists generally overlook. Why have theorists so often ignored Anzaldúa’s groundbreaking contributions to queer theory? I don’t know. Do many heterosexually identified scholars fear being censured or labeled as gay? Do they simply not see the provocative, transgressive elements in her work? Are most queer theorists so Eurocentric or masculinist in their text selections that they have entirely ignored *This Bridge Called My Back*, where Anzaldúa’s queer theorizing first occurs in print?

Many readers also overlook or seem to be unaware of Anzaldúa’s lifelong struggles with her health. Due to a rare hormonal imbalance, Anzaldúa began menstruating while still an infant and went through puberty when only six years old (she had a hysterectomy in 1980). Throughout her child-

hood, she was marked by this physical difference in ways that profoundly shaped her work, giving her an expansive, nuanced understanding of difference as well as tremendous compassion for those who are marked as outside the norm.¹⁸ These health-related issues were central to Anzaldúa herself; readers interested in exploring this aspect of her life and her work might find the previously unpublished “Disability & Identity: An Email Exchange & a Few Additional Thoughts” especially useful. This piece, which began as an email exchange between Gloria, my students, and me, was one of Anzaldúa’s final writings. (She was revising it into an essay during the last year of her life.)

Over half of the material in this volume has not been previously published, and many of the previously published pieces are currently out of print. As I sorted through the enormous amount of unpublished writings, trying to decide what to include, I was guided by my desires to introduce readers to additional aspects of Anzaldúa and her work and to trace her theoretical and aesthetic development. Thus, for example, I selected the interview with Linda Smuckler because it offers a complex, multifaceted view of Anzaldúa, focusing on the relationship between spirituality, sexuality, and her work. Drawn from two very different points in Anzaldúa’s career (1982 and 1998), this interview also enables us to chart important shifts and continuities in Anzaldúa’s thought. Other pieces, like “Creativity and Shifting Modes of Consciousness,” “On the Process of Writing *Borderlands/ La Frontera*,” “Dream of the Double-Faced Woman,” “Memoir—My Calling; or, Notes for ‘How Prieta Came to Write,’” “How to,” and “When I write I hover” offer fascinating insights into Anzaldúa’s writing process, *Borderlands*’ origins, and other writing-related issues.

Because many readers view Anzaldúa almost exclusively as a prose writer, it seemed especially important that this collection also highlight her poetry, fiction, and experimental autohistorias.¹⁹ From the early 1970s until the end of her life, Anzaldúa defined herself as a poet and fiction writer and spent much of her energy in these genres. At the time of her death, she had written over forty stories, including *La Prieta/The Dark One*, a novel-in-stories, which she viewed as one of the highlights of her career. As she explains in her writing notas,²⁰ *La Prieta* is

about transformation and metamorphosis, about the relation between nature and culture, between humans and animals. The stories interweave the surreal, unconscious subreality of the inner world of thought, fantasy, and dream and the world of the spirit with the everyday life. All converge at the liminal space I call *nepantla*, the interface space between all the worlds.

Prieta experiences a sense of self that is and is not tied to time, space, or society. She experiences unusual events—a shamanistic event which awakens her, or a paranormal event where different realities converge. She undergoes a radical shift in her way of seeing the world, a coming-to-consciousness which changes her identity.

As this description indicates, Anzaldúa interwove many of her own theories and philosophical concerns into her fiction. Indeed, she viewed her fiction as central to her entire creative process and a major catalyst for her thinking. In addition to including one of the stories from *La Prieta*, I have included two previously published short stories: “El paisano is a bird of good omen” and “Ghost Trap.” These stories are fascinating on many levels, including (but not limited to) gender relations, sexuality, social conventions, and paranormal perception.

I write because it's my calling, my task to do in the world. I write. It is a ritual, a habit, a propensity bred in my bones. It is what I do. I write because I like to think on paper. I write because I like to think, and to track my thoughts. I write because I want to leave a discernable mark on the world. —GLORIA ANZALDÚA, “When I write I hover” (1997)

I first met Gloria Anzaldúa back in 1991 and began working closely with her a few years later when, through a series of serendipitous events, I edited a volume of her interviews. After this collection, *Interviews/Entrevistas*, was accepted for publication, we began collaborating on several more projects. Working so intimately with Gloria gave me many insights into her intense writing and revision process. As she indicates in the preceding epigraph, writing was her vocation, her mission in life, her “task to do in the world.” Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Anzaldúa approached her writing like a ritual or a prayer. Her creative process was thoughtful, recursive, and communal, involving extensive research, multiple, heavily revised drafts, and peer critiques with her “writing comadres” and others. Seeking precisely the exact word or term which could most effectively convey her meaning to a specific audience, she carefully examined and revised each metaphor and analogy, every sentence, paragraph, line of poetry, and stanza.²¹ She could happily devote an entire day to revising a handful of pages; she could spend weeks, months, or even years revising her work. Especially during the last phase of her career, Gloria did not want to release a manuscript for publication until she felt that it was ready—“ready” as she defined the term, not as others might. In fact, the publication of our

co-edited book, *this bridge we call home*, was delayed by an entire year because she absolutely refused to stop revising her essay “now let us shift.”²² Similarly, she was very reluctant to publish “Let us be the healing of the wounds: the Coyolxauhqui imperative—*la sombra y el sueño*” (included in this volume) because she wanted to revise it further. Only the impassioned pleas of the book’s editors, combined with encouragement from her writing comrades, compelled her to permit the essay’s publication.

I describe Anzaldúa’s meticulous, spirit-inflected approach to her art as “shaman aesthetics” to underscore her faith in language and imagination, her belief in writing’s potentially transformative power. Anzaldúa posited an intimate interrelationship between image, metaphor, and change. Thus in “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman” she maintains that writers’ words enter into and transform their readers: “Like the shaman, we transmit information from our consciousness to the physical body of another.” Throughout her work, Anzaldúa attempts to enact this transformation. Her careful, deliberate writing process relies on rigorous self-excitation, multiple revisions, and extraordinary, painstaking attention to image, metaphor, and individual word choice. Flesh becomes text as she intensely self-reflects and strives for words that can move through the body, transforming herself and her readers on multiple levels.

Anzaldúa’s two most influential works (thus far) are the multigenre co-edited collection *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) and her single-authored text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Widely regarded as a feminist classic, *This Bridge Called My Back* broke new ground. Bringing together U.S. women-of-color feminists from diverse ethnic/racial, economic, sexual, and national backgrounds, *This Bridge* offered a crucial challenge to conventional feminist theorizing and the mainstream women’s movement in the United States.²³ Although some scholars describe *This Bridge* as women of colors’s entry into the feminist movement, I see the book somewhat differently, as a crucial reminder that feminism was not and never had been a “white”-raced women’s movement with a single-issue, middle-class agenda. Anzaldúa and the other contributors self-identified as feminists, and most had done so for many years before *This Bridge*’s publication. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, they remind readers that feminism, defined broadly and flexibly, offers crucial points of connection for social-justice workers of diverse backgrounds. Although they critique the racism, classism, and white supremacy within certain strands of feminism, they do not describe feminism itself as “white” or as belonging primarily to “white”-raced women.

Instead, they call for new kinds of feminist communities and practices; they simultaneously invite women of colors to develop new alliances and challenge “white” middle-class feminists to recognize and rectify their racism, classism, and other biases. Consisting of poetry, letters, analytical essays, interviews, and prose narratives, *This Bridge* also demonstrated the transformative possibilities that arise when we theorize in multiple genres and modes.

While *This Bridge* brought Anzaldúa important attention from feminists and led to numerous speaking engagements in the early 1980s, she is best-known for *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), an innovative blend of personal experience with history and social protest with poetry and myth. Although *Borderlands* resists easy classification, scholars often describe it as a complex cultural autobiography that builds on and expands previous uses of the genre. Anzaldúa herself describes this text as “autohistoria-teoría,” a term she coined to describe women-of-color interventions into and transformations of traditional western autobiographical forms. Autohistoria-teoría includes both life-story and self-reflection on this story. Writers of autohistoria-teoría blend their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and other forms of theorizing. By so doing, they create interwoven individual and collective identities. Frequently anthologized and often cited, *Borderlands* has challenged and expanded previous views in a number of academic fields, including (but not limited to) American studies, border studies, Chicano/a studies, composition studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, feminism, literary studies, critical pedagogy, women’s studies, and queer theory. As Sonia Saldívar-Hull notes, *Borderlands* is a “transfrontera, transdisciplinary text” that has “traveled between” many disciplines.²⁴

Focusing especially on Anzaldúa’s theories of the “Borderlands,” the “new mestiza,” and “mestiza consciousness,” scholars have critiqued and revised their disciplinary paradigms and contemporary identity-based issues. *Borderlands* has also significantly impacted the ways we think about Chicano/a studies, border issues, the concept of the Borderlands, ethnic/gender/sexual identities, code-switching,²⁵ and conventional literary forms. Anzaldúa uses the term “Borderlands” in two complex, overlapping yet distinct ways. First, she builds on previous views of the borderlands as a specific geographical location: the Southwest border between Mexico and Texas. Second, she redefines and expands this concept to encompass psychic, sexual, and spiritual Borderlands as well. For Anzaldúa, the Borderlands—in both its geographical and metaphoric meanings—

represent painful yet also potentially transformational spaces where opposites converge, conflict, and transmute.

Anzaldúa's theory of the "new mestiza" has been equally influential and represents an innovative expansion of previous biologically based definitions of mestizaje. For Anzaldúa, "new mestizas" are people who inhabit multiple worlds because of their gender, sexuality, color, class, body, personality, spiritual beliefs, and/or other life experiences. This theory offers a new concept of personhood that synergistically combines apparently contradictory Euro-American and indigenous traditions. Anzaldúa further develops her theory of the new mestiza into an epistemology and ethics she calls "mestiza consciousness": holistic, relational modes of thinking and acting or, as she explains in "La conciencia de la mestiza," "a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes."

As this *Reader* demonstrates, Anzaldúa's post-*Borderlands* writings expand these concepts and others in provocative ways. Thus, for example, her later theories transform the *Borderlands* into *nepantla*, new mestizas into *nepantleras* and *nos/otras*, and mestiza consciousness into *conocimiento*.²⁶ Perhaps because scholars, publishers, students, and others have focused so much of their attention on *Borderlands*, these theories have not yet received the attention they deserve. I hope that this volume will encourage readers to explore Anzaldúa's later writings in more detail and recognize the important developments she made in the years following the publication of *Borderlands*.

In editing this volume, I have tried to respect Anzaldúa's wishes and follow her intentions as closely as possible. Thanks to the years we spent working together, I developed a solid understanding of her literary expectations and aesthetics, her beliefs about what constitutes good writing, and her personal standards as an author. Because she was such a perfectionist, I seriously debated including a few pieces, like "Creativity and Switching Modes of Consciousness" and "On the Process of Writing *Borderlands*," which are not as polished as Gloria might prefer. However, I decided that these essays give us such valuable insights into her work that they should be available to a broad readership. Although Anzaldúa sometimes (often!) continued revising her work after publishing it, I usually included the earliest published versions rather than the later revisions because we anticipate publishing the revised versions at a later date.²⁷ I did stray from this practice in two ways: First, and in keeping with Gloria's strongly expressed preference, I chose not to italicize Spanish, Náhuatl, or other non-English words. As Gloria often explained, such italics have a denor-

malizing, stigmatizing function and make the italicized words seem like deviations from the (English/“white”) norm. Second, in instances when the published versions had typographical errors and in instances when there was a lack of clarity (probably generated by the publishing process itself), I went back to the manuscripts in order to ascertain Anzaldúa’s intentions. For those pieces which were previously unpublished, I generally used the most recent versions. Throughout this volume, the footnotes are my own, designed to provide additional information that might be helpful to readers. The endnotes are Anzaldúa’s original notes. Editorial additions to these notes are placed in square brackets.

I have arranged the selections chronologically, divided into three periods marked by specific points in Anzaldúa’s publication history: The “early writings” cover her work up to and including the second edition of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1983); the “middle writings” include work shortly before and after *Borderlands* (1987); and the “late writings” include her work from the mid-to-late 1990s until her death in 2004. I made these divisions somewhat arbitrarily (one decade per “period”) and for my own convenience the first time I taught a graduate seminar on Anzaldúa. However, as my students and I made our way through the writings, I realized that these divisions can reflect distinct periods in Anzaldúa’s career: a spiraling yet cyclical movement, a contraction followed by an expansion of sorts. More specifically, Anzaldúa’s writings from the early and late periods are broadly inclusive, at times positing a global citizenship of sorts, while some of her work from the middle period is less inclusionary, more focused on rigid identity labels and categories, and (therefore) more restrictive.²⁸

Indeed, some of my students have reacted quite strongly to a few of Anzaldúa’s pieces from this middle period, insisting that Anzaldúa seems to rely on stereotypes and monolithic categories; this reliance leads to broad generalizations that entirely reject those labeled “white,” male, and/or members of the dominating culture. In short, these student readers, when focusing solely on some of Anzaldúa’s work from this middle period, feel as if they have been reduced to a false stereotype and actively excluded from her theories. I caution against such assumptions. As I’ve explained to my students, we need to read each piece in (at least) two contexts: first, the original audience and historical period, keeping in mind Anzaldúa’s experiences at that time; and second, the full trajectory of Anzaldúa’s work, a trajectory energized by her attempts to forge inclusionary, community-building theories and endeavors. Moreover, even during her more exclu-

sionary moments, Anzaldúa enacts inclusionary gestures. (See, for instance, “The New Mestiza Nation,” where she writes, “Progressive whites who have friends from different worlds and who study different cultures become intellectual mestizas. They may not be emotional mestizas and certainly are not biological mestizas. But there can be empathy between people of color and progressive, sensitive, politically aware whites.”)

I believe in free dialogue & abhor academic censorship of any kind, especially that which seeks to “protect” me or “my” image. . . . Any of you estudiantes, please feel free to unravel these concepts (or any other of “my” concepts) — once they go out into the world they cease to “belong” to me. —GLORIA ANZALDÚA, “Identity & Disability” (2003)

This statement, written only seven months before her death, illustrates Anzaldúa’s generous attitude toward her literary reputation and her work. Once she had released her words “into the world,” she tried to detach her ego from them. They were not her personal, private words but “belonged” to anyone who read them. Gloria was not possessive about her theories and ideas — except in those instances when others tried to police the meanings, circumscribe the definitions in narrow terms, and/or appropriate her ideas and pass them off as their own.²⁹ She was fascinated by the various ways people interpreted her work, and she often wove their interpretations into her later writings.³⁰ She did not believe that any particular person or group — not Chicanas, not queers, not women, not tejanas, not mexicanas, not personal friends or colleagues — had an exclusive, superior, insider perspective into her theories and her writings. Anzaldúa’s inclusionary vision, coupled with her ability to create expansive new categories and interconnections, makes her work vital to contemporary social actors, thinkers, and scholars.

And so, I close with an invitation, from Anzaldúa herself, to build on and “unravel” Anzaldúa’s words, to remember and enact her bold insights and holistic, relational vision.

Notes

Thanks to Pamela White for reading and commenting on this introduction.

1. In keeping with Anzaldúa’s own preference, I do not italicize Spanish, Náhuatl, or other non-English words. Italicizing non-English words denormalizes them.

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