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**Tejana Literature and the (Un)Making of Queer Worlds: Gloria
Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba**

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Thesis

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For my parents
For Juan Pablo

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Abstract

Tejana Literature and the (Un)Making of Queer Worlds: Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba

by

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“Tejana Literature and the (Un)Making of Queer Worlds” adapts José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications by transposing the queer worldmaking concept into the Tejana literary sphere. Foregrounding lesbian Tejana experiences, I explore the ways in which queer writers and activists Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba use literature and theory to question heteronormativity and white supremacy. Two general questions guide my research: 1) How does Anzaldúa’s, Pérez’s, and Gaspar de Alba’s fiction and scholarship capture, critique, and reconfigure the physical and psychological violence to which the gendered, racialized, non-normative body has been subjected under the realm of Euro-American, Tejano, and heterosexual dominant cultures? 2) What is Anzaldúa’s, Pérez’s, and Gaspar de Alba’s stance with regards to

Aztlán, the imagined homeland for Chicanos/as and privileged site for cultural nationalism? To examine, then, whether these queer feminists of color create worlds that can function as alternate spaces of freedom, I analyze four poems from *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Pérez's *Gulf Dreams* (1996), and Gaspar de Alba's *Sor Juana's Second Dream* (1999). My aim is to show how decolonial and disidentificatory projects among feminist Tejanas who share similar backgrounds vary in genre, approach, and outcomes.

“Tejana Literature and the (Un)Making of Queer Worlds” also links the theoretical with the creative by using Anzaldúa's, Pérez's, and Gaspar de Alba's scholarship as roadmap to interpret their poetry and fiction. I therefore argue that concepts like Anzaldúa's *el mundo zurdo* (1977), Pérez's *sitios y lenguas* (1991), and Gaspar de Alba's *embodied aesthetics* (1994) are the critical techniques through which they attempt to build worlds that reconfigure traditional (i.e., normative) aesthetics and politics. Hence, I look at the needs and desires that push Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar de Alba to negotiate dominant culture, their own Tejano upbringings, and build worlds through the notions of *el mundo zurdo* in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *sitios y lenguas* in *Gulf Dreams* and *embodied aesthetics* in *Sor Juana's Second Dream*. Assuming that Anzaldúa's, Pérez's, and Gaspar de Alba's writing is performative in the sense that it discursively does something, I consider the performative power of queer Tejana literature and its particular effects on Tejano and Chicano cultures in relation to Aztlán as symbolic homeland.

Keywords: queer worldmaking, *el mundo zurdo*, *sitios y lenguas*, embodied aesthetics, Tejana literature.

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Introduction

More than a decade ago, the late cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz opened *Disidentifications. Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) by affirming that “there [was] a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics” (1). For him, such magnetism—exemplified by Marga Gómez’s performances—derived from the multiple significance of queerness¹ going public during the nineties despite homophobic crimes, discriminatory legislation, and the AIDS pandemic. Notably, that queers of color theatricalized queerness was a clear example of public risk-taking. Such risk meant the opening of alternate, non-normative worlds and their multiple possibilities. This making of new worlds, Muñoz told us, mapped out ways of experiencing race, sexuality, art, and politics in a safer, more inclusive way, in addition to representing queer lives in their complexity. Queer worldmaking, as he called this transformative process, was thus presented as a strategy of survival.

Identifying similarities between the marginalization that queer public arts performers endure and the isolation that Tejanas in the southwest experience—from homemakers to secretaries to queer scholars—I began this project by considering that

¹ Following David Halperin, throughout these pages I will use the heterogeneous terms of “queerness” and “queer” in the very general sense of “a positionality *vis-a-vis* the normative” (De Genova 106). Including more than just the categories of gender and sex allows me to refer to other potential factors of “abnormalcy,” like race, ethnicity, class, etcetera that challenge the dominant. José Muñoz, however, offers the following definition: “Queers are people who have failed to turn around to the ‘Hey you there’ interpellating call of heteronormativity” (*Disidentifications* 33).

writers, like performers, have both the need and the potential to create worlds of alternative politics with words (instead of stage props). Narration, Ross Chamber asserts, has the power to effect social change (see *Story and Situation*, 1984). Thus, like the performances Muñoz analyzed in *Disidentifications*, I see literature as a transgressive and transformative vehicle, and therefore, an invitation to imagine and pursue more just ways of living and loving.

Particularly interested in authors from Texas because of the region's historical and political specificities in relation to Mexico, my home country, this thesis's premise began thus: self-identified lesbian Tejana² writers and theorists Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004), Emma Pérez (1956), and Alicia Gaspar de Alba (1958)—arguably three of the main representatives of Tejana and Chicana literature(s) and feminism(s)—queer worldmake. Pushing beyond the “campesino archetype” (Castillo 172) that characterized the poetry and fiction written by earlier Tejano and Chicano writers from the fifties and sixties (Tomás Rivera, for instance), these writers have carved out their own experience as Chicanas in general (female U.S. Mexicans) and Tejanas in particular (female Texas Mexicans), questioning the multiple ways in which oppression works. On the one hand, Anglo dominant society has discriminated against them as “third-world-women,” and on the other, Mexican and Chicano culture's inbred machismo has marked them as outcasts because of their refusal to yield to the cultural protocols that prioritize heterosexuality and motherhood as two of the highest standards of society.

² By Tejana/os I refer to the people of Spanish, Mexican or Indigenous descent who were born in the sociopolitical region of Texas and whose identities and experiences are directly informed by Texas.

Although Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar de Alba are certainly not the only Chicanas to question and resist fixed categories of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class, I selected them because of Texas. As it has been widely shown by Chicana/o scholars throughout the United States, region matters. Texas's particular history—its war of independence from Mexico in 1836; its nationalist character and the problematic relationship with both the United States and Mexico during and after annexation in 1845; the continuing racial conflicts and economic inequality along the border; The Alamo and its mythic history; and the huge number of Mexicans and Mexican descendants that make up its population have played a fundamental role in shaping the state's literary production. Born out of the clash between multiple cultures (Indian, Spanish, American, French, and Mexican), Tejano literature has most generally focused on Mexicans' disenfranchisement, labor, racist policies, the complexities of the geopolitical boundary that separates the U.S. from Mexico, and the imposition of American culture upon the Mexican one. Marked by a history of conquest, Tejano literature—as both a constitutive element and a product of Tejano culture—captures the racial and political conflicts that have made for almost two centuries the relationship between Anglos and Mexicans an unequal and oftentimes violent one. By focusing on Tejana writers, gender and sexuality—fundamental categories that have been dismissed by the Chicano literary canon—are exposed.

Once I chose the theoretical framework, selected my case studies, and defined my region of interest, performative writing morphed out of Muñoz's queer worldmaking concept. Understanding performatives as “narratives that can exert their impact and

produce change” (Chambers 9), I thus analyzed Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Pérez’s *Gulf Dreams* (1996), and Gaspar de Alba’s *Sor Juana’s Second Dream* (1999) as works that, when paired with their author’s respective theoretical concepts *el mundo zurdo* (1977), *sitios y lenguas* (1991), and *embodied aesthetics* (1994), brought into being what they were discursively calling for. In this sense, performativity allowed for Tejana creation of queer worlds where multiple sexual, racial, and aesthetic representations allowed both the reader and the writer to picture and temporarily inhabit imaginaries where social restraints were brought down while some political agency was more visible. Shamelessly inscribing the stigmatized queer Tejana experience of the page, I imagined Muñoz agreeing that the selected works were “enactments of power in the face of repressive truth regimes and the state power apparatus” (199).

Anzaldúa’s definition of Chicana writing, painting, performing, and filming as “acts of deliberate and desperate determination to subvert the status quo” legitimized my argument of Tejana queer worldmaking (Keating 135). Approaching art as activism, Anzaldúa continued by saying that such creative acts “employ[ed] definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and [were] not merely aesthetic exercises. We build culture as we inscribe in these various forms” (Keating 135). Anzaldúa’s suggestion of a common strategy to turn abjection into political self-making further defined one of this thesis’s main research questions: how do Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar de Alba represent their realities in literature in order to counteract and reinterpret the colonial and sexually repressive discourses that have kept queer Tejanas at the margins of

multiple spheres (family, society, academia, politics)? Or, how do they create queer worlds?

Fascinated by Muñoz's understanding of utopia, then, this thesis adapts the queer worldmaking concept to the Tejana literary scene. To explore queer worldmaking through different genres, in this thesis I analyze four poems in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987)—“*Matriz sin tumba*,” “Corner of 50th St.,” “Interface,” and “Letting Go”—and two novels: *Gulf Dreams* and *Sor Juana's Second Dream*. Traversing these literary works are the various essays and articles in which Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar de Alba have theorized Tejana and Chicana identity, history, sexuality, colonialism, and even mysticism. Because along the way new questions shaped my initial hypothesis, I was compelled to look beyond idealism. Realizing later that there is no *one* brand of Tejana feminism, together with the evidence that Tejana literature is not based exclusively in Texas, the three chapters in this thesis have thus incorporated other theorists and, consequently, different approaches to queer worldmaking. Given the results of the analyses herein, if I were to write this thesis again I would in fact resist applying the term Tejana to connect these authors, for while the category works as a demonym it does not necessarily reflect a common political stance. Likewise, the next pages demonstrate that Anzaldúa's, Pérez's, and Gaspar de Alba's different understandings of colonialism and power, Chicana/o nationalism, and even queerness translate into varying alternative worlds that resist oppression at different levels, or even, unwillingly reproduce it.

Although oppression is such a commonly used word, particularly in cultural studies, the first step to ground my argument about Tejanas queer worldmaking was to

consider oppression in the context of Texas-Mexico history. In other words, if in its broadest sense oppression is “prolonged cruel or unjust treatment or exercise of authority, control, or power; tyranny; exploitation,” then who embodies the oppression that Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar de Alba resist? (OED, web, 04/01/2015). Why the need to create alternative imaginaries, and in opposition to whom? Who or what do these feminists and writers specifically resist? What does intersectionality (the ways in which race, sex, class, gender, and other categories of analysis jointly come to bear on the subject) mean in the context of queer Tejanas who share a common history of land dispossession, displacement, and marginalization? Thus Aztlán, the imagined homeland for Chicanas/os and a privileged site for the cultural nationalism and politics following the civil rights movement, came to mind.

In the article “There’s No Place like Aztlán” (2004), Gaspar de Alba, in considering the symbolic nation’s fundamental role in shaping Chicano masculinity and cultural production, questioned whether Chicanas, in their artistic representations of Aztlán, had gone beyond it. “If Aztlán is populated by machos, misogynists, and homophobes as well as by more middle-of-the-road types who nonetheless subscribe (consciously or not) to the Tres Marías [the Virgin Mary, Mary the mother of James, and Mary Magdalene] as the appropriate role models for women,” Gaspar asked, “then to what degree does the male nationalist construction of Aztlán inform the political identity of Chicana artists?” (“No Place like Aztlán” 117). Such query forms the divergent basis of my second research question: What is Anzaldúa’s, Pérez’s and Gaspar de Alba’s stance in relation to the Aztlán? Can their queer worldmaking be, more than an

alternative to Anglo white supremacy, a Tejana feminist suggestion to leave behind a symbolic land that has systematically oppressed women? These are the questions I answer in this thesis.

On Queer Worldmaking and Queering Chicana/o Studies: Present and Past

José Muñoz's concept of queer worldmaking is central to this study: "worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world" (*Disidentifications* 195). These views, he warns us, are more than mere alternative perspectives. Rather, "they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of 'truth' that subjugate minoritarian people" (195). Muñoz's project therefore requires queer minorities (the disempowered, oppressed groups) to edit, reinterpret, and redo that which has served majorities (those who hold power) to discredit difference. Above all, his project aims to transform the dominant public sphere. *Disidentifications*, Muñoz argues, is a negotiating strategy of the marginalized that calls for the building of an alternate world to dismantle dominant codes. Thus, it is also about the cultural worker creating change via the spectator or reader. It is then when a new world is constructed.

By reading Anzaldúa's, Pérez's, and Gaspar de Alba's poems and novels as performative literatures, I analyze the ways in which their critical notions of *el mundo zurdo*, *sitios y lenguas*, and *embodied aesthetics* are used as discursive mechanisms to create queer worlds. Although I initially did not consider the limitations of my proposal—queer worldmaking *is* a utopia and therefore is always in the making, never fully accomplished—reading the poems and novels herein as performative literatures means that

writing is not mere representation, but action. Regardless of the ability of these writers to effectively build queer worlds, literary discourse says *and* does. Further, the notion of performative involves an effect. This means that writer (the doer) affects the reader (the receiver). As in a contractual relationship, both the writer and the reader are transformed and transported elsewhere. For Muñoz, such transformation “makes inroads on the ‘real world’” (197).

The notion of “performative” began in the fifties with J.L. Austin as a theory of utterances, but has since taken broader paths—for instance, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler. Derrida, who applied the area theory of performativity to all areas of social life, insisted “that all human codes and cultural expressions are ‘writing’” (Schechner 168); such ‘writing’ is an ongoing process of erasing and composing. Also considering that social reality is constructed, Butler took performativity to the arena of gender and argued that gender is performed through a “stylized repetition of acts” (140). As mentioned earlier, in this thesis I center on Chambers’s conception of performativity as narrative—poems and fiction—that challenge through the “power of words” (6). By creating spaces where readers see themselves reflected, change can be enacted. Thus, every discourse, with its “power to charm,” creates a reality (Chambers 6).

My decision to use Muñoz’s disidentifications as theoretical framework acknowledges, on the one hand, my admiration of his work, and on the other, his own critical borrowing from Third World feminists and radical women of color. Particularly, Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Cherríe Moraga’s groundbreaking anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), “a valuable example of disidentification as political strategy” (22). He

further stated: “The bridge to a queer world is, among other things, paved by *This Bridge Called My Back*” (25). For the time being, I look at them all—Muñoz and Tejana queer feminists—to establish a dialogue that can shed light on how things should be if we think of a better, more inclusive world.

The idea of queer worldmaking (like incorporating Queer Theory to Chicana/o literary criticism) is certainly not new. Gloria Anzaldúa’s and Cherrie Moraga’s anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, generated in the early eighties a paradigm from Third World Feminisms. Since then, Anzaldúa’s, Pérez’s, and Gaspar de Alba’s work, along with that of other Chicana feminists, calls attention to the urgency of queering the gaze, queering history, queering mestizaje, the nation, Aztlán, the “straight” mind, and whatever calls for more comprehensive interpretations (everything surrounding us). Although the term “queering” might have slight variations for each author, I adhere to Emma Pérez’s definition: “queering” is a technique that contests national narratives and traditional representations of gender and race by looking “with another critical...nonwhite, noncolonial, nonheteronormative eye” (“Queering” 128). In this sense, to queer something requires, in the first place, that one breaks away from the colonial mindset (the internalized racism and oppression) that a history of conquest has imprinted on the minds and bodies of the colonized throughout generations. Turning to Muñoz, Pérez tells us that queering is a disidentificatory tactic that allows us to “see, act, interpret, and mock all at once in order to survive and reconstitute a world where s/he is not seen by the white colonial heteronormative mind”

(“Queering” 124). Thus, to queer is to see beyond what has been learned and absorbed from dominant culture in order to uncover new meanings.

In her essay “To(o) Queer the Writer–Loca, escritora y chicana” (1991) Anzaldúa delved into the question of what being a lesbian writer meant (lesbian, by the way, being a term with which Anzaldúa did not identify with because of its relation to white, middle-class women) and what reading like a lesbian means. Also, in thinking about how straight readership interpreted the work written by lesbians, Anzaldúa argued in favor of a queer sensibility that enabled straight readers to read between lines in order to “get” the subtext. For Anzaldúa, the chances for a straight female reader to catch “the undercurrents having to do with dyke sexualities” are low (170). Hence, invoking performativity, Anzaldúa elicits a queer readership that can more than interact, repeat back, or mirror, “add to the dialogue” (169). Because Anzaldúa sees third-world queer writers’ and artists’ texts as “colored queer rites of passage,” she demands straight readers queer their perspective.

Cherrie Moraga also theorizes queering. In *The Last Generation* (1993) she advanced the notion of “Queer Aztlán” as a reaction to Chicanos’ institutionalized heterosexism’s refusal to accept gay men and lesbians among their ranks. Hanging on to the core of nationalism, she re-imagined a Chicano homeland (Aztlán) “that could embrace all of its people, including its *jotería*” (148). And in response to those who argued that the Chicano movement of the sixties was dead, she maintained that, rather, “El Movimiento ha[d] never been a thing of the past, it ha[d] retreated into subterranean, uncontaminated soils awaiting resurrection in a ‘queerer,’ more feminist generation” (149). In this manner, Moraga points to the power in queerness, visualizing a nationalist

movement whose comeback would be stronger thanks to its new queer sensibility, aesthetics, and politics. Furthermore, she proposes a turn to indigenism. In an effort to build a strong community, Moraga stresses the importance of Chicanos coming together as a “tribe” that can cooperatively face its common problems. However, her indigenist call is problematic. Moraga’s clinging to Aztlán continues to predicate the exclusion of other Indians. Indeed, under the umbrella of the mythical homeland, Aztecs are imposed upon the many other native tribes that Moraga claims to acknowledge and uses as examples: Diné, Northern Cheyenne, and Kayapó, among others. As Rafael Pérez-Torres pertinently argues, “Aztlán as a place, or even as a unifying symbol or image, erases the vast differences that form the richness and variety of the term Chicano” (93). Similarly, the diversity of indigenous peoples risks erasure by Moraga’s queer nationalism.

More recent studies focus on the importance of queering the Chicana/o sphere. Anthologies like *Velvet Barrios*, edited by Alicia Gaspar de Alba (2003), and books like *Brown on Brown* (Frederick Luis Aldama, 2005), *On Making Sense* (Ernesto Javier Martínez, 2013), and *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer* (Sandra K. Soto, 2010) offer arguments in favor of deconstructing, reconstructing, and destabilizing hegemonic social and political constructs by centering cultural analysis on identity, race, sexuality and the gendered self. By complicating the homogeneous representations that have historically treated queer people of color as second-class citizens, Chicana/o and Latino/a queer scholarship has engaged in what Aldama calls “queer recoveries” or the reclamation of historical peculiarities that have been denied to minorities (23). Similarly, in *Homecoming Queers* (2009), Marivel T. Danielson advances the idea of “homemaking”

by building on Pérez's *un sitio y una lengua* as critical tool to examine the ways in which Chicana and Latina writers' and performers' exploration of sexuality has built a queer home—a place that offers a sense of belonging for the marginalized. The works by Chela Sandoval, Carla Trujillo, Mary Pat Brady, and Catrióna Rueda Esquibel affirm Danielson's assertion that "it can no longer be said that matters of Chicana/Latina gender and sexuality lack scholarly attention" (8).

Similarly, Queer Theory, Third World Feminisms, and Chicana art and literature have been the focus of several PhD dissertations written in the last decade. Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar de Alba enjoy popularity. Of particular interest are "Between Feminine and Feminist: Contemporary U.S. Latina Writers Negotiate Genre and Politics" (2002), where Susan Elizabeth Nichols studies how Latina feminism is written through fiction. Nichols not only looks at how Emma Pérez's Chicana lesbian feminist theorizing emerges in *Gulf Dreams*, but also explores how Gaspar de Alba reappropriates in *Sor Juana's Second Dream* the cultural legacy of the seventeenth-century nun in order to articulate a Chicana lesbian feminist aesthetic and practice. In another dissertation, "Writing the Past: Women's Historical Fiction of Greater Mexico" (2007), Elizabeth Cummins Muñoz also dedicates one of its chapters to Gaspar de Alba's *Sor Juana's Second Dream* as an example of a fictional biography that uses Sor Juana's body as a tool to reconfigure national history. Cummins's main argument posits that Gaspar de Alba creates an alternative historical model—one that subverts official narratives in order to center women's role in relationship to Mexico's nation-building project since the colonial period (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries)—through the nun's embodied performance. Put

differently, Cummins sees the body as a historical text that has been inscribed with sexually oppressive public discourses. Finally, “Mapping Tejana Epistemologies: Contemporary (Re)Constructions Of Tejana Identity In Literature, Film And Popular Culture” (2008) by Lori Beth Rodriguez, focuses on cultural workers in Texas. As for the performative aspect of Tejana literature, scant recent research has been done. Most publications focus on Chicana/Latina life performances or on performance as an act of resistance.

Amid a fair amount of queer Chicana literary and cultural studies research, I hope that this thesis, in proposing queer worldmaking in relation to Aztlán, opens ground for critical discussion about the value we place on categories, myths, and memories. Although I do not discredit or diminish the role Aztlán has played in Chicana/o self-affirmation and determination, I agree with Rafael Pérez-Torres in that “Aztlán also foregrounds the difficult relationship Chicanos bear with history” (*Movements* 61). Such a problematic is often evaded, however, with historical and fictional narratives opting for either victimization or glory. Thus, I consider that an oftentimes-uncritical nationalism leads to the repetition of harmful cycles. Chicana/o nationalism perpetuates oppression and repression within Chicanos. Repression, Emma Pérez demonstrates in *Gulf Dreams*, not only comes from the outside (Euro-Americans) but from the inside (Chicano and Mexicans). Precisely because domination also comes from our “own” people and from our “own” psyche, it is always harder to identify and therefore resist. Similarly, an excessive confidence in queerness as transformative force often erases issues that, silently, reproduce the ideologies that one wishes to critique and dismantle. Hence, I see

these pages as the result of my own leaning process and as the first attempt to examine the slippages, contradictions, and limitations in so-called decolonizing projects.

Overview of the Chapters

This thesis opens with Chapter 1, focusing on Rio Grande Valley born thinker, writer, poet, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa. It centers on how the poems included in her groundbreaking *Borderlands/La Frontera* create an archive of keywords that function to create ideology. Using redundancy as strategy, I argue that the poetic form allows Anzaldúa to rework terms and notions of “becoming” in order to propose Chicana/o “queerhood” that is both outside and within Aztlán. “*Matriz sin tumba (o el baño de la basura ajena)*,” (Section II, “*La Pérdida*”), “Interface” (Section III, “Crossers y Otros *Atravesados*”), “Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Avenue” (Section III, “Crossers y Otros *Atravesados*”), and “Letting go” (Section IV, “Cihuatllyotl, Woman Alone”), which I analyze in-depth,³ illustrate my argument. Through repetition, Anzaldúa effects change on the present and a mystic future.

Rooted in historical consciousness and the poet’s individual experiences, these postmodern poems reveal the negotiating process posed by the conflict of occupying an “in-transit” space between Mexico and the U.S., reality and myth, politics and spirituality (Pérez-Torres). By postmodern aesthetics I refer to fragmentation, syncretism, and montage: from the margins, Anzaldúa takes from here and there to create her own world.

³ Other poems like “We Call Them Greasers” or “Mar de repollos” in which migration, labor work, or racism are the central topics are key to understanding that queerness does not necessarily imply a non-normative sexual identity, but also other factors of abjection like race, class, and ethnicity. I will not analyze these titles, however, because they have received already much scholarly attention.

Using Muñoz's disidentificatory lens, in this first chapter I analyze how worldmaking occurs through the tactical use of *el mundo zurdo*. Employed as a discursive tool, Anzaldúa's imaginary form of community building transports and ideally transforms the reader (like Muñoz demands of disidentifying practices) to worlds where difference is conceived in safer terms, or, to a place where "the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere, not in the dominant world nor completely within [their] own respective cultures...can live together and transform the planet" (Keating 50). Simply put, *el mundo zurdo* is the call for minoritarian groups to negotiate differences and create alternative sites of liberation, where new kinds of social relationships are established. In particular, I focus on the poetic form and what it enables Anzaldúa to express. I look therefore at how *el mundo zurdo* is carved out through form. Versification; sound and rhythm; narrativity, emotion and affection; resemantization; and reappropriation of Aztec symbols are all the formal elements that Anzaldúa uses to build queer worlds of Tejana resistance. Including a poem in Spanish ("*Matriz sin tumba*") also sheds light on how the poet experiences her multicultural, intersectual identities, navigating emotions from one language to another.

In Chapter 2 I shift my attention to Emma Pérez's critical notion of *sitios y lenguas* (sites and discourses) and *Gulf Dreams*, a novel that features a lesbian narrator of Mexican descent painfully confronting a past of violence and desire in a Texas rural town. Given the emphasis Pérez puts on the protagonist's irrepressible yearning for sex, love, and freedom, I place desire at the center of the disidentificatory process in her writing and in *sitios y lenguas*. In other words, it is Pérez's longing for a queer female space and a queer female discourse freed from male, white and Chicano colonial

domination what constitutes both *sitios y lenguas* and *Gulf Dreams*. Similarly, it is the narrator's troublesome yearning (product of her unfulfilled desire to love who she wants and how she wants far away from the violent Anglo and Mexican societies that surrounds her) that serves Pérez to queer worldmake. Desire being an integral part of the novel, Pérez turns to an explicit sexual language that recovers stories of gender and racial oppression in Texas. Her explicit sexual vocabulary is necessary to account for different abuses from gang rape to marital violence to the inaction of a community that remains insensitive to others' pain. A language of sexual desire is also needed because "it is through the transformative powers of queer sex and sexuality that a queer world is made" (Muñoz 23). Interestingly, though, Pérez uses literature to represent both gay and heterosexual love in a destructive way that complicates Muñoz's utopian conceptualization of a queer world. I contend that such a questioning of queerness and its powers is purposefully laid out by Pérez in order to stress the urgency of breaking away from internalized racism and sexism, corrosive by-products of colonialism and gender narrative structures. Thus, I analyze how Pérez's fiction demonstrates that making queer worlds is impossible without previously transforming the inherited dominant cultural, political, and social structures within one's mind. On the contrary, the novel she creates makes a performative countersite that brings into being the idea to which it refers: queer women of color need a space and a language of their own to account for their neglected histories and individual experiences. Thus, *sitios y lenguas* and *Gulf Dreams* are Pérez's own queer Tejana worlds.

In Chapter 3 I examine how El Paso born Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *Sor Juana's Second Dream* challenges dominant historical narratives about Juana de Asbaje, the seventeenth century nun, intellectual, and poet from New Spain, best known as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. In this chapter I work on two levels of analysis. First, I acknowledge Gaspar de Alba's potential power in the fictional reconfiguration of Sor Juana as a desiring lesbian who tactically chose life in cloister. Through the notion of embodied aesthetics, I analyze how the author attempts to disrupt the "official" image of an asexual, chaste Sor Juana to offer instead a liberatory portrait. In this sense, Sor Juana's body holds aesthetic significance that demands new, non-normative criteria, essential to Muñoz's theory of disidentifications.

Second, I offer a critique of Sor Juana's theoretical and fictional representation. Specifically, I attempt to decipher what identification, disidentification, and counter-identification involve, particularly in relation to the possibility for epistemic violence. Thus, Gaspar de Alba's strong identification with Sor Juana, along with her reasons for choosing the nun as foremother of Chicana feminism lead one of my questions: why choose a figure that was closely linked to Europe (i.e., Imperialism), the Court (i.e., colonial opulence), and the Church (i.e., Catholicism) in New Spain as symbolic foremother of Chicanas? Further, my focus centers on the implications in representing Sor Juana as a violent, masculine nun who unwillingly replicates the patriarchal behaviors that Tejana and Chicana decolonizing projects challenge. Turning to Gayatri Spivak and Jean Franco, I thus analyze the extent to which *Sor Juana's Second Dream* recovers or rather erases Sor Juana's voice.

Finally, I conclude this investigation by analyzing the three authors' relationship to Aztlán. As Gaspar de Alba stated in "There's No Place like Aztlán," both straight and queer Chicana feminists—and therefore Tejana feminists—have employed Muñoz's politics of disidentifications by choosing not to separate completely from the Chicano movement and its dominant ideology—Chicanismo—but rather to transform it from the inside (117). That is, politically, Chicana feminists have supported and collaborated with the movement's daily political resistance. On a cultural level, however, Gaspar de Alba tells us that Chicana feminists have worked "to transform [Chicanismo's] cultural logic [of sexism and homophobia] from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of [Raza] resistance" (126). In considering what disidentifying with Aztlán (the imaginary nation that has ostracized Chicanas) means, this last section attempts to answer whether Aztlán is the shadow behind Anzaldúa's, Pérez's, and Gaspar de Alba's efforts to queer worldmake or, rather, if the creation of these new worlds should function in opposition to Aztlán. The fact that most Chicana feminist writers and intellectuals insist on reshaping a system as *machista* as they claim Aztlán to be rather than building one from scratch—like Alurista and Rodolfo "Corky González" did in 1969 through "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán"⁴—demands exploring the underlying reasons for this, while not forgetting that "negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of disidentification" (Muñoz 15). In sum, this concluding section analyzes the

⁴ In March 1969, "El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" was masterminded and drafted by poets Alurista and Rodolfo "Corky" González, and presented at the Chicano Youth Conference held in Denver, Colorado. The plan introduced Aztlán to Chicana/o discourse. For Rafael Pérez-Torres, "although it evokes a Chicano homeland, Aztlán also foregrounds the construction of history within Chicano context" ("Refiguring Aztlán 201).

ambivalence and contradiction in the Tejana disidentificatory process and queer worldmaking.

Chapter 1.

Gloria Anzaldúa and the Poetic Form: An Archive of Keywords

*I write the myths in me, the myths I am,
the myths I want to become.*

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

Published in 1987, *Borderlands/La Frontera* is one of the most influential books within Chicana/o and Latina/o studies. Foregrounding her experience as a self-identified queer Tejana who dwelled between contact zones, Gloria Anzaldúa therein advanced a comprehensive reflection about the different borders—geopolitical, cultural, sexual, and spiritual—that delimit the spaces to inhabit, the languages to speak, and the persons to love. As scholars across countries agree (in the United States, Mexico, and Spain, among others), it was by blurring the lines between genres and disciplines that Anzaldúa created a multi-layered portrait of what the U.S.-Mexico border feels, sounds, smells, and tastes like for the brown female bodies in white, male-centered America. Together with the groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited with Cherrie Moraga in 1981, *Borderlands/La Frontera* made of Anzaldúa an admired thinker that has left a blueprint for how to be a flexible crosser of the many boundaries that rule our world.

The critical attention that *Borderlands/La Frontera* has received, however, is not balanced. Divided in two parts, the opening block, “*Atravesando Fronteras / Crossing Borders*” captures most scholars’ interest. A collection of autobiographical essays that lay out Anzaldúa’s key theoretical concepts, “*Atravesando*” overshadows, at least in terms of analysis, the second part, “*Un agitado viento / Ehécatl, The Wind*,” made up of 38 poems grouped in six sections. With most scholars glossing over the poetic pieces, the essays

are, once and again, privileged. As a consequence, much of what has been pointed out for the past twenty-five years about Anzaldúa's borderlands theory and the new mestiza consciousness is reiterated, leaving intact the possibility of finding new meanings through new approaches to her poetry.

Eliza Rodríguez y Gibson noted that relegating poetry to the margins for the sake of narrative form is not particular of Anzaldúan studies, but rather a generalized trend within Chicana/o studies. One of the few critics to deeply engage the formal qualities of Chicana poet, in particular Lorna Dee Cervantes, Rodríguez y Gibson asks: "Why is the poetry ignored?" (PhD diss. 47). Rodríguez y Gibson's guess is that "close reading and formalism is the province of New Criticism and therefore politically suspect" (PhD diss. 47). How—her answer suggests—could one ignore the inherent biographical aspect of Chicana/o poetry? How could one not look at the social and political context in which the poems were written, when Chicana/o poetry is rooted, as Rafael Pérez-Torres asserts, in historical consciousness? (see *Movements* 1995). Although history, biography, and gender are elements that certainly frame Chicana/o poetics, Rodríguez y Gibson insists that it is important to acknowledge that poetry and prose are different literary forms whose craft and possibilities are consequently distinct. She further argues that Moraga and Cervantes—and by extension, Gloria Anzaldúa—are writers "deeply committed to Chicana politics and cultural production, [who] have chosen particular literary forms because of the potential freedom or structure that those generic forms provide" (PhD diss. 47). Following this thread, what does poetry allow Gloria Anzaldúa to express, and what does the closing section of poems add to the essays in *Borderlands/La Frontera*? In other

words, what does the poetic form, with its sonority and stylistic freedom, enable Anzaldúa to tell about Indian and Mexican cultural heritages, queerness, racism, and politics, among other crucial issues that frame her experience as a lesbian woman of color in the United States? As poets prove so once and again, the poetic form matters because, through sound and images, it enables the reader to establish connections that would otherwise seem dissociate. Pushing us to see and feel differently, poetry shows us different worlds and possibilities.

With the aim of exploring what the poetic form offered Anzaldúa—a writer who was already incorporating fragments of poems and poetic prose in her essay writing—in this chapter I analyze four of Anzaldúa’s poems: “*Matriz sin tumba o ‘el baño de la basura ajena’*” (Womb without a tomb or ‘the bathroom of someone else’s trash’), “Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.,” “Interface,” and “Letting Go.”¹ Although my selection cannot speak to the whole of Anzaldúa’s poetry in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, it is nonetheless representative of the political and spiritual concerns that informed her work: displacement, racism, misogyny, sexuality, and the ongoing Chicana feminist struggle to resist the scripted roles that both heteropatriarchal Anglo and Chicano cultures impose upon female brown bodies. Moreover, these poems condense and reiterate in different aesthetic terms what I understand as Anzaldúa’s “theories of becoming.” What I mean is that if the Chicano movement worked to fashion a new racial identity (Milian 101), then in *Borderlands/La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa models a new kind of Chicana identity. Via

¹ It is important to note that I deliberately set aside the poems that focus on Mexican migration and labor in the fields, such as “*Mar de repollos*” or “We Call Them Greasers” because they have already received a fair amount of attention. Further, my focus in this thesis is queer Chicana identity and sexuality.

the discursive construction of the Coatlicue state² and the new mestiza³—core concepts of her borderlands volume—Anzaldúa delineates the physical and psychic processes through which marginalized U.S. women of Mexican descent must go through in order to become decolonized subjects, liberated from “entrenched habits and patterns of behavior” such as patriarchy or self-hatred (*Borderlands* 101). With “theories of becoming” I therefore refer to the ideological and spiritual battles that Anzaldúa claims Chicanas must lead in order to become flexible crossers of borders and cultures. With the exception of the poem “Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.,” where Anzaldúa decenters herself from the narrative, “*Matriz sin tumba o ‘el baño de la basura ajena,’*” “Interface,” and “Letting Go” conjure the bodily and mystic rituals that give birth to the new mestiza.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, poetry is a “composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm; the art of such a composition” (web, 03/29/2015). The realm *par excellence* of the subjective and the personal, poetry has proven that linguistic abstraction, ambiguity, and self-centeredness can spark, like no other genre, streams of sensations and affects. Further, similar to folk tales, folk songs, and folk drama—all of them part of a performative tradition—poetry

² For Anzaldúa, the Aztec deity Coatlicue is one of the archetypes that inhabit her mind. Described as “the consuming internal whirlwind,” Coatlicue incarnates cosmic processes such as birth and death (*Borderlands* 68). Anzaldúa clusters the Aztec deities Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl, and Tlazolteotl in the Coatlicue state. The Coatlicue state symbolizes the fusion of opposites (i.e., beauty-horror, heaven-underworld, life-death) and the constitution of an integrating self—that is, one that continually embraces and overcomes contradictions. For Anzaldúa, embracing Coatlicue is necessary for a decolonization of the mindset.

³ A misreading of Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos’s *La raza cósmica* (1925) inspired Anzaldúa to shape her concept the new mestiza. Part and parcel of the Coatlicue state, the new mestiza is an expert in border-crossing (in all the sense of the word: crosser of cultures, sexualities, and states of mind) whose “*conciencia de mujer*” allows her to transcend duality. Simply put, the new mestiza is flexible enough to juggle cultures and accept difference.

“embod[ies] discredited knowledge and articulate[s] a history of the margins” (Pérez-Torres 26). For Chicana/os and other disenfranchised ethnic and racial groups in the United States, poetry has consequently been an aesthetic endeavor and a “form of counterdiscourse” (34). Thus, from Rodolfo “Corky” González’s epic “I am Joaquín” in the sixties to the daily-life-centered poems of Laurie Ann Guerrero in the new millennium, Chicana/os have claimed in poetry a space to voice what dominant groups have kept silent.

A promoter of art as activism, I argue that the poetic form allows Anzaldúa to be redundant. Stated differently, the fact that the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza appear under different forms in almost all of the poems in *Borderlands/La Frontera*—and in particular in the ones I analyze—points to the author’s intention in reinforcing and performing her theoretical concepts.⁴ Repetition, a rhetorical device that risks being tiresome in prose, is desirable in poetry. By revisiting the core concepts advanced in the essayistic part of her seminal book—that is, the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza, together with the recurrent and sometimes interchangeable notions of gaps, borderlands, interstices, liminal spaces, thresholds, masks, *nepantla* and bridges—Anzaldúa emphasizes her political stance, insisting on the need for decolonizing practices that can help Chicanas overcome the legacies of conquest with poetry. Simply put, Anzaldúa’s systematic repetition of key words is a formalistic gesture that creates ideology. Through discursive and conceptual repetition, Anzaldúa seeks to produce a body of myths, beliefs,

⁴ In my view, Anzaldúa’s terms such as the Shadow-Beast, La Prieta, the New Mestiza, the Coatlicue State, *la facultad*, *el mundo zurdo*, *making faces*, among others, are all interrelated, if not synonyms that oftentimes could be used interchangeably. Together, they all make-up and illustrate Anzaldúa’s psychic worldview.

and ways of being that can empower herself and others through an emphasis in racial and cultural pride. Ultimately, with its vast invention of terms and formal reiteration, I read *Borderlands/La Frontera* as an archive of keywords and poetics.

With José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer worldmaking as the framework for my reading, I look at how the notion of *el mundo zurdo* is carved out through the poetic form in "Matriz sin tumba," "Corner of 50th St.," "Interface," and "Letting Go." A utopian model of community building, *el mundo zurdo* calls for the creation of a queer world, summoning "the queer groups, the people that don't belong anywhere" to join in, to "live together and transform the planet" (*This Bridge* 233). Appealing to consciousness and spiritual awareness, Gloria Anzaldúa thus defines her alternative, left-handed world: "The pull between what is and what should be. I believe that by changing ourselves we change the world, that traveling *El Mundo Zurdo* path is the path of a two-way movement—a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and reconstruction of society" (*This Bridge* 232). Given that the poems conjure, like *el mundo zurdo*, self-exploration, reconstruction of the self, and letting go in order to become (a new being), I take *el mundo zurdo* as the all-encompassing term of Anzaldúa's theories. Although the concept dates back to the essay "La Prieta" (1981) and is not explicitly mentioned in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I see *el mundo zurdo* as the home for all of Anzaldúa's theoretical deployments and the backdrop to Anzaldúa's writing. Through this lens, *el mundo zurdo* is the queer world where it all happens, the space that simultaneously is and is becoming, and above all, the "universe" where everything and everyone finds a place (*This Bridge* 232). Rupture therein is not

only possible, but desirable. Ultimately, the freedom implicit in *el mundo zurdo* allows Anzaldúa, in the selected poems, to break with the poetic form. Anzaldúa thus avoids conventional citation practices, introduces—deliberately (or not)—spelling mistakes or writing that is not always bound to Spanish-language rules, and combines settings that span from the ancient Mexica empire to the urban American cities of the twentieth century.

Forgetting Form: Poetry as Narrative

Mary Pat Brady and George Hartley stand among the few scholars that have critically engaged Gloria Anzaldúa's poetry. In *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies* (2002), Brady dedicates part of her third chapter to Anzaldúa's poem "Interface," analyzed as a "science-fiction love story" that represents practices of space and citizenship (86). For his part, Hartley dedicates a twenty-page article to the poem in Spanish "*Matriz sin tumba*"⁵—Anzaldúa's poetic approach to the hysterectomy she went through in the late seventies. Hartley's detailed interpretation focuses on clarifying the poem's pre-Cortesian imagery in order to demonstrate how Anzaldúa transforms a medical experience into a spiritual passage.

Although both Brady's and Hartley's analyses are cogent, they prioritize the biographical, the social, and the political over the poetic form. Approaching the poems as narratives, the poetic technique remains, for the most part, unexplored—whatever extends beyond the poems' layout, lineation, and word interspacing is set aside or overlooked.

⁵ See "*Matriz sin tumba: the Trash Goddess and the Healing Matrix of Gloria Anzaldúa's Reclaimed Womb*" (Fall 2010), *Melus*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Oxford University Press, pp. 41-61.

Disregarding elements of the poetic craft such as rhythm or word choice, their analyses seem to correspond to short stories. While Brady and Hartley explore the circumstances from which Anzaldúa's poems emerge (i.e., mythic memory, colonial history, dispossession, and heteropatriarchy), neither explains how the poems are crafted, how they achieve their texture, or further, what the genre grants Anzaldúa.

In contrast, attending to form (particularly to the lexical sets and use of rhetorical devices such as metaphors, similes, alliterations, metonymies, and repetitions) in "*Matriz sin tumba*," "Corner of 50th St.," "Interface," and "Letting Go" establishes the recurrent pattern of keywords that I previously noted. That is, over and over the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza are invoked and, through the page's layout or content, reproduced. This means that the theory Anzaldúa develops in her essays relatively attuned to the genre's convention (let's not forget her unapologetic use of Spanglish, overt self-referential theorization, and frequent incorporation of poetic elements), in the poems she revisits with the discursive freedom that only poetry can offer. In this manner, the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza are reflections of Anzaldúa's own processes of becoming.

With the aim of exploring a less common approach to Anzaldúa's work, then, I turn to John Lennard's practical criticism in *The Poetry Handbook* (1996). "*Matriz sin tumba*," "Corner of 50th St.," "Interface," and "Letting Go" break form, yet this does not prevent us from looking into the ways in which form is essential. According to Lennard, the methodology to analyze the poetic craft—how the poem is built, what the poet's tools are, and how history and biography are deployed—requires "itemization, description, and demonstration" (xxii). Such a task is what I embark upon in this chapter. In parallel, I try

to, as Chela Sandoval says of cultural productions, “identify the meanings, hopes, aims, and desire contained within them” (*Methodology* 4-5). My analysis, of course, is not exhaustive or definitive, but rather a first attempt to look for different answers. Moreover, poetry permits all interpretations.

In poetry, Lennard notes, there are nine basic aspects to attend. First, meter. “Rhythm is basic,” Lennard explains about poems and life (1). Like musical notation, meter determines the poetic rhythm, structures voice intonation, and gives the poem its vocal force, flow, and speed. In contrast to prose, phonic repetition is periodic, with syllabic or consonant sounds that are cyclically accentuated. Put simply, meter is the basic rhythmic structure of a verse. It is important to note that although the lines in a poem can do without meter—as in Anzaldúa’s case—they cannot do without rhythm. In her *Diccionario de retórica y poética*, Helena Beristáin notes that there are phonic rhythms (i.e., rhyme, as in beat and beet or cough and rough), visual rhythms (i.e., the continuous flashing of a light) and, depending on their realization, also physical, physiological, and natural rhythms (i.e., the act of rowing, heartbeats, and the waves of the sea, respectively). In lack of rhymes to sustain the poems’ cadence, such kinds of rhythms are found in Anzaldúa’s poems.

Inscribed within the postmodern tradition of Chicana/o culture, the selected poetic pieces are all free-verse. This means that their line extension varies (all lines have a different length and rhythmic structure) and that there is no established rhyme scheme (such as aabb or abab; except for a couple of coincidences of sounds, Anzaldúa’s poems are unrhymed). As evidenced in her essays, Gloria Anzaldúa is not a follower of rules

and, similarly, not a classic poet—more precisely, she is a writer-inhabitant of *el mundo zurdo*. A kind of academic dissident, Anzaldúa therefore opts for a form of poetry that allows her to create without restrictions of established conventions. Rafael Pérez-Torres observes: “Chicano culture—particularly poetry—moves both through the gaps and across the bridges between numerous cultural sites: the United States, Mexico, Texas, California, the rural, the urban, the folkloric, the postmodern, the popular, the elite, the traditional, the tendentious, the avant-garde...mov[ing] against and with diverse sites” (*Movements* 3). Collages of the folkloric and the urban, colloquial language, and pre-Cortesian mythology, Anzaldúa’s poems indeed navigate across time, space, and cultures.

The second aspect to consider in poetry is form. Anzaldúa’s poems are stanzaic, but, as mentioned, her stanzas⁶ do not show a predetermined internal structure (a template) or rhyme scheme. Anzaldúa is not the creator of alexandrine verses or sonnets, but a postmodern poet that braves with form through the symbolic use of *el mundo zurdo*. Her poems are neither ballads nor odes, and thus to her stylistic freedom corresponds an open form that destabilizes master notions of symmetry and taste. More than strict patterns, then, in “*Matriz sin tumba*,” “Corner of 50th St.,” “Interface,” and “Letting Go” we find stylistic variations that reinterpret and reiterate her theories of becoming.

Beyond form, Lennard notes, lies genre: lyric, epic, satiric, comic, tragic, elegy, and pastoral. None of these modes, however, is completely adequate to describe the poems in this thesis. Rather, Anzaldúa crosses—to use her own metaphor—from one to another. Thus, sometimes she discloses her “Truth(s)” (her innermost emotions and

⁶ “A stanza is a group of lines displayed on the page by blank lines above and below, typically with a constant structure or rhyme scheme” (Lennard 385).

consciousness exploration) as the lyric poet would do, other times her spiritual battles resemble epic struggles or even a sort of elegy (“*Matriz sin tumba*”), and still other times she blends humor into her social critiques (“Interface”). In this manner, Anzaldúa takes from here and from there, like the new mestiza that “juggle[s] cultures,” to create her *mundo zurdo*—a queer world of radical pluralism (*Borderlands* 101).

Layout is the third aspect to consider in this analysis. Intimately bound to punctuation and rhyme through lineation,⁷ in free-verse poems like Anzaldúa’s—where there is no discernible pattern or line-length to display—the layout of the poem or *mise-en-page* may visually express what the words (or lack thereof) in the poem do not. Attending to whether the poems are justified or ragged, if the lines are indented or not, or if there are capitalized words that add emphasis to emotions provide the poem with meaning by stressing a specific word, by slowing down or speeding up the rhythm, or by creating ruptures—for instance, “*Matriz sin tumba*,” completely written in Spanish, is italicized in order to mark Spanish as a foreign language.⁸ Finally, the way in which lines and stanzas are spaced from one another or the occasions when graphical spaces are used between lines or words represents the unseeable: the speaker’s breaths, pauses and sighs; the progression of emotion; and/or the presence in the poem of other speakers or poetic subjects. Layout, then, is a tool for both interpreting nuances of language and finding out where the poet wants readers to center their attention. Generally, the way Anzaldúa takes up the page’s space compels the reader to either follow a serpentine movement—right to

⁷ Lineation is “the organization of a poem into lines” (Lennard 375).

⁸ The contradiction in discursively promoting the blurring of lines in order to avoid establishing hierarchies and then visually differentiating the two languages (English-Spanish) through italics could be an editorial requirement or Anzaldúa’s service to her readership in an attempt to make the texts more legible.

left, left to right—or to identify two levels of discourse that are marked by spaces between stanzas.

Punctuation is the fourth element of analysis. Lennard distinguishes between elocutionary punctuation (i.e., instructions for reading a text aloud—where to pause or what to stress, for example) and syntactic punctuation (critical marks such as commas, colons, or periods indicate how the sentence is constructed). Closely linked to layout, punctuation permits articulation and bears stress. Simply put, how a poet punctuates (or not) either ensures against ambiguity or stresses it. In this sense, Anzaldúa's poems tend to be clear. For the most part, her use of critical marks, just as her capitalization, is quite conventional, paralleling almost the same practices used in narrative. In the poems analyzed herein, when punctuation marks are skipped (there is no clear pattern to determine what makes her punctuate and then just not), a blank typographic space indicates the pauses. In this sense, the prose-poems that Anzaldúa includes in the first part of *Borderlands/La Frontera*—some completely unpunctuated—are more experimental and challenging in terms of legibility.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh aspects that I consider in this chapter are lineation (the poem's division into lines), rhyme (coincidence of sound) and diction (the poet's choice of words for the poem, its reasons and consequences: verb tenses, noun groups, colors and textures, adjectives, etcetera). Anzaldúa represents her lines in subtle ways, without dramatic or messy layouts. For example: achieving an alternating flow similar to a “come and go” pushed forward by the indented lines and pulled back by the line at the margin, “*Matriz sin tumba*” and “Interface” visually recreate the dialogue between poetic

subjects or the clash between the material and the ethereal, the body and the mind. By “visually” I mean that the layout on the page asks the reader to move the eyes, as already stated, in a serpentine fashion that pays tribute to Cihuacoatl, the snake woman and part of Coatlicue.

Of great importance is Anzaldúa’s choice of words (diction), given that the lexical sets that she draws from are key to understanding redundancy in her work. As I argue in this chapter, Anzaldúa turns to poetry to reinforce her key terms of the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza. The ways in which she reiterates such abstractions, however, draw from different lexical sets that create contrasting settings and atmospheres, from somber to colorful, from painful to joyful. Thus, whether Anzaldúa turns to pre-Cortesian mythology (“*Matriz sin tumba*”) or to twentieth-century metropolitan life (“Interface”), the Coatlicue state (i.e., a sense of struggle, “a whirlwind,” a “tickle”) is invoked and the figure of new mestiza (i.e., product of the purifying battle) carved out. Verbs that signify struggle and pain (ripping, shaking, and breathing, for example) delineate processes of physical and psychic transformation. Similarly, all poems share a lexical set that concerns the body. Flesh, blood, hands, navels, and arms, come to the fore once and again. In his analysis of “*Matriz sin tumba*,” for example, George Hartley points out that “[it is] only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, [that] the human soul [can] be transformed” (54). As these poems show, Anzaldúa’s theory indeed emerges from the flesh. Except for “Corner of 50th St.,” the poems center on Anzaldúa’s body and her ongoing processes of “becoming the new mestiza” through consciousness awareness and the transcending of the mind-body binary.

Anzaldúa's predilection for the gerund form provides speed and enhances the poems' motion and continuity. Her vocabulary is not presumptuous. Instead, colloquial language and slang help her capture the world she inhabits—urban or rural, but always queer and rooted in the remembrance of a brown, idealized past. In order to achieve poetic texture, Anzaldúa crafts the everyday speech via literary licenses. Metaphors, alliterations, similes, gradation, repetition, and refrains are only some of the rhetorical devices in charge of creating images, sound, and physical sensations. In lack of identifiable rhyme patterns, Anzaldúa relies on alliterations and word repetition to create rhythm. Finally, it is surprising that the code switching (i.e., Spanglish) that characterizes the first part of the essays disappears in the selected poems: “*Matriz sin tumba*” is completely written in Spanish, whereas “Corner of 50th. St.” (except for one word, “*maricón*”), “Interface,” and “Letting go” are all in English. If in the narrative genre Anzaldúa uncannily mixes both languages (not without spelling and conjugations that differ from standard Castilian), in poetry—perhaps for the sake of rhythm and flow—she sticks to either one or another language.

Anzaldúa's syntax—that is, the way in which she constructs her sentences—tends to be clear and cogent, neither charged nor minimalistic. More than experimenting with the possibilities of language (how inverting word order affects meaning, for example), Anzaldúa's lines generally reproduce the conventional structure of narrative (i.e., subject-verb-object). It is the layout (how such sentences are ruptured by blank typographic spaces) that inserts them within the poetic genre. In terms of syntax, that her lines belong to a poem and not to sentences from a short story is indicated by how she fragments them

(i.e., enjambment) to continue the idea in the next line. Nonetheless, if one ignored the layout, most of the poems could be read as narrative. For example, even though in “Interface” punctuation is marked in less conventional ways (blank spaces substitute for some commas), it is still possible to fluidly read lines like the following: “What does it feel like, she asked / to inhabit flesh, / wear blood like threads / constantly running?” (lines 31-36). If we took the slashes out and just added a comma after “asked,” we would have—in terms of construction—a prose sentence: “What does it feel like, she asked, to inhabit flesh, wear blood like threads constantly running?” The same syntactic style can be detected in a poem like “*Matriz sin tumba*,” a complex piece because of its reference to Mexica deities: “*Una espina gruesa le pica la nalga, / su cuerpo se estremece. / Se entrega a un sabor de hierro / y al eter*” (A thick thorn pokes her buttock / her body shudders / She surrenders to the taste of iron and ether) (Lines 11-15). These two examples of linear phrasing evidence that the poetic form, more than luring Anzaldúa into a game of syntactical experimentation, serve her instead to be more sparse (save words to express an idea or feeling) than in narrative. Hers is not a maze-like linguistic architecture. To achieve poetic texture, Anzaldúa polishes colloquial language by creating similes (“wear blood like threads / constantly running?”), metaphors (“*Una espina gruesa le pica la nalga*”), and metonymies (“*Se entrega a un sabor de hierro / y al eter*”) that stress meaning through sensorial images.

Finally, Lennard’s practical criticism gets to the aspects that catch most of Anzaldúa’s critics’ attention: history, biography, and gender. “As with many postcolonial literatures,” Pérez-Torres notes, “Chicano poetry entrenches itself in the significances of

history. The poetry thus forges a connection with historical reality” (*Movements* 10). Like other Tejana/o and Chicana/o poets, Anzaldúa grounds her work in the hardships of land pillage, political disenfranchisement, cultural clashes (Mexican, Indian, American, French, and German), racism, and gender and sexual oppression. Because Anzaldúa inserts herself at the center of such context, while reading her poetry one must consider her identity and multiple positions as “[a] *third world lesbian feminist with Marxist and mystic leanings*” (“La Prieta” 45). Anzaldúa’s connection with a mythic past and her reclamation of Mexica goddesses have to be taken into account, for she has made of them an integral part of herself. As if embarking on a spiritual revolution, Anzaldúa uses Mexica goddesses as instruments of empowerment.

By now it should be clear that because Anzaldúa condenses in her subjectivity what hegemonic cultures deem aberrant—namely, brownness (therefore working-class, dirty, and dangerous), queerness (therefore ill and perverse), strong spiritual attachments (therefore lacking seriousness), in addition to hormonal imbalances that made Anzaldúa menstruate from the age of three months—her life takes on key importance in her poems. In fact, she channels her poetic imagination to critique the effects of racist ideologies, while pointing towards “spiritual and political agency (Pérez-Torres 6, 10). Consequently, just like overlooking the role of form in Anzaldúa’s poems paints an incomplete picture of her work, dismissing the historical and the biographical detracts from its significance as critical tool.

Before moving on to the analyses, two points deserve clarifying. First, based on Anzaldúa's own reflection about authorship, throughout the following analyses I identify her with the speaker. She explained:

When a poet is immersed in the act of writing, there is a movement from close up to back off to see what s/he's doing. The distancing persona becomes the 'she,' while plunging into the immediacy of the experience becomes the 'I.' Here we all are: Gloria the author, the I who's the narrator who's immersed in the writing of the poem—often the boundary between author and narrator get erased so that I become the I of the poem (Keating 196-197).

This statement evidences that Gloria Anzaldúa foregrounds her subjectivity, allowing to read her as both the poetic subject and the speaker, interchangeably. Furthermore, unlike in the essay genre, where the reader expects objectivity from the author, poetry allows Anzaldúa to inhabit different subject positions. Speaking as Anzaldúa, or as a goddess, or even as an animal if she wished is part of the game of poetry.

Second, because "*Matriz sin tumba*," "Corner of 50th St.," "Interface," and "Letting Go" revisit in new aesthetic terms the content and keywords exposed in the first part of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, I also use Anzaldúa's theory as roadmap to interpreting their symbols. As mentioned, I read her poems as didactic strategies that reiterate her theories of becoming or queer worldmaking. By describing the processes through which "the self" embarks upon spiritual journeys that deconstruct, reinterpret, and shake off the inherited systems of thought that perpetuate oppression and domination among Chicana/os, Anzaldúa liberates her mind and body from the legacies of conquest. *El mundo zurdo*, then, is a queer world where every kind of rupture is possible.

"Matriz sin tumba o 'el baño de la basura ajena': The Poetics of Recovery

“*Matriz sin tumba o ‘el baño de la basura ajena’*” is a free verse poem in Spanish that is both a tribute to fertility and a mourning for the physically removed womb—that is, the material site of origin and the symbolic source of creativity. Based on Gloria Anzaldúa’s physically and psychically painful hysterectomy in the late seventies (consequence of her long-life hormonal imbalances), the poet uses the present tense to actualize the event and to dramatize her account. Carried out by two voices—first-person “I” and third person “She”—that encompass Anzaldúa’s body and soul, functioning as mirror of one another, the seven stanzas of the poem delineate the process of healing through the dark enchantment of the Coatlicue state. As George Hartley aptly argues, Anzaldúa’s mythical imagination transforms a surgical experience into a spiritual passage that allows her to symbolically recover her womb, at least the womb’s ability to give birth. Moreover, as a poem that engages loss from the gut (literally and figuratively), Anzaldúa shows us the visceral of letting go and renewing oneself; bleeding and vomiting, these are the means of purification.

Revisiting the past, Anzaldúa opens “*Matriz sin tumba*” by representing herself lying still on a hospital stretcher: “*Tendida estoy en una cama angosta, / calzones empapados de sangre / Se que yo callada no soy nada*” (I am lying on a narrow bed / panties soaked in blood / I know that silent I am nothing) (lines 1, 2, 3). Disempowered and vulnerable—“*callada*” (silent, voiceless)—she underscores her lack of agency before the medical staff that slaps and pierces (“*manotea*,” “*agujera*”), as Anzaldúa puts it, her stomach while she surrenders to the effects of anesthesia. Anzaldúa faces death: “*Me siento muy lejana, juzgada / por ese buitres en la panza*” (I feel very distant, judged / by

that vulture in the belly) (lines 21, 22). The vulture—symbolizing both the doctor that digs into Anzaldúa’s belly and also the death that emanates from her ill body—stalks her. Aware of how she is judged by both the medical gaze and the bird that heralds her passing, Anzaldúa turns to Tlazoltéotl, Aztec goddess of filth and fertility (Báez-Jorge 2000). In the first part of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa explains: “When pain, suffering and the advent of death become intolerable, there is Tlazolteotl hovering at the crossroads of life to lure a person away from his or her seemingly appointed destination and we are held *embrujadas*, kept from our destiny, our soul arrested” (*Borderlands* 69). Hence, embracing the goddess to whom the Aztecs confessed their sins, Anzaldúa embarks upon a journey of purification and recovery.

In order not to take “*Matriz sin tumba*” as a scatological piece of syntactical experimentation, it is important to untangle the meanings of Tlazolteotl and the “intriguing,” as Hartley (2010) describes it, phrase “*el baño de la basura ajena*” (the bathroom of other people’s trash). Disentangling the ambiguity of the title is essential for the poem to make sense. Likewise, it is necessary to know Tlazolteotl’s characteristics, otherwise lines such as “*sueña con una mujer que orina pus / y que come su propio excremento*” (she dreams of a woman that urinates pus / and eats her own excrement) (12, 13) may lead to erroneous aesthetic and formal conclusions that occlude the mystical—and visceral—understanding of life and death to which Anzaldúa points at in the poem.

Named for the first time in the fourth stanza (line 30), although previously alluded to in the second stanza (“*sueña con una mujer que...come su propio excremento*”), Tlazolteotl is also the symbol for sexual misconduct and impurity (i.e., carnal pleasure).

Identified with black around her mouth, Tlazolteotl, “the Eater of Filth” who both induced to misconduct *and* cleansed the sin from it, eats the ill’s and sinners’ garbage or feces and then she purifies them (Key, web, 03/20/2015). Such an ability to heal makes of Tlazolteotl the deity of medicine, one that favors the continuity of life (Báez-Jorge 2000). Religious Studies scholar Anne Key adds that “[a]ssociated with purification, expiation, and regeneration, [Tlazolteotl] turns all garbage, physical and meta-physical into rich life” (web, 03/20/2015). Transcending dualisms—a task upon which Anzaldúa insists throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera*—Tlazolteotl is ultimately “the cycle of death and life, of death feeding life, of life cycling to death” (Key, web, 03/20/2015). Simply put, Tlazolteotl condenses and informs Anzaldúa’s mystic approach to living.

But more than in Tlazolteotl, the mystery of intelligibility lies in the apparently non-sensical “*el baño de la basura ajena*.” “*en honor a Tlazolteotl*,” the third person voice in the poem enigmatically says, “[s]ueña que toma ‘*el baño de la basura ajena*’ (in honor to Tlazolteotl / she dreams that she takes ‘the bath of other people’s trash’) (lines 30, 29). Far beyond a game of words, the phrase in Spanish “*el baño de la basura ajena*” translates to “*tetlazolaltiloni*,” that in Nahuatl means “*conducta sexual ilícita ajena*” (other people’s illicit sexual conduct) or “*trueque terapéutico de pasiones*” (therapeutic barter of passions) (Hersch, web, 03/20/2015). Mexican historian Alfredo López Austin explains that illnesses considered a harmful consequence from the sexual transgressors or from the illicit desires of the people who had been close to the transgressors received a

common treatment: '*el baño de la basura ajena*' [tetlazolaltiloni]"⁹ (Hersch, web, 03/20/2015). Still practiced in some rural towns in Mexico, tetlazolaltiloni is therefore a lustral purification ceremony that works under the logic of contradiction. For example: in order to counteract the sin, the wife of the adulterer had to commit adultery—hence the barter of passions (*trueque de pasiones*). Thus, "*el baño de la basura ajena*" is a cleansing ceremony that included spells, water, incense, fire to wash away the filth, and bartering with a higher power for redemption (Hersch, web, 03/20/2015).

In light of these definitions, it becomes clear that when Anzaldúa says in the poem that the dying woman on the stretcher ("I") dreams of "taking the bath of other people's trash" in honor of Tlazolteotl, Anzaldúa is actually pleading, like the sinner who has committed a sexual transgression, the goddess to eat her filth—that is, to heal her, to cleanse her from sin. In other words, on the verge of death Anzaldúa seeks purifying her mind, her body, and her sexuality. Here, one could ask: is the poet alluding to lesbianism as an illicit desire or is it rather life itself from what Anzaldúa pleads to be cleansed? As the poem develops, the second choice seems to be more accurate. Ultimately, offering her womb as sacrifice, Anzaldúa seeks for Tlazolteotl's healing qualities with the aim of transforming death and garbage into life and poetry.

The sense of duality that pervades the poem is marked by the dialogue between the "I" and "She" that alternatively lead each of the seven stanzas. Such shift in voices ("I-She") uncovers Anzaldúa's doppelgänger—that is, the unfolding of Anzaldúa's

⁹ In its original Spanish the quote reads: "*los males que se creían derivados de la influencia dañina de los transgresores sexuales o de los simples deseos ilícitos de personas que habían estado próximas, recibían un común tratamiento: 'el baño de la basura ajena' [tetlazolaltiloni]*" (Hersch, web, 03/20/2015).

ethereal self. Reflecting her notion of “*enfrentamiento con el alma*” or “quality of the mirror,” the meeting of the “I” and “She” signifies the capacity of “Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she” (*Borderlands* 64). To establish this duality visually, Anzaldúa indents the third, fifth, and seventh stanzas, favoring a back and forth movement—a dialogue between the two Glorias (Hartley 2010). Such visual shifts gesture towards Anzaldúa’s ideas of the integrating self, that is “Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she.” Moreover, the layout in the page also marks a subtle serpentine template that signifies rebirth and regeneration.

Similarly, two discursive and overlapping spaces dominate in the poem: on the one hand, the material world where the surgery takes place; on the other, the spiritual world where Anzaldúa simultaneously resists and surrenders to the Coatlicue state. Thus, the deployment of the third-person “*Sueña*” (She dreams) as refrain of the second, fifth, and seventh stanzas—“*Sueña con*” (She dreams with) (line 16), “*Sueña que*” (She dreams that) (line 29), and “*Sueña de* [sic] (She dreams of)” (line 53)—contrasts with the other first-person refrain of the poem, “*Revuelvo y repito palabras sin sentido*” (I mumble and repeat senseless words) that the sedated Anzaldúa repeats as chant. Whereas “*Sueña con*” refers to a dreamlike atmosphere, “*Revuelvo y repito*” takes the poetic subject to the materiality of the stretcher where she lays. It is important to note here that these two refrains, each carried out cyclically throughout the poem, have a rhythmic function as well, providing the poem with a cadence that alternatively slows down and speeds up. Later, when a variation of “*Revuelvo y repito*” appears in the gerund form—“*revolviendo y repitiendo*”—the poem creates, phonically and semantically, a sense of circularity and

therefore endlessness: life and death, the never-ending cycle of life. This is, in two words, Anzaldúa's repetition and performativity. Furthermore, this is Anzaldúa's invocation of the serpent (Coatlicue), the fertility it represents in Aztec mythology, and therefore, the continuity of life (Báez-Jorge 123).

"*Matriz sin tumba*" achieves a visually dark and dense texture by combining ash-y and burgundy tones in its lines: red, brown, and black are the blood, excrement, and filth that taint the poem with disease, loss of bodily control, and above all, a history of pain (racism, sexism, homophobia) that manifests in the body. For example, the bodily fluids that Anzaldúa uses to illustrate her poetic canvas—"sangre," bile ("*vomitando algo amarillo*"), "pus" and "*cicatriz*" (scar)—are the physical and symbolic marks of the brown queer female body that resents, internalizes, and resists society's rejection. A visceral poem, "sangre," bile, "pus" and "*cicatriz*," in addition to "*rajadas cavidades*" and "*agujero*" (hole), which refer to Anzaldúa's genitalia, help trace the abject and the erotic in Anzaldúa (Holland et al 394).

Speaking from the gut, Anzaldúa further incorporates to her discourse verbs that imply the releasing of secretions such as "*vomitando*," "*orina*," "*me sangra*," or "*escupiendo*," suggesting in this manner an affective, visceral quality that goes beyond the stretcher and the emergency room. In other words, Anzaldúa's carnal language addresses her surgical experience, but also "the processes [that] produce us as subjects and objects" (Holland et al 394). Such processes, although not explicit in the poem, are inherent to Anzaldúa's personal and collective history: land dispossession, inherited gender-conforming scripts, and a cultural conquest that imposes new values and power

schemes upon the colonized (i.e., Anglo domination over the Mexican and Indian). If ill Anzaldúa involuntarily releases waste, in her spiritual journey Anzaldúa voluntarily lets go; that is, she participates in the project of expelling what has been taken in. As Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins remind us, vomiting is “a style of resistance to the hegemony of colonization” (402). By vomiting, bleeding, and peeing, Anzaldúa is purging her body and mind from toxic patterns of domination. Such a sense of emptying is epitomized by the closing verses of the poem, “*en un lugar interno algo se revienta / y un agitado viento empuja los pedazos*” (in an inner place something bursts / and a blowing wind pushes the pieces) (lines 73 and 74). Rupture, Anzaldúa suggests, is needed for renewal, whereas the Aztec gods take charge of the rest: Ehécatl—“*un agitado viento*”—is Quetzalcoatl, the feathered (male) serpent who will spread Anzaldúa’s inner self through all directions.

From the third stanza on, once Anzaldúa dreams of taking the “bath of other people’s trash,” the Coatlicue state begins. However, Coatlicue is depicted as a sinister monster. As the following fragments show, it is Tlazolteotl who, healing Anzaldúa, sustains and protects her from falling into the maws of Coatlicue, “*el monstruo que se traga el sol cada tarde y le da luz cada mañana*” (*Borderlands* 68).

Fourth stanza:

<i>Sueña que toma “el baño de la basura ajena”</i>	29
<i>en honor de Tlazolteotl</i>	30
<i>Detrás de ella mira una figura</i>	31
<i>tragándose el sol.</i> ¹⁰	32

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa mentions in the first part of *Borderlands/La Frontera* that when “We are not living up to our potentialities [we] thereby imped[e] the evolution of the soul—or worse, *Coatlicue*, the Earth, opens and plunges us into its maw, devours us. By keeping the conscious mind occupied or immobile, the germination work takes place in the deep, dark earth of the unconscious” (69).

<i>Con obsidiana le punza cuatro veces, cinco.</i>	33
<i>¿Estoy muerta? le pregunto</i>	34
<i>Por favor entierren mi matriz conmigo.</i>	35

Fifth stanza:

<i>Un relámpago perforando el cielo</i>	36
<i>dispersa la noche.</i>	37
...	
<i>Alguien me empuja entre la lumbre,</i>	43
<i>aspiro humo de cabellos chamuscados.</i>	44
<i>Esta pequeña muerte,</i>	45
<i>Una comezón que no me deja a gusto.</i>	46
<i>Un dedo sale del cielo, y descende [sic],</i>	47
<i>se insinúa entre mis rajadas cavidades.</i>	48
<i>Chispas salen del agujero</i>	49
....	

Sixth stanza:

<i>Sueña de una cara tiznada,</i>	53
<i>De una boca escupiendo sangre</i>	54
<i>y luego comiendo atole de miel y chile.</i>	55
<i>Hacia el oriente una larga cicatriz</i>	56
<i>raja el cielo.</i>	57
...	

In search for proper burial of her womb—and likewise seeking purification—Anzaldúa unknowingly undergoes transformation through the lustral ceremony (fire, incense, Tlazoltéolt's stained face) and a little death (the allusion to an orgasm in lines 45-49) that will eventually result in life—sexuality as liberation—only to die again immediately after. Anzaldúa explains: “*Padezco de un mal: la vida, / una enfermedad recurrente / que me purga de la muerte*” (I suffer from an illness: life, / a recurrent sickness / that purges me from death) (lines 59-61). Hence, for Anzaldúa to live is to die, and, likewise, to live is to walk away from death. This is, the poem suggests, how Anzaldúa deals with the

paradoxical nature of existence. This, also, is how a life of contention, oppression, and rejection can turn into a constant dying.

Pertinently closing the section “*La Pérdida*,” “*Matriz sin tumba*” is framed by the section’s epigraph “*¡Qué lejos estoy del suelo donde he nacido! / Intensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento; / y al verme tan solo y triste cual hoja al viento / quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento*” (How far I am from the soil where I was born / Great longing pervades my mind; / and when I see myself so alone and sad as if a leaf to the wind / I feel like crying, like dying from sadness) (*Borderlands* 137). Like the subject who is uprooted from his/her land, Anzaldúa’s body is rummaged in order for the womb to be removed. Loss, certainly, is the reigning sentiment. Yet healing is possible thanks to Tlazolteotl and her curative powers. For instance, the fact the poem is written in Spanish gestures towards the possibility of recovery: unlike the lost womb, the maternal tongue—that which has been silenced by Anglo dominant culture—is embraced. Using her “original” language as tool, she pays tribute to the lost womb, offering it symbolic burial.

Anzaldúa’s trashed womb turned into poetry—the written page being the embodiment of her physical and spiritual rebirth—reminds of Argentinian poet’s Alicia Partnoy’s “The Art of Poetry” closing verses: “like the meat / of a cadaver, turning into seed” (*Gay Latino Studies* 84). To conclude, then, I read Anzaldúa’s “*Matriz sin tumba*” in what scholar Ramón García has noted: “the cadaver, an emblem of oppression and defeat, is paradoxically ‘turning/into seed’” (*Gay Latino Studies* 85). Similarly, Anzaldúa’s womb, site of birth and recipient of all that has been taken into the body from the outer world is, for better and for worse, thrown into the trash as if a piece of dead

flesh. Resisting oblivion, however, Anzaldúa insists on giving proper burial to her reproductive death in order to sow the seed. Anzaldúa's womb, as García understands it for Partnoy, is "a dead thing full of meaning and wounds, but also, paradoxically, something that can be turned into seed, something that has the possibility to heal and return the life that was denied" (*Gay Latino Studies* 85). Thus the cycle of life, according to Anzaldúa's mythical worldview, begins.

Cracking Open: "Interface" and The Process of Coming Out

*To me spirituality, sexuality and the body have
been about taking back that alien other.*

—Gloria Anzaldúa, "Sexuality, Spirituality and the Body" (interview)

Echoing Octavio Paz's main argument in the essay "Máscaras Mexicanas" (1950), a recurrent idea in Gloria Anzaldúa's work is that the world knows Chicanas and *mexicanas* by the symbolic masks they wear in an attempt to fit in male-dominated Anglo and Mexican societies. As she elaborated in "*Haciendo caras, una entrada*" (1990), Chicanas play down, if not repress, their personalities, desires, and fears in order to comply with social structures. "The masks—*las máscaras* we are compelled to wear—drive a wedge between our intersubjective personhood and the person we present to the world," Anzaldúa wrote, delineating thus what I imagine as a symbolic borderlands from which Chicanas can "thrust out and crack the masks" of self-hatred and internalized oppression—the legacy of colonization ("*Haciendo Caras*" 125). Turning to a sewing lexicon, Anzaldúa called such a wedge an interface. Comparing it to the piece of material that is sewn between two pieces of fabric, she further described it as the contact zone "where

our multiple-surfaced, colored, racially gendered bodies intersect and interconnect” (“*Haciendo Caras*” 125). In sum, Anzaldúa conceived interfaces as in-between spaces where negotiation and acceptance were possible, despite the seeming impenetrability suggested by the seams.

Described by Mary Pat Brady as a “narrative, playful poem,”¹¹ I read “Interface” as a whimsical reinterpretation of Anzaldúa’s theories of identity formation (*Extinct Lands* 84). Reworking her seminal idea of becoming a new mestiza, the poem’s title points to Anzaldúa’s emphasis on letting go from the invisible chains and masks that tie Chicanas to dominant cultures. Last in the section “Crossers *y otros atravesados*”—which houses the poet’s queer experience and sensibility—“Interface”’s placement responds to Anzaldúa’s claim that each of the chapters in *Borderlands/La Frontera* carves a pattern that reflects the progression of her consciousness awareness. In other words, “Interface” displays the fact that—after much psychic travelling—the queer Anzaldúa has finally left the closet of sexual, linguistic, and cultural repression: the masks have been removed and the cracking up has successfully occurred.

“Interface”—a “lesbian sci-fi love poem” for Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano—accounts for the love relationship between the corporeal speaker (i.e., Anzaldúa) and an ethereal being first addressed as “she” (Brady 83). The poem begins with the immateriality of the lover:

She’d always been there	1
occupying the same room.	2

¹¹ Mary Pat Brady frames her interpretation of “Interface” within a spatial perspective. She notes: “‘Interface’ suggests that contemplating the space between—indeed, discovering the largely hidden surface lying between two portions of matter or space—and then falling into that space, opens whole new arenas of desire, pleasure, and transformation” (*Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies* 85).

It was only when I looked	3
at the edges of things	4
My eyes going wide watering,	5
objects blurring.	6
Where before there'd only been empty space	7
I sensed layers and layers,	8
felt the air in the room thicken.	9
Behind my eyelids a white flash	10
a thin noise.	11
That's when I could see her.	12

Elusive and hard to grasp (lines 3, 4, 5, 6) albeit ever present (lines 1 and 2), the “She” in this stanza can only be seen by making a strong physical and mental effort. Although her airy presence can be felt as a weight (lines 8 and 9), Anzaldúa has to shut herself from the outer world (lines 5 and 6) in order to connect with such a luminous being (white flash).

The second stanza offers more details about the enigmatic “She” that tricks the speaker by appearing and disappearing via sensations. “She wasn’t **solid**” (line 16), the speaker describes, and “She had never wanted to be **flesh** she told me / until she had met me” (lines 20 and 21). Thus the speaker echoes Anzaldúa’s theory of masks and disembodiment, establishing the distinction between corporeality (the body) and abstraction (the spirit). The speaker renders this dichotomy explicitly:

At first it was hard to stay	22
on the border between	23
The physical world	24
and hers.	25
It was only there at the interface	26
that we could see each other.	27

Up to this moment, it is clear that Anzaldúa (the speaker) has emphasized her theory of borderlands: the nouns “edges,” “eyelids,” and “flesh” respectively convey the idea of bodily lines, shields, and curtains that divide, while “border” and “interface” leave no space for doubt that there is a line to blur between the speaker’s “physical world” and the immaterial space of the “she.” Further, the indented lines stress the sense of an in-

between space of contact. Visually, the blank spaces sustained throughout the poem mark the interfaces where the two beings—the corporeal and the spiritual—connect. “Interface” thus presents an architecture of wedges and meeting points that mirror the poem’s content.

As a narrative poem that follows the Aristotelian structure of exposition, rising action, climax, and dénouement, the poem arrives to a bending point. Gradually, the “she”’s thin voice— “a breath of air”—stirs and fills the speaker’s hair and head (read becomes louder and impossible to ignore). Like the genie in the bottle, “she” is thus asking to be let out. Because “she” has become more present (and insistent), the speaker names her Leyla—“a pure sound” (50). Many who have studied this poem (Brady, Neziri¹², Yarbro-Bejarano) argue that “Interface” is about lesbian love. Although this is undeniable, I read Leyla as more than a physical lesbian lover, but as the embodiment of Anzaldúa’s soul and queer self. That is, “Interface” is more about the speaker’s own relationship with herself (her soul) than with another woman. It is a form of auto-erotics. Because Leyla had “always been there occupying the same room” I see her as Anzaldúa’s hidden, unacknowledged queer self. As Leyla insists on her desire to become flesh, the speaker further clarifies:

She stayed insubstantial day after day	65
so I tried to blur	66
My borders, to float, become pure sound.	67

¹² Mary Pat Brady, for example, mentions that Anzaldúa gives birth to her lover, while Jill M. Neziri sees Leyla as the speaker’s lover and companion: “Leyla, as other/alien, is in reality the speaker’s lesbian lover. At first, Leyla seems ethereal or “unreal” because Anzaldúa is not prepared to come out of the closet” (PhD Diss. 146).

Notice here that Anzaldúa repeats the description she had assigned to Leyla's being: "pure sound." In accordance with Anzaldúa's conception of the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza, in "Interface" the speaker and Leyla are one—mind and spirit, object and subject—that come into contact via the typographical spaces (that is, interfaces) in the poem.

As the images progress, Leyla—who is pure sound and feels like fog—becomes more substantial to the degree of finally penetrating Anzaldúa's body, filling her in for a certain time, and finally pushing out of Anzaldúa's body, in the form of a birth: "When I started cramping / she pushed out / her fingers, forearm, shoulder," the speaker describes through gradation, in order to accumulate significance in Leyla becoming flesh and bone (lines 110-112). However, before continuing with Leyla's development as human, I want to focus on the "pregnancy" described by Anzaldúa for, apparently, such a (symbolic) birth parallels the way in which humans ideally are conceived: it begins by the erotism in exploring the other's body—"She [Leyla] was stroking stroking my arms / my legs, marveling at their solidity / the warmth of my flesh, its smell"—it continues with foreplay—"smoke-fog [Leyla] pressing against my eyelids / my mouth, ears, nostrils, navel"—and follows up by penetration—"a cool tendril [Leyla] pressing between my legs / entering" (lines 76-78; 84-85; 86-86). Interestingly, Leyla's penetrating Anzaldúa's body deviates from the heterosexual norm. Anzaldúa describes thus:

A cool tendril pressing between my legs
entering.
Her finger, I thought
but it went on and on.
 At the same time
an iciness touched my anus,
 and she was in

and in and in
 my mouth opening
I wasn't scared just astonished
 rain drummed against my spine
 turned to steam as it rushed through my veins
light flickered over me from toe to crown.

“Anus.” “Iciness.” Anal erotism. A penetration that goes on and on, up to the mouth, traversing the body, invading it all, transforming (i.e., bringing new light) the subject that receives. Is this Anzaldúa’s promise of transformative queer sex? That is to say, does liberation and rupture with colonial structures—rebirth—occur through anal erotism? And, is this an early blueprint of the female anus as “location for transgressive self-shattering,” as Holland et al refer today to the possibility of the anus being a “productive site to speak the truth about interiority”? (Holland et al 400). Because it is through this queer penetration that Leyla enters Anzaldúa and develops inside her making Anzaldúa feel fulfilled: “I wanted no food no water no nothing / just her—pure light sound inside me/.../Leyla had begun to swell.” Thus, it is clear that Anzaldúa proposes an alternative mode of sex and an alternative mode of being. Queerness, she suggests through the birth of Leyla, is fertile. Anzaldúa advocates for anal pleasure in queerness.

Simultaneously, the Coatlicue state and the new mestiza emerge, for such a penetration is, above all, symbolic. Hence, these verses also show the process by which the serpent (i.e., Leyla, the soul, and the unacknowledged queer) enters into Anzaldúa’s body, possesses her, fills her with light, and then liberates the sexually contained Gloria. Welcoming the spirit of the Aztec deities that empower her, Anzaldúa becomes an integrated self where the ethereal and the corporeal come together, like the new mestiza. To reflect such physical and psychic transformation, alliterations, repetitions, and lack of

conventional punctuation lead the phonic rhythm. The abundant use of the gerund form (present in 44 lines) also marks the poem's cadence. The *-ing* ending in "stroking," "running," "dangling" "changing," "playing," etcetera, provides speed and enhances action, implying the restlessness in self-transformation.

Leyla's birth ultimately materializes Anzaldúa's sexual empowerment. A new being is created. I agree with Neziri in that "Leyla's physical manifestation points not only to Anzaldúa's openness about her sexuality but to her ability to accept the part of herself that she feels were the cause of her alienation, and an ability which comes from the Coatlicue State" (PhD diss. 149). Similarly, the epigraph suggests that "Interface" works as a performative poem that lets Anzaldúa's inner "alien" out. This means that Anzaldúa's brownness, lesbianism, and spirituality (that is, the characteristics that mark her as alien to normative Anglo and Mexican cultures) gain force while writing.

"Interface"'s closing lines suggest that process has been successful:

Last Christmas I took her home to Texas.	191
Mom liked her.	192
Is she a lez, my brothers asked.	193
I said, No, just an alien.	194
Leyla laughed.	195

Comparing her lesbianism with being alien, Anzaldúa—"radiant" (line 107) since she came to terms with Leyla—embraces her "difference" with humor. Moreover, her daring to take the last step—coming out as queer to the mother(land)—proves successful: "Mom liked her."

With 194 lines grouped unevenly in seven stanzas, "Interface" is the second longest poem in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (the first is "Holy Relics"). In agreement with its topic—the ultimate realization of the ethereal, disembodied being that inhabits the

speaker's mind and body—the poem's length and layout vaporously mirror the interstices and long process—hesitance, resistance, negotiation, and acceptance—involved in becoming a new (queer) mestiza. Ultimately, with long lines that are generally followed by indented and shorter ones, the pattern of the serpent reemerges.

Breathing and “Letting Go”

*And into my hands unknowingly
I took the transformation of my own being.
--Gloria Anzaldúa, “La Prieta”*

Placed in the section “*Cihuatl* [sic], Woman Alone,” “Letting go” is a ten-stanza poem that establishes its authority in what the process of becoming the new mestiza is like. With *Cihuatl*—which most probably refers to *Cihuacóatl*, one of a number of mexica goddesses of fertility—framing the piece, Gloria Anzaldúa explicitly continues her project of self-decolonization via her reclamation of ancient deities.

In contrast to the dark atmosphere of “*Matriz sin tumba*” or the playfulness of “Interface,” “Letting go” adopts a fresh but nonetheless prescriptive tone about the urgency to stop resisting knowledge, death, and sexuality (see *Borderlands* 70). Attuned to Anzaldúa's seminal theories of becoming, it foregrounds the speaker's body as a receptacle of historical and cultural trauma that must be emptied (that is, turned inside out) in order to, metaphorically speaking, walk with lighter baggage. The poem's alignment to the left (no indents) also stresses its instructive tone by directing the reader's eye to one point.

Like in “*Matriz sin tumba*” and “Interface,” the body herein takes on first importance. A catalog of flora and fauna imagery, “Letting go” is, like the other poems,

about physical symptoms. Thus, in her cautioning of how deciding to open (i.e., stop resisting the serpent's call) is not enough, Anzaldúa uses the second-person mode to involve the reader in the process:

You must plunge your fingers	3
into your navel, with your two hands	4
split open,	5
spill out the lizards and horned toads	6
the orchids and the sunflowers,	7
turn the maze inside out.	8
shake it.	9

Like a set of instructions, Anzaldúa deploys a metaphorical guide to letting go that although seemingly violent (think of the verbs “plunge,” “split open,” “spill out,” etcetera) is naturalized by the frequency with which it has to be done. Anzaldúa's use of the second person voice not only addresses the reader directly, but advances her personal experience as a universal Truth. That is, Anzaldúa's use of the imperative and conditional forms produce a sense of expertise in the processes of Chicana self-realization. This is evidenced in the sixth stanza, where she reminds the reader via a refrain that “It's not enough / opening at once. / Again you must plunge your fingers / into your navel, with your two hands, / rip open” (lines 23-28). This repetition provides the poem with cyclic rhythm and also underscores the endless nature of the process. Further on, invoking Coatlicue through the dragon, Anzaldúa warns:

This time you must let go.	33
Meet the dragon's open face	34
and let the terror swallow you.	35
--You dissolve in its saliva	36
--no one recognizes you as a puddle	37
--no one misses you	38
--you aren't even remembered	39

The use of the slashes in lines 36 through 39 epitomize the prescriptive tone of the poem. Using enumeration as rhetorical figure, Anzaldúa warns about the solitary process of ripping open. However, the challenge must be accepted for breathing and survival depend on it. For example, when Anzaldúa describes how shaking the body inside out is not enough, she draws from a lexical set concerning the respiratory system and links a frog to the process:

Yet, you don't quite empty.	10
Maybe a green phlegm	11
hides in your cough.	12
You may now even know	13
that it's there until a knot	14
grows in your throat	15
and turns into a frog.	16

In its popular meaning, the American phrase “a frog in the throat” is indicative of difficulty to breathe, an emotional blockage that, if unresolved, will eventually asphyxiate the mind. The “threat” of this growing obstruction is even emphasized in the poem through playful gradation (the phlegm turns into a knot that turns into a frog) and through the added emphasis in the matching sounds “cough,” “know,” “knot,” “throat,” and “frog.” However, because the frog in the throat actually “tickles a secret smile / on your palate / full of tiny orgasms” (lines 17-19) I would argue that the frog symbolizes an underdeveloped stage of the serpent—that is, sexuality—wanting to come out. Like Leyla, the “thin voice” that pesters the speaker’s mind in “Interface,” the frog demands to be let out: “The green frog indiscreetly croaks / Everyone looks up” (lines 21 and 22).¹³ In an effort to bring the serpent out and let sexuality flow, Anzaldúa must plunge her fingers

¹³ The frog in the throat also produces a sensation of asphyxia that parallels the subject’s state of mind before deciding to “let go.” In other words, the burden of hiding (the queer, the Indian, and the many other selves that inhabit Anzaldúa’s body) eventually impedes breathing.

again into her navel and recommence the process. Thus, sexuality (the frog), origin (the navel) and breathing (throat) represent life.

Anzaldúa's choice for insects and animals such as "lizards and horned toads," "frogs," "rats and cockroaches," and legendary creatures like the dragon have the clear purpose of conjuring up Coatlicue and the new mestiza's ability to inhabit varying, sometimes contradictory worlds. The dragon is Anzaldúa's way of representing Coatlicue's sinister aspect—the one that devours and draws to the underworld,¹⁴ its fire paralleling the sun that Coatlicue swallows. For their part, the small lizards, the horned toads and the frog, amphibians all of them, represent Anzaldúa's desire to breath and survive, like a new mestiza, in different habitats.

Using negations, Anzaldúa also insists that letting go is a task that, like the Coatlicue state, entails solitude and abandonment:

Nobody's going to save you.	45
No one's going to cut you down,	46
...	
No one's going to storm	48
the castle walls nor	49
kiss away your birth	50

The sum of negations in the poem—"nobody" (1 time), "no one" (5 times) "alone" (3 time) or "nothingness" (1 time), "nor" (2 times), "not" (3 times)—intensify the solitary, if not marginal, nature of constantly transforming and renewing oneself. Despite such panorama, Anzaldúa compels the reader (and herself, as the "you" is also a reiterative call

¹⁴ A dragon, according to the online Oxford Dictionaries, is "a mythical monster like a giant reptile. In European tradition the dragon is typically fire-breathing and tends to symbolize chaos or evil, whereas in East Asia it is usually a beneficent symbol of fertility, associated with water and the heavens."

to her “I”) to embark upon the long-life journey¹⁵ of letting go, ripping open, cutting off the chains of patriarchy. “Face it,” she instructs, “you will have / ... to do it yourself.” Presenting a spiritual task through abundant metaphors, similes, and symbols, among other licenses of discourse, Anzaldúa delineates the path for becoming a new mestiza. The poem’s closing lines suggest that the new human being that Anzaldúa imagines is not only a survivor, but one who can adapt to anything and everywhere. Anzaldúa thus depicts the reward to such a physical and psychic endeavor:

And soon, again, you return	67
to your element and	68
like a fish to the air	69
you come to the open	70
only between breathings.	71
But already gills	72
grow in your breasts.	73

These final lines emphasize that having dared to plunge into the transformative Coatlicue whirlwind—“You’ve crossed over / And all around you space. / Alone / With nothingness” (lines 42-44)—strengthens the crosser. More importantly, practice provides the new mestiza with the ability to live in apparently opposite realms, situations, and cultures (“But already gills / grow in your breasts”). Anzaldúa, “like a fish to the air,” becomes equipped with the qualities of an amphibian—that is, she is able to live on land and water, able to, like the new mestiza, navigate cultures and differences, inhabit both the worldly and the spiritual. As breathing organs, the gills provide her (or the “you” whom the poem addresses) with a new life that is not dependent on the scripts assigned by a society shaped after conquest and colonization.

¹⁵ “It’s not enough / letting go twice, three times / a hundred.” The use of gradation here normalizes the violence of rebirth.

A poem that delves into the new mestiza's physical and psychic transformations, "Letting go" is ultimately, like "*Matriz sin tumba*" and "Interface," a third example of how Anzaldúa practices a theory in the flesh (Moraga 1983), or, in thinking of viscosity, a theory of the gut: Anzaldúa theorizes human life from the inside out (see Holland et al 2015). Suggesting that there is no victory where the body is not at play, each of these poems shows "a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war" that successfully lead to Anzaldúa's constant rebirths and regenerations (*Borderlands* 100).

The World Through the Eyes of the New Mestiza: "Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av."

From the somatic journeys of "*Matriz sin tumba*," "Interface" and "Letting Go," in "Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.," Anzaldúa shifts her gaze to the urban and hostile space of New York to portray homophobic violence. Assuming the stance of the onlooker, Anzaldúa focuses on a Puerto Rican gay man—"PR about 30" (line 7)—physically assaulted by four policemen. Framing the scene with the nature of the unexpected yet unfortunately familiar ["Talking my usual walk / I run into sirens flashing red, turning" (Lines 1 and 2)], the poem discloses the everyday threats that the queer and the ethno-racialized bodies—the marginal subjects—face daily in the so-called progressive metropolis. A short, slow-paced poem, "Corner of 50th St." depicts how "the order of things" is physically and verbally imposed by those in power and those that claim respectability.

In agreement with its placement in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, my analysis of "Corner of 50th St." would conventionally appear after my analysis of "*Matriz sin tumba*." Like "Interface," "Corner of 50th St." belongs to the section "Crossers y *Otros*

Atravesados,” explicitly dedicated to gay and lesbian experience.¹⁶ However, my reason to disrupt such a chronology is due to Anzaldúa decentering herself from the narrative. Written during the peak of the (ongoing) AIDS pandemic and gay condemnation in the eighties, “Corner of 50th St.” shifts the poetic focus from Anzaldúa to those surrounding her in order to portray the daily experiences of gay and Latina/o communities in general. By focusing on a queer Puerto Rican man, Anzaldúa builds bridges between Tejanas and gay Latinos. Like the new mestiza who is touched and concerned by what happens around her, Anzaldúa thus raises her voice against abuse and injustice. Because what is accounted for in the poem mirrors the social conscience of the new mestiza—that is, one that no longer acquiesces to the silence imposed by dominant culture—I see “Corner of 50th St.” as a move beyond the Coatlicue state. Simply put, the Anzaldúa that speaks against homophobic violence—Anglo *and* Latino/a—is the one that has already embraced her queer self, in all the sense of the word, and gained the confidence to speak up. Unlike the other poems where a zigzag template can be identified in the page, “Corner of 50th St.” is aligned to the left margin.

“Corner of 50th St.” is made up of four short stanzas—36 lines in total that offer a quick, yet forceful glimpse of sexual intolerance in the city. To relive the past event and to stress its continuity in time, Anzaldúa uses the present tense. For example, “I run into sirens” (line 2) or “Two uniforms have his head” (line 8). In this manner Anzaldúa suggests that “then” just as “now” are dangerous times for queer people, particularly

¹⁶ The epigraph to this section is taken from Isabel Parra’s song “*En La Frontera*” [At the Border]: *Al otro lado está el río / y no lo puedo cruzar, / al otro lado está el mar / no lo puedo atravesar.* (On the other side is the river / And I cannot cross it / On the other side is the sea / I cannot bridge it).

queers of color. Mirroring the city's landscape, the language in the poem is colloquial. Abbreviations and slang words such as "PR," "Rican" or "*maricón*" (faggot)—the only word in Spanish—fills the lyric atmosphere with realism, concisely reproducing the sounds ("thuds"), voices ("*maricón*"), and reactions to the event ("eyes drifting slowly / over the crowd").

The scene narrated by Anzaldúa is common and yet highly dramatic: four "uniforms" pull down an arrested gay man's pants and hit him, relentlessly, in the scrotum:

Another pulls down his pants
holds him tight around the waist
the fourth [policeman] pummels
the pale orbs over and over
till the PR's face is flushed
the cop's fist red
the sirens turning turning

In public, before the collective and insensitive gaze of the crowd, the policemen display their access to power (in contrast to the half-nakedness of their manacled, immobilized victim) and their irrepressible need to exterminate the source of sexual pleasure (hitting the white Puerto Rican's testicles). Highlighting the passivity of the onlookers with their frank contribution to the violence by yelling the homophobic slur "*maricón*," Anzaldúa pushes us to see, as Paula L. M. Moya argues about Manuel Muñoz's short stories, "how deeply all of us, queer and non-queer alike, are implicated in the ongoing production and reproduction of queer identity and experience" (*Gay Latino Studies* 251). As passive witnesses, the crowd contributes to the isolation of the gay Puerto Rican, and by extension, to the marginalization and violence against all gays. "*Maricón*" in Spanish is also denotative of a Spanish-speaker person—a fellow Latino/a that represents peer-

oriented cruelty (a symptom of internalized colonization—self-hatred, assimilated sexual normativity). Although people might consider hurting fellow denizens “a form of entertainment or survival” this is never a “site of liberatory empowerment” (La Fountain-Stokes, *Gay Latino Reader* 58). Anzaldúa foregrounds how physical and verbal violence “functions as a symbolic affirmation of [the policemen’s and onlooker’s] non-object place within the collective heteronormative order” (Martínez, *Gay Latino Studies* 230). Supposing that one of the “uniforms” was also a Latino, such an assertion would take on a double affirmation.

By extracting the brutal event from the millions of others that happen daily, Anzaldúa pauses to question us all: to what degree are we all involved in homophobic violence and gay isolation? And, to what extent is male on male violence also a repression of sexual desire? To foreground the violence, and therefore to make the reader complicit in it, Anzaldúa focuses on the beating:

He just thud got out thud of jail (line 24).

“He just got out of jail” is what another Rican from the crowd yells. Interestingly, Anzaldúa graphically represents the overlapping of two sounds: the onlooker’s yell (“He just got out of jail”) and the fists hitting against the fragile flesh (“thud”). The interspaces between words stress simultaneity, while forcing the reader to focus on the pain: the blank spaces slow down the poem’s rhythm. Such gaps house the scene’s brutality. In one line, Anzaldúa epitomizes the “physical violence that arises in response to illicit sexual desire” (Martínez, *Gay Latino Studies* 231). Each thud affirms the policemen’s and the crowd’s belonging to the collective gender-conforming order. Therefore, each blank

space also functions to demonstrate the Puerto Rican's isolation. Communally punished (verbally or physically), the Puerto Rican man is alone in his suffering (and in his gayness). By publicly punishing him, the policemen show that there is (and should not be) a social space for queerness. Each thud, finally, follows what Ernesto Javier Martínez calls the "logic of gender purity" (234). Paradoxically, with the police holding their victim in a way that could parallel a passionate gay encounter, but that in contrast pummels as if wanting to destroy such temptation, Anzaldúa closes the poem with a grave tone: "that's as close as they let themselves get / to fucking a man, being men." These lines speak of Anzaldúa's escaping "the tendency to desexualize homophobic violence" (Martínez, *Gay Latino Studies* 234). As Anzaldúa demonstrates, homophobic violence *is* sexualized.

"Corner of 50th St."s craft is simple, but vivid. In just a few lines Anzaldúa weaves movement, sound, and image. Rhetorical devices such as similes ("the cop's arms like baseball bats"), repetitions ("over and over"), alliterations ("through the thick air thinking"), and visual rhythm (carried out by the continuous flashing of the red lights and the policemen's thuds) transform a daily episode into a poetic piece. In particular, the repetition of the line "red sirens turning turning" (repeated seven times) provides the poem with a sense of the irremediable: over and over, gays endure violence. Repetition is necessary to mark the frequency with which this kind of events take place. Furthermore, reiteration performs the violence depicted.

Red, which has a special meaning for Anzaldúa, is an adequate color to describe "Corner of 50th St." The Puerto Rican's "flushed face" (line 17), "the cop's red fist" (18),

and “the sirens turning turning” (line 19) convey the tone. Blood and violence are red. In addition, for Anzaldúa red is symbolic. Rendering homage to the ancient Aztecs’ “*tlilli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de sus códices* (the black and red ink painted on codices),” Anzaldúa claims to write with her blood: “*Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre*. I write in red. Ink...Daily, I battle the silence and the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle” (*Borderlands* 93). In this case replacing her blood with that of the beaten man, Anzaldúa challenges the silence thrown upon gay violence.

Performing the Archive of Keywords

Formalistic gestures in “*Matriz sin tumba o ‘el baño de la basura ajena’*” (Womb without a tomb or ‘the bathroom of someone else’s trash’) “Interface,” “Letting Go,” “Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.” reinforce Gloria Anzaldúa’s Chicana feminist decolonizing project through an archive of keywords and poetics. Taking advantage of the stylistic freedom that poetry offers—that is, using redundancy as literary strategy—Anzaldúa completes with these carnal and visceral poems a linguistic catalog that reiterates her body of work. With concepts such as the wound, borderlands, interfaces, masks and faces, nepantla, shadow beast, la facultad, the Coaclicue state (and its clustering of goddesses Tonantzin, Cihuacoatl, and Tlazolteotl), serpents/tongues/clitoris,¹⁷ and the new mestiza consciousness, among others that constantly emerge in different images and oftentimes interchangeable names, Anzaldúa

¹⁷ See Anzaldúa’s short piece “Dream of the Double-Faced Woman” in Keating’s *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (2009).

creates a queer, mystic Chicana ideology. Reiterating, Anzaldúa enacts her body of beliefs.

Like a religion, *el mundo zurdo* is beyond, below, above, and around Anzaldúa's writing and being. Because Anglo and Chicano cultures deny Anzaldúa her place, she builds a left-handed world where people can "empathize and identify with each other's oppressions" (*This Bridge* 233). As Claudia Milian puts it, "Anzaldúa's transgressive abnormalities g[i]ve way to a collective subjectivation put forward by a 'weird' universal deformity that socially arranges her being. A disproportionately built populace materializes, compromising 'the squint the eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half-dead'" (*Latining* 57). Hence, *el mundo zurdo* has built as a home for what dominant groups would call "social aberrations."

Likewise, *el mundo zurdo* is the space where contradictions meet and are celebrated—from Marxists to "practitioners of magic." In this sense, Anzaldúa's left-handed world is an unruly collage of social, political, and theoretical approaches. Ubiquitous, *el mundo zurdo*'s principles guide Anzaldúa through generic boundaries, allowing her to unapologetically take from here and from there to create—disidentify in José Esteban Muñoz's way—a queer world shaped to her needs. Using *el mundo zurdo*'s powers as shield, it is undeniable that Anzaldúa breaks with scholar conventions, oftentimes dismissing citation practices, disregarding fixed linguistic rules, and even incurring in what in other contexts would be deemed as literary misinterpretations.

Although Anzaldúa's poems are free-verse and draw much from her own mysticism, analyzing the poetic form is important to reinforce the impact of redundancy

in her creation and performance of ideology. In Anzaldúa's word choice, alternation of verb tenses, use of metaphors and symbolism, together with the ways in which she takes up the page, the reader willing to enter into the serpent will find a queer, mystic *mundo zurdo* that allows for everyone and everything, past, present, and future.

Chapter 2.

Turning Your Back on the Nation: Emma Pérez's *Gulf Dreams* and the Door to a Queer World

*But don't forget that to write anything at all my basic material is the word.
So that's why this story will be made of words that gather in sentences and
from these a secret meaning emanates that goes beyond words and sentences.*
--Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*

Emma Pérez's *Gulf Dreams* is an experimental debut novel that pushes us to rethink colonial power and Chicana/o nationalism. With its particular interest in recovering the history of Chicanas in the U.S. Southwest, the novel is, like one of its characters' childhood scars, "a reminder about things forgotten" (*Gulf Dreams* 98). A narrative that tracks down what has remained hidden though not absent from the colonized imaginary, it brings up provocative questions with regards to Aztlán (the symbolic homeland for Chicana/os and privileged site of cultural nationalism), its heteropatriarchal structure, and the role Chicanas and Chicana lesbians in particular, play in a culture that has systematically oppressed them. Echoing her critical work as a scholar, Pérez provokes the reader by implicitly asking: Why, despite harmful consequences, do we nourish our pathological addiction to the source of our destruction? Can one eradicate endemic gender and racial-based violence from within the place in which it occurs? Is a radical break up with the symbolic nation the only possible way for Chicanas' discursive, sexual, and spatial autonomy?

Set in a rural Texas coastal town generically called El Pueblo, *Gulf Dreams* is lead by a first-person lesbian narrator haunted by memories of betrayal and life-long desire for an unnamed woman referred to as "the young woman." By invoking her

childhood memories, youth dreams, and unfulfilled sexual yearnings, the self-identified Mexican¹ narrator unfolds her frustration before the impossibility of love and acceptance in a town where white skin reigns over brown skin, English over Spanish, and men over women. However, as the narrator's conflicted voice shifts its focus to the brutal gang rape of Ermila, a defiant girl from town, and the shameful trial, it becomes clear that beyond the community's racist and sexist attitudes, what cuts short any chance of satisfaction is each person's inner hell, including the narrator's. In effect, all of the characters are burdened by an unconscious, corrosive memory that pushes them to harm in the same ways in which they have been hurt. Back and forth, through a fragmented narrative style that attempts to blur the past with the present, the novel traces the origin of such a yoke. In "Confession," the novel's opening section, the narrator states: "I memorized hate" (Pérez 15). Like her, the rest of the characters have learned to loathe. Tracking the origin and meaning of such a resentment is Pérez's aim.

In this chapter, I read *Gulf Dreams* as a performative countersite that turns its back on Aztlán, a symbolic nation modeled after inherited Euro-American colonial tenets. Using Pérez's critical work as roadmap, in particular the essay "Sexuality and Discourse" (1991) and the book *The Decolonial Imaginary* (1999), I contend that the novel represents the corrosive by-products of colonialism in Texas (racism, misogyny, and pervasive homophobia). Similar to other scholars—Ellie Hernández, among them—I agree that *Gulf Dreams* revisits the Cortés-Malinche legacy (i.e., Mexico's foundational

¹ Throughout the novel, Pérez uses the term Mexicana instead of Chicana, Tejana, or Mexican American to refer to the women of Mexican descent in El Pueblo, the fictional space where the novel takes place. Her use of the word suggests that the characters migrated from Mexico to the United States at a very early age or that they are second-generation. She does not clarify if she also uses the term to refer to those who were born in what today is Texas, before annexation in the nineteenth century.

myth of rape) through the characters' damaged relationships. Indeed, via a fictionalized deployment of the Oedipal conquest triangle that Pérez contends initiates Chicana/os' colonial imaginary, she presents El Pueblo, a community permeated by misogyny and homophobia, as a sort of contemporary dystopia that can be, in my view, extended to a larger scale: Aztlán.

The Oedipal conquest triangle is the psychoanalytic model of colonization by which Pérez explains the unconscious drives that push conquered peoples to reproduce within and out of their communities a racist, sexist and homophobic ideology ("Sexuality" 1991; *Decolonial*, 1999). The model, drawn from Pérez's reading of Freud's Oedipal theory (i.e., the son's fear of castration), Octavio Paz's reflections in "Los hijos de la Malinche" (1950), and Lacan's "symbolic law of the father" (i.e., the Oedipal son's acceptance of a language that is enmeshed with phallic symbols), features the triad Hernán Cortés-Malinche-Octavio Paz, as the symbolic father, mother, and son, respectively. Such a critical layout serves Pérez, a feminist historian from El Campo, Texas, to examine how the inherited socio-sexual relations of colonized people, namely Mexicans and Chicana/os, shape power relations and hierarchies among them. With regards to Chicanas' historical marginalization as second-class citizens within Anglo politics, and their status as objects within Chicano culture, Pérez has argued that the vanguard of a successful revolution relies on "race-gender analysis and sexual autonomy" ("Sexuality" 160).

By portraying El Pueblo (whose generic name allows us to think of any other Chicano town/community/homeland) as a constrictive, suffocating site that fuels its

resentment on past and present violence, I believe that Pérez urges us to break away from the destructive and infertile Chicana/o schema of internalized oppression and self-hatred. For this, I again turn to José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer worldmaking. I argue that by revealing the damaging effects of a Chicana/o society that have internalized dominant structures of oppression, Pérez asks the reader to envision and create a new order where Chicanas, queer or not, can develop and flourish as full subjects liberated from heteropatriarchal tenets that push them into homemaking, male-dependency, and men's sexual and physical violence (see Paula Moya, *Gay Latino Studies*, 253). Likewise, Pérez proposes a new kind of Chicano masculinity.

As Muñoz explained in *Disidentifications*, queer worlds are alternative views “of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out a future” (195). Hence, my analysis suggests that *Gulf Dreams* reenacts the Oedipal conquest triangle in order to metaphorically represent Aztlán as a failed and harmful ideal or nation from which Chicanas, especially queer Chicanas, must let go to be free. As an alternative, she points towards a truly decolonized imaginary—one that I believe can parallel Muñoz's notion of a queer world—where life can be built from scratch. Pérez thus moves herself and the reader “through political and symbolic space” with the aim of delineating a new world where alternative politics and criteria govern (197).

It is important to note that whereas Muñoz's cultural analyses of queer worldmaking place disidentifications (i.e., the survival strategy by which the marginalized subject negotiates dominant culture to rework and reconfigure meaning for their own service) at the center of the process, Pérez's critical notion of *sitios y lenguas* is

the tool with which she queer worldmakes. A space apart from male domination, the term invokes creative ways to oppose colonial patriarchy via a female space where she unveils a language that accounts for Chicanas' sexuality, violence, and marginalization in their full complexity (see "Sitios" 1991; "Irigaray's" 1994; *Disidentifications*; 1999). Of course, this is not to say that Pérez does not disidentify at times—her mere choice for fiction and a queer lens to track Chicana history is a disidentification itself—but rather that her worldmaking process involves, in the first place, realistic representation (as opposed to deconstructive reinterpretation), and secondly, counter-identification. In other words, Pérez opts to reject rather than to reshape and attempt to invert to her command. Thus, the novel shows other possible techniques for queer worldmaking.

Gulf Dreams relies on Pérez's appropriation of an Irigarayan imaginary. That is, through *sitios y lenguas* Pérez follows French feminist Luce Irigaray's claim that women must create a language that is free from phallogentric intrusion. As a survival tactic (like disidentifications), Pérez's critical concept allows me to analyze how the space and discourse from which her work emerges shape a world that rejects both Anglo domination and Aztlán's heteropatriarchal cultural tenets, while inscribing Chicanas' experience into history. Given the notion's performative nature—*sitios y lenguas* effectively opens up the female imaginary that it claims—I contend that *Gulf Dreams* is an example of performative writing. In other words, the novel brings into being the queer world of hope that it discursively calls for. I therefore call it a performative countersite. This means that *Gulf Dreams* is Pérez's own *sitios y lenguas*, her tangible and imaginary alternative to Aztlán.

My analysis also locates desire—“a medium for social change”—as an integral element of the author’s worldmaking process (*Decolonial* XIX). Desire, I argue, triggers the narrative, sets forth literary performativity, and ultimately allows Pérez to create the transformative powers of queerness, central to Muñoz’s theory. Desire, understood now in its most simple definition as wish and yearning, is behind Pérez’s (and *Gulf Dreams*’s narrator’s) longing for a life beyond the kitchen. Desire also motivates the author’s (and *Gulf Dreams*’s narrator’s) wish for uncensored discourse, gender and racial equality, and female sexual autonomy. Indeed, it is such a yearning that pushes her to articulate the Tejano world as she experiences it in the present and as she imagines it in the future. Of course, desire as unfulfilled passion, psychic activity, and mental unrest is also emphasized in the novel via an explicit sexual language: “I lick your lips, your labia, smother your vulva with a drenched tongue. I swallow your mouth into mine, juices stirring nuclei into one. I devour you, your liquid for my body which longs to possess you through your sweet body” (Pérez, *Gulf*, 137). Thus the narrator fantasizes about “the young woman” whose sexual ambivalence and manipulative games torment her. Finally, manifested in the characters as unconscious habit of the body, desire also points at colonial memory (see *Decolonial*, 1999; “Chronotope,” 2003). Such a historical framing comes from Pérez’s Foucauldian claim that the body remembers. Inscribed upon the flesh are the stories of the past. Hence Pérez decodes how desire determines Chicana/os’ oppression throughout history (see “Sexuality,” 1991; *Decolonial*, 1999).

My analysis ultimately considers the novel’s three epigraphs as textual references that frame *Gulf Dreams*. “Thus it was that our sexual dream kept changing into a

nightmare” (Bataille), “tormented shadows haunt my dreams as I sleep tormented at night” (Lispector), and “¿Y qué buscabas en aquel sueño?” (Gervitz) which open the sections “Confession,” “The Trial,” and “Desire,” respectively. Clearly, the book’s sexualized atmosphere comes from Georges Bataille in *Story of the Eye*; an emphasis on the power of words to create realities resonates with Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*; and the desire to recover the past’s silences and traumas pays tribute to Mexican poet Gloria Gervitz’s *Migraciones*. Similar to Gervitz, whose aim with *Migraciones* was to “write a motherland,” Pérez ventures into abandoning her imaginary homeland to create one anew (Baranda 2001). Finally, my chapter concludes by arguing that all the above-mentioned theoretical paradigms (the Oedipal conquest triangle, *sitios y lenguas*, performativity, queer worldmaking, desire, and intertextuality) unravel Chicana/o internalized Euro-American colonialism in *Gulf Dreams*. As a much needed alternative, Emma Pérez opens up a space from which a new world can emerge.

Origin: The Legacy of Sexual and Territorial Rape

The popularized telling of the historical encounter between Hernán Cortés and la Malinche weighs like a curse for both Mexicans and Chicana/os as the mixed-blood descendants of the Spanish and the Indian. Mexico’s history, many have argued, is founded on a symbolic rape. Malintzin, the Aztec princess who served Cortés as translator upon the conquistador’s arrival to Campeche in 1519, “gave” herself to him, “selling” her people “out” and giving birth to the first mestizo (see Colmex, 1976; Pérez, 1999; Paz, 2004). According to this narrative, the colonizer’s success in penetrating what is Mexico today was due to her “betrayal.” In tactical agreement with heteropatriarchal

structures, this misogynistic foregrounding of Malinche has taught to condemn *her*: Malintzin, Malinche, la Chingada, la Vendida, the Indian who chose the foreign.²

In “Sexuality and Discourse,” Pérez advances the implications of such a foundational story in the Chicana/o consciousness. Via the Oedipal conquest triangle, she argues that Paz (the symbolic mestizo son) repudiates Cortés (the symbolic Spanish father) for having chosen an inferior woman to begat an inferior race. The symbolic mother, of course, is Malinche, the raped *india* or “tamed” whore. Because she acquiesced to the conqueror, her son hates her. And because the mestizo male fears that he is inferior and passive like his mother, he colludes with the white colonizer. Together (colonizer and colonized), they condemn *la mestiza* (i.e., Mexican women and Chicanas).

Once and again, the Oedipal conquest triangle emerges throughout *Gulf Dreams*. It is most clearly visible in “The Trial,” where a rapist, his victim, and the rapist’s defendant, all of them of Mexican origin, make up the triangle. Given that this second section of the novel sets the stage for the symbolic colonial model that constitutes the core of the narration, my analysis first focuses on the story of Ermila, the raped sensuous and independent girl whom I interpret as the incarnation of Malinche. Echoing Mexicans’ and Chicana/os’ foundational myth, “The Trial’s” opening lines are an immediate reference to rape: “What happens here, began long ago,” the narrator tells us. “The story began in a hot, steamy room where three boys groped a baby’s body” (Pérez 77). The quote, it is worth noting, does not refer to Ermila as an infant, but rather invokes one of the decisive events that motivate her eventual rape: the rapist’s own rape as a teenager

² Blaming Malinche for the Aztec Empire’s fall to Cortés and his men neglects Cortés’s alliance with the Tlaxcalteca Indians, enemies of the Aztecs and decisive actors in the fall of Tenochtitlan.

and his subsequent reproduction of molestation as pathology. Since the “long ago” of the phrase can be extended to a broader, historical sense that can take us way back in time, this opening phrase, then, points at the memory of rape as origin. In addition to the Spanish Conquest, such a memory evokes the 1846-48 U.S.-Mexico War, where the latter country lost half of its territory to the former, leaving the Mexican settlers at the expense of Anglos. “The loud rapist is born at childhood,” the narrator further explains, suggesting thus the inscription of pain and sexual violence from an early age and its subsequent pathological repetition (*Gulf Dreams* 112).

Ermila is an attractive working-class young girl who is censored by a community who rejects women as desiring subjects. Sexually autonomous, she is a transgressor of El Pueblo’s racial and gender norms. She wanders around “swinging her [full] hips,” dresses with thin sleeveless T-shirts, “braless”, and even gets sentimentally involved with a rich *bolillo* (the derogatory or colloquial term used by Mexicans in Texas to refer to white Anglos) from town. Resonating with Malinche’s “preference” for the foreign, Ermila colludes with whiteness: “To escape El Pueblo, [she] would trade herself to a white boy, hoping he’d leave and take her with him” (Pérez, *Gulf* 100). Her purposeful way of speaking also shocks people, who wonder where her tough and direct words come from. An iconoclast, Ermila challenges El Pueblo’s (and therefore Aztlán’s) fantasy of male greatness by confronting men—that is, by acting as a subject rather than allowing objectification—and by actively embracing her sexuality. Conjuring up the image of Cortés’s lover as the tamed Indian, the narrator tells us that “[m]en prized her provocative arrogance each assuming he would be the one to *tame* her” (Pérez 97; emphasis added).

Taming, of course, is a means of discipline and social control to express and establish patriarchy.

Chencho, a 35-year-old closeted gay, is the one to finally “tame” Ermila. Along with four other men, he thrusts her into the back seat of a car, gang rapes her, and then pushes her out, making her roll down a grassy, dry embankment. Stripped of control over her body, Ermila is disciplined by fear and shame (see Hill Collins 2005). Chencho is one of the boys from the opening quote who sexually groped a baby. A victim of sexual abuse himself, as we later find out, he was repeatedly raped by one uncle throughout his teen years. Chencho’s pathological reproduction of abusive behavior mirrors Pérez’s claim that the flesh, like a text, is marked and inscribed by its own historical drama: “The past, its memories, becomes so much a part of the body’s desires that it will attempt to re-create what has come before, the way flesh has been caressed” (*Decolonial* 108). Pérez thus insists that our memories, even when objectionable (such as sexual abuse), dictate our present desires. From this perspective, Chencho’s raping of Ermila reproduces the logic of the memory of origin. Further, because rape, along with other forms of physical violence, destroys “the victim’s sense of self-determination” it “is a very effective tool to routinize and normalize oppression” (Hill Collins 128-129). It is through physical violence and pillage that every territorial conquest has been accomplished, and similarly, by psychically denigrating and physically controlling a women’s body.

As for Chencho being a closeted gay, his hidden homosexuality symbolizes “the complications of masculine desire in a nationalist culture” (Hernández 171). In effect, in a town like El Pueblo (and by extension in a homeland like Aztlán) there is no room for

homosexuals or lesbians. As a harmful tactic of survival against homophobia, Pérez suggests that Chicana/o gays and lesbians might imitate heterosexual arrangements, therefore inheriting patriarchy's inherent destructiveness ("Sexuality" 173-174). Chencho's "true" sexual inclinations—such as those of every other character in the novel—embody Pérez's suggestion that the decision of who we love or what we do can be "traced to a precise historical moment, usually at childhood, when something occurs to push us in a particular direction" ("Sexuality" 162). It is in this manner that, as the fragmented narrative progresses (or reverses through flashbacks), Pérez exposes the ways in which desire, forever elusive, is a construction of colonialism or a craving for the learnt pain (see *Colonial Imaginary* 1999). By representing the allegories of colonial trauma through lived experience, Pérez unravels how power and domination mold desire (see Hernández). Nonetheless, Pérez especially insists on personal responsibility: until when, she suggests, will we blame our past for who we are and how we behave?

Although Ermila is "scarred inner flesh," she is blamed for her brutal assault (Pérez, *Gulf* 78). Given the reigning misogyny in El Pueblo—a community that, haunted by the Malinche legacy, deems Chicanas as prostitutes who "deserve" to be raped—sexist men and submissive women are eager to punish Ermila's longtime alleged promiscuity and defiance. Executing their inherited phallic power, men and women alike side with Chencho and the other rapists: "She asked for it. She was always with somebody, in the back seat of a car, in alleys, she fucked anybody. Those men gave her what she wanted" (Pérez, *Gulf* 93), people in El Pueblo tell newspaper reporters about Ermila, blaming her for "causing" Chencho (and other men) to desire her. Such communal judgment and lack

of empathy for Ermila, a brutal victim of rape, parallel Pérez's claim that both "women and men [mestizo sons] are addicted to the very thing that destroys them—the patriarchy within capitalist constructs in the late twentieth century" ("Sexuality" 173). Like Malinche, Ermila's sexual agency fixes her as a whore in people's imaginaries. A violated body that could also stand as the symbol for a violated nation (i.e., the forced territorial intrusion of the conqueror), Ermila explicitly mirrors Cortés's translator: "*la malinchista, la chingada*, a betrayer, her own people called her" (Pérez *Gulf* 93). Hence, she symbolizes the physically and discursively dominated Chicana whose flesh is marked and whose voice is silenced. Punished by her people for not conforming to the expected script of femaleness (docile, non-challenging, undesiring), Ermila stands isolated in her pain. Like thousands of other Chicanas in the U.S. Southwest whose stories we do not know of, Ermila screams her rage, but is decidedly unheard. In contrast, by recuperating her story, Pérez makes audible every victim's pain.

The trial that follows the rape is a public moral lynching that casts Ermila as culprit and Chéncho and the other abductors as prey. In this process, the figure of Pelón, Chéncho's lawyer, is of great importance. Former president of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO), a civil rights organization from the late 1960s based in San Antonio, Pelón is the defendant that exercises "the law"—of the father/phallus. A misogynist woman-batterer himself, he claims his clients' innocence. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and the use of violence as mechanism of control and intimidation are all attitudes he has inherited from the movement and subsequently reinforced. In fact, Pelón and his misogyny embody the Chicano colonial imaginary: "César Díaz, el Peloncito,

was a man with devout opinions, true to himself and to men, unaware of how much he loathed women...He was so sure about himself that when he spoke about gringo enemies, he forgot who Ermila was and where she came from” (Pérez, *Gulf* 89). Guided by Chicano nationalist tenets predicated on the exclusion of difference, gender oppression is not a concern for Pelón. A fighter of civil rights—like the members of the Chicano Movement—his words have not been for women. Fighting for Ermila’s pain is therefore unimportant. Like the other men in El Pueblo, he has unconsciously learned to hate women, mere replications of Malinche. For him, racial inequality (and not repressive gender and sexual relations among Chicana/os) is the only social problem that Chicanos must combat. Ultimately, with physical traits that invoke Mexican revolutionaries Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, epitomes of *machismo* and normative masculinity, we can conclude that, more than one individual case, Pelón, “adopting the script written by the ideologues of the Mexican Revolution,” represents a male national body: El Pueblo, and therefore Aztlán (Pérez, *Decolonial* XIX). Fetishizing the social and political movement that overthrew Mexican president Porfirio Díaz from power, Chicanos, Pérez suggests, uncritically imitate a way of being and combatting that brazenly excluded and physically and sexually abused Mexican women.

It is thus how via Chenchó, Ermila, and Pelón/El Pueblo/Aztlán, the Oedipal conquest triangle emerges in *Gulf Dreams*. Chenchó, the rapist, represents a colonized version of Cortés (i.e., the ruled that mimics the ruler), who by means of violence penetrates Ermila’s body—a signifier for both the raped Indian and the land invaded by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. The other men involved in the sexual assault, along with

Pelón and El Pueblo's repressive community, collectively invoke "the law of the father" that subjugates the sons and daughters of colonization via a language that "is ensconced with symbols that dictate patriarchal power" (Pérez, "Sexuality" 164). This fictional layout, I argue, is Pérez's pretext to creatively unravel the ways in which the memory of origin (i.e., the memory of rape) determines Mexicans' and Chicana/os' relationship with racism, sexism, and homophobia. As a mirror of the Cortés-Malinche-Paz triangle, this schema allows Pérez to carve out the memories that haunt the victims of rape, unconsciously pushing them to repeat the violence experienced, consequently perpetuating a colonial ideology that nurtures hate and resentment. Seen from the perspective of performativity, also, such mimicking reminds of Butler's theory of gender performativity. In other words, Pérez's psychoanalytic model echoes to some degree the idea that one "becomes" through repetition. Thus, just as one becomes a woman through the performance of gender, one becomes the oppressor through the repetition of oppression. By revealing such pathological iterations, Pérez aims to create a consciousness that can affirm Chicana/os separation from such a destructive ideology. Breaking with patriarchal addiction, Pérez insists, is a matter of individual responsibility. There is no cure for harm, *Gulf Dreams*'s narrator suggests near the end, "only behaviors [which are learnt, repeated, and internalized] can be changed" (150).

Ultimately, *Gulf Dreams* represents through Ermila's story how the Oedipus complex is embedded in Chicana/o consciousness. The memory of origin haunts Chéncho, Ermila and Pelón alike, as victims of physical or symbolic rape. Each character deals with (or avoids) the trauma differently, and while Chéncho and Pelón become

perpetrators who cannot break with the pattern of violence, Ermila chooses to confront them by speaking out her rage and pain. In this manner and despite the town's efforts to silence her, she fights back. Echoing Pérez's urgency for *sitios y lenguas*, Ermila's grandmother's advice for the girl, as the only person to stand by her, is "to shout, to thunder cries for all to hear because if a woman didn't roar at injustice, a day would come when all would be taken from her" (*Gulf Dreams* 91-92). Thus, appropriation of a female language appears in this case as the first step towards freedom from phallogentric order—freedom of the mind, freedom of the memory of rape. The girl's determination to publicly denounce her assault, and "[scream] for someone or something to help recapture her future" reflects the urgency to reclaim *un sitio y una lengua* that can account for rape and abuse, desire and sexuality, autonomy and freedom (77). Hence, language emerges as a powerful tool for social transformation. Before that, however, Pérez shows us the ways in which desire haunts.

Desire: The Ever-Yearning to Break Away

This section looks at desire and its relation to queer worldmaking. It focuses on other Chicana bodies and different forms of carnal torments and psychic unrest within *Gulf Dreams*. With the Oedipal triangle framing the narrative, the narrator's lesbian desire for the unnamed woman from El Pueblo manifests itself as a burden. A conflicted desire, it attempts to disrupt the legacy of hate, but nonetheless falls prey to its destructive dynamics. By focusing on the complicated relationship between the narrator and the young woman, Pérez posits Chicana lesbian sexuality at the center of the plot. Her aim is to dissect how the historical construction of desire and its discourse have been

“repressive, even fascist, in its colonial forms” (*Decolonial* 125). As we have seen, such a task necessarily involves looking into the Oedipal triangle, as their actors’ desires are shaped by it.

To articulate Chicanas’ yearnings in a town like El Pueblo, words appear as the tool to seize socio-sexual power. Via an explicit sexual female language, Pérez carves out her own *sitios y lenguas*, which means that more than a mere utterance, the notion plays out as action. This is her performative language. Also, echoing her critical work, *Gulf Dreams* appears as a pretext to explore how sexuality is expressed for colonized women. Her choice of fiction, I believe, points at her awareness of the “the power of narrative to change relationships” (Chambers 9). This means that social change, as Chambers argues, occurs through narrative. In other words, the performative aspect of Pérez’s novel allows her to *do*—that is, to build a Chicana lesbian imaginary where the reader can find an alternative to oppression. Unlike a more disciplinary approach—history, for instance—fiction allows Pérez to freely narrativize (a)historical events, bringing vividness to them. Furthermore, “[f]ragmentation, contradiction, and discontinuity” can be best grasped by fiction (Davies 2000).

El Pueblo’s suffocating atmosphere is capable of turning every “abnormal” yearning (i.e., lesbian or female heterosexual transgressive desire) into a nightmare. A non-normative sexual yearning like that of the lesbian narrator or Ermila’s “promiscuity” is utterly rejected in the Chicana/o nationalist ideology that structures life in this unjust town. Considered betrayers of the patriarchal system that guarantees the continuity of *la familia*—the core notion of Aztlán—Chicana lesbians in particular represent a threat for the

family's unity. Furthermore, female sexuality as a whole is condemned. Like the raped girl who is blamed by a community that denies her pain, the narrator is daily reminded that she has no right to love as she loves: "I live in a place that ruptures and negates this practice" (Pérez, *Gulf* 73). Thus, the narrator and Ermila share the status as outcasts. As transgressors of social norms, they represent a threat for the Chicana/o *familia*. Both, however, refuse to yield: "Don't misunderstand me, even when I'm told to hide from public, to meet only in unlit rooms where you can't see us, I am defiant," the lesbian narrator states (73). And like Ermila and the narrator, Pérez resists misogyny, homophobia, and colonial domination by speaking, by using the transformative "power of words" that Chambers discusses.

Desire invaded the narrator at fifteen, when during the summer she met the young woman who becomes her life-long obsession. The immediate attraction manifests in the narrator's erotic dreams: "I dreamt of her fingers brushing my skin, lightly smoothing over breasts, neck, back, all that ached for her" (Pérez, *Gulf* 12). However, according to the narrator's subjective voice, her object of desire plays innocent, ambivalently giving in and stepping back. Apparently heterosexual, she takes pleasure in tormenting the narrator by sharing her encounters with other boys. In a Bataillesque tone, the narrator remembers: "That day under the shaded tree, she had spoken about a young boy. She craved his delicious, expert mouth, she said. She told me he had sucked her nipples. He was careful not to hurt or impregnate her. Instead, he licked her moistness. He loved her. No other boy had ever licked her softness" (14). Pérez's choice of "moistness" and "softness" to refer to the young woman's vagina emphasizes her critical argument that

articulating a female language that accounts for female sexuality is central to any significant social change (see “Sexuality” and “Chronotope”). The phrase also recovers experiences neglected by many male Chicano authors who have rather depicted women as passive subjects who either cook or offer motherly comfort, if not both.

Despite the narrator’s pain and unsatisfied longing, the friendship between the two young women continues, with dreams as the only space where the narrator’s love can take place. The oneiric space, however, soon turns nightmarish and psychologically draining. Their relationship evolves into a harmful game of deceit that pushes the narrator to replicate heteropatriarchal practices in order to not lose the young woman, accustomed to and dependent upon male domination. In this manner, the narrator also dates other boys, and, with the young woman, falls into a pathological reproduction of violence that establishes between them a game of seduction and power that not only keeps them unsatisfied, but traps them in El Pueblo’s social circumstances. Both become “enraptured, entrapped, addicted to each other’s eroticism” in moments of hidden intimacy that then turn into jealousy and manipulation (Pérez, *Gulf* 28). Such ephemeral states of euphoria and deception represent the narrator’s fantasy of inhabiting a different world: the pull of imagining freedom and the push to reality’s entrapments. Both women’s behavior represents the psyche of the colonized, unconsciously dependent upon domination and oppression, tracking pain as their source of pleasure. In particular, the narrator’s overpowering desire and respective lack of fulfillment is Pérez’s allegory for decolonization and the difficulty in breaking away from memory and its subtle, imperceptible commands.

Reiterating Pérez's Foucauldian claim that violence is encoded upon the body, the young girl is presented as someone who has been previously damaged by men. Also a victim of sexual fondling, she is used to violence and addicted to the source of her destruction—masculine power or the patriarchal law. Hence, she demands the narrator reproduce the pattern of brutality that she has always experienced with men: "When I denied her the fight she sought, she would finally look elsewhere. So accustomed to brutality, she chose the victim's role" (28). Such reference to the young woman's inclination for violence emphasizes the ever-presence of the Oedipal conquest triangle, now feminized. This means that, acting out the mestiza daughter role, the young woman's internalized self-hatred makes her believe that she deserves, and even needs, violence. It is important to clarify that her condition as a mestiza daughter, whose psyche has also been penetrated by the law of the father, replaces with her figure the mestizo son in the original narrative. In contrast, the narrator's lesbianism appears as potential disruption of the triangle. I say "potential" because albeit she is a transgressor of heterosexual norms (that is, as someone who pushes the boundaries of what is socially permitted and desired in terms of gender and sexuality), she is also attached to memories of hate and structures of power that inhibit the disruption of the pattern.

Muñoz's queer disidentificatory lens makes the confession of such female violent impulses problematic. Pérez being a lesbian, one would expect her to posit hope in queerness. Instead, she reminds the reader that the flesh's scars determine what we want. Hence, just like Chéncho reproduces rape, the young woman reaffirms her submissive role within Chicana/o culture by pushing the lesbian narrator to imitate patriarchal roles:

“The young woman needed assurance that I was like him, that I would also punish her, believing she deserved punishment” (Pérez, *Gulf* 62). Thus, Pérez posits that, with every member of El Pueblo trapped in a colonial imaginary (including the narrator), queer love can only replicate—and not transform—heteropatriarchal discourses and practices. Afraid of losing her, the narrator falls prey to the young women’s game: “I hit her, tightening my grip around her arm, bruising the skin...I wanted to clutch her, to own her” (63). Cruelty and physical violence thus become the only way to approach the woman. Imagining different modes of loving remains a mere fantasy.

Finally, one day, “[a]fter unspeakable nights together the young woman censored her passion, gave in, chose a common predictable life” (121). Opting for the damaging behaviors that perpetuate the Oedipal conquest triangle, she leaves the narrator for Pelón, the former MAYO member who years later would defend Ermila’s main rapist, Chenchó. In what is the first manifest attempt to break away from El Pueblo, the narrator leaves the Gulf coast for Los Angeles. Driving through the desert, she thinks about the possibility of liberation from the young woman and social condemnation—freedom as desire. Instead, her new home submerges her into a downward spiral of destruction, “vice,” and uncompromised sex (72). The narrator explains: “I kissed mouths skimming my hand past the arch of waists. Inside a woman’s thigh, my fingers searched vaginal lips that spoke desire. I thrust fingers and silicone phalluses into moist vaginas, driving and shoving in and up to a spot that made a woman gasp into the air, into longing” (73). Interestingly, though, the guilt that frames the whole scene renders the image disturbing, featuring a narrator that rather than finally free to exercise her sexuality as she pleases, is

tainted by the ogres of the past. In addition, the contradictory presence of the silicone phalluses poses interesting questions: are they brought upon innocently as sexual game, as disidentification, or as reproduction of heterosexual intercourse and thus power relations? Given Pérez's stance with regards to the phallus as tool of oppression, I tend to go for the last option. In other words, this is a gesture towards the narrator's desire for power.

It is the news about Ermila's rape, ten years later, that brings the narrator back to El Pueblo. Interested in following the trial, she also returns to confront her past. Via the narrator's painful memories, Pérez brings back the invisible and corrosive performativity of colonialism in "postcolonial" times. Scathing racial logics, repeated cases of sexual abuse, and language marginalization (Spanish speakers are forced to adopt English) reemerge in patterns that shape the narrator's present: "I'm trapped between visions...never sure what's real, but always conscious of how I'm scorned, hated, rejected for who and what I am. Mexican, dumb, stupid, hateful, ugly, someone who must learn a world that craves tanned brown, not real brown, not birth brown, just gringo-tanned-at-the-beach, golden brown, not Mexican brown" (116). Tormented, her inability to break away with what has been so violently learnt and internalized denies her the possibility of a freer future.

The trial secretly reunites the narrator and the young woman, not with fewer complications than before. By now, the latter is married to Pelón, and is therefore his accomplice with regards to Ermila, a fact that deeply troubles the narrator. Also, just as in his public life as a lawyer Pelón defends rapists, in the domestic, private sphere he is a

dominant and abusive husband that threatens with the fist. Treated by her husband as an object, the young woman is consumed by her unhealthy marriage. As a metaphor for the barrenness of abusive heterosexual relationships, infertility is a stain in their marriage. Despite this, the young woman submissively assumes her role as a devoted wife. Afraid of emancipation (that is, unable to resist the perpetrator), the young woman perpetuates the hierarchical pattern, always finding an excuse for her husband's abusive behavior. Such a passive stance is also fueled by the eventual love demonstrations she receives from her husband. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "violence that is intertwined with love becomes a very effective mechanism for fostering submission" (230). Unable to defy his power, the young woman defends his behavior, normalizing in this way domestic violence and male supremacy. The young woman's loyalty and support for her husband, Pelón, can be extended to the harmful support Chicanos receive from the female figures around them. In this manner Pérez demonstrates how we are all complicit in the construction and perpetuation of unequal social systems.

More importantly, though, the young woman loves power, as the narrator tells us, and thus power makes her stand by Pelón. It is worth remembering that Pérez's critical work contends that colonial and male power is exercised via the phallus as symbolic tool of oppression. Therefore, what draws the young woman to her abusive husband is his virility. Like the father in the Oedipal conquest triangle, Pelón exercises his control via the phallus (i.e., his phallic discourse and power). And like the mestizo sons or daughters that have not taken personal responsibility for the inherited hierarchical structures and their self-hatred, the young woman embraces the victimizer. In the novel Pérez recreates

this scheme through a disturbing scene that complicates the potential, symbolic subversion of power between sexes. Threatened by the narrator's presence in El Pueblo—Pelón fears she might steal the young woman from him—he dreams that, after a confrontation with the narrator about the trial, he slashes his own penis. Gripping the “bleeding, puny genital,” he tells the narrator: “*Mira ten esto. Póntelo tú!*” (Pérez, *Gulf* 118). Clearly, the dream symbolizes the materialization of the mestizo son's castration anxiety (fear of losing power). Defeated in his dreams by the shadow of the narrator in his life, Pelón is apparently ready to pass on his power. However, as soon as he awakes, he, “in terror,” grabs his “floppy penis” to verify that it is still there (*Gulf Dreams* 118). Pelón, then, is not willing to relinquish. Reflecting the mestizo male's fear that his phallus (power) will never match the supreme power of the white man's, Pelón's insufficient power is determined by the size and quality of his penis (“Sexuality and Discourse” 168). The narrator refuses to accept the slashed penis: it is not her who castrated Pelón, hence it is not her who desires his power.

With the narrator back in town, the reader hopes for *the* radical act that will finally disrupt the Oedipus Complex, moving the characters beyond the colonial imaginary. It bears saying that as a mindset that finally detaches itself from imperial chains, Pérez's decolonial imaginary is parallel to Muñoz's queer worlds. However, every attempt of queer worldmaking is frustrated: the narrator's recurrent nightmares and permanent uneasiness, the young woman's repeated refusals to run away from El Pueblo, and Ermila's social condemnation, prevent transformation. In stark contrast, for example,

to the young woman's sterile, childless life with Pelón, the narrator unsuccessfully delineates for her a new world of alternative logics:

Here's the scenario...I tell you how you've left him. You live on an island now, your island of deep sea blue with green plants, orange and violet flowers. You're with someone else. A man, a somewhat passionless, yet reliable man. You have children, two beautiful, playful children, like you. You live for these children of yours. I have come to you, to greet you again...I come to your house on this island where people are deliciously dark skinned and dark eyed, by the hundreds zigzagging on city streets on humid nights, brushing against each other's damp torsos. Bright colors are constant. I meet him, this man you've chosen as the father of your children. He is unsuspecting, kind. We drink espressos. I get up to leave, kiss your mouth, shake his hand, hug your children. We pretend the visit is over. We will not receive each other again. (Pérez, *Gulf* 123-124)

The fantasy goes on to describe how the next day the two lovers will kiss, make love, and finally separate. Content with the young woman's happiness, the narrator concludes: "The memory will delight me after today," at last creating a blueprint for the future—an ephemeral, pleasurable imaginary moment that can serve as template for new modes of living (125).

This lengthy passage is interesting for a number of reasons. In the first place, a queer world is clearly invoked. The term "scenario" itself demands that we shift our attention from El Pueblo to the space that is about to be built via *sitios y lenguas*. Once with our eyes set on the future (that is, once we are temporarily dislocated from the present), a world of hope and radical transformation is created, even if momentarily. In the world depicted (an island), the narrator offers her lover and herself the possibility of alternative sexual and racial politics: queerness and sexuality are not punished (the

narrator can kiss the young woman in front of her man, and sweaty torsos can brush against each other) and “third world people” (the dark-skinned and the dark-eyed) can live as full subjects. Such a hyper-erotization of brown bodies is Pérez’s attempt to “redeem that which has been disregarded in history,” in this case the disparaging of brownness (*Decolonial VX*). In addition, Pérez proposes a kind of masculinity (“unsuspecting, kind”) that as Paula M. L. Moya would have it, does not “depend on the denigration of women, but rather has a different relationship to both women and femininity” (*Gay Latino Studies* 251).

Second, in opposition to the sterile landscape of El Pueblo (dusty, potholed, and hostile), the imagined island transmits liveliness, with children giggling (those that the young woman cannot conceive with Pelón), colorful plants and flowers, and a tropical atmosphere. Interestingly, the narrator’s idea of a queer world includes a man whose characteristics (unsuspecting and kind) suggest that a different form of manhood can exist. Rather than imagining herself as the permanent partner of the young woman, the narrator extends her desire for the young woman beyond romantic hopes of living a life with her. Thus, her self-erasure as sentimental partner shows that liberating the young woman from Pelón and El Pueblo—that is, from the Chicano patriarchy and Aztlán—is her real reward and satisfaction. Pérez calls upon love and forgiveness as acts of liberation. As the narrator states early in the novel, “Maybe I had to love her [the young woman] enough to let her go” (Pérez, *Gulf* 28). A metaphor for a queer future, this island is a utopia.

Yet the first requirement to access the island is to leave Pelón. Such an imaginary space compels the young woman to reject the phallogentric power he embodies. Only detached from the source of destruction, the new world is there for her to inhabit. But the young woman says no. Like in previous occasions, she clings to the violence she has known. “You look at me, almost sad. You like the story, you tell me. You’ve always liked my stories, but they were never anything but that. You want to shake me back to reality. You want to talk about Pelón,” the narrator states (125). Anchored to her abusive marriage, the young woman does not allow a queer future to transform her present (Muñoz 197). In contrast to the young woman, however, Pérez does believe that stories can be more than just “that.” As her novel shows, Pérez actually sees in words and storytelling a strategy for the disempowered, a technique for subjugated peoples to recover self-esteem (see *Bhattacharyya 1998*).

A Language to Build a World

After Ermila’s trial and an unjust resolution, the narrator heads back to Los Angeles, where she tries to make sense of her memories by reconstructing with words a somber history that, as Clarice Lispector’s epigraph to this chapter suggests, tells a secret meaning that goes beyond words and sentences. For her part, the young woman stays in El Pueblo, where she will grow old with Pelón as an accomplice of Ermila’s (and by extension that of all raped women) tragic and unfair downfall, caught in the pattern of simultaneously embracing and repudiating the male perpetrator. With regards to Ermila, after weeks missing in El Pueblo, her bones are found on the sand. This somber ending reveals how women who defy the sexual law of the father or dare challenge their

oppressors are punished with death, whether symbolic or physical. To recuperate the dignity that was collectively denied to Ermila—from her gang rape to her unnoticed death—the narrator explains: “Everyone...wished her silence in decaying bones. For me, Ermila lives happily in her grandmother’s village in Mexico. Children surround her as she weaves stories about *el norte* and how it makes some men evil, others’ greedy” (*Gulf Dreams* 156). Imagining an alternative ending for a woman who dared defy sexism and misogyny, Pérez proposes a way to honor—to discursively caress and render significant—the silenced, violated Ermila (that is, the Malinches of Chicana/o communities).

Finally, Chenchó, after serving only one year in prison, is brutally killed in the parking lot of a gay bar in Los Angeles, his own testicles jammed into his mouth. The narrative mystery that has been interwoven throughout the novel by attempting to blur the dreamlike with the real is clarified here: the narrator, avenging Ermila and all of her kind, beats Chenchó—la *costurera*’s son, the kid who learnt hate from an early age—to death. “I beat over and over, first his head, cracking sounds resonate as I smash his skull. His face becomes shapeless and mushy like jelly,” the narrator explains (*Gulf Dreams* 143). Unrelenting, the narrator beats Chenchó and strips him of his violent sexual power. Castrated, Chenchó is depleted from his dominance, control, and masculinity. Chenchó’s killing represents Pérez’s unmaking of colonial domination.

Before such a tragic, violent portrait of love and sexual relationships among Chicana/os (and Anglos), I believe that Pérez urges for the creation of countersites that allow for healthier, more just social dynamics. In other words, Pérez compels us to turn our backs on Aztlán, a symbolic nation that replicates what it blames its oppressor for

doing. With El Pueblo as a town based on Aztlán's heteropatriarchal tenets, it becomes clear that the Chicana/o mythic homeland is colonial in itself. Built by Chicanos, Pérez suggest that Aztlán's constitution follows the Oedipus-conquest-triangle. Ultimately, if repression is Chicana/o inheritance, then the memory of origin must be dealt with and a different national imaginary inhabited.

From my perspective, *Gulf Dreams* is Pérez's creative and performative countersite. Sordid and slippery, it is nonetheless her building of a queer world. In a sense, she constructs in opposition to dystopian images. This means that in contrast to her characters' impossibility to disrupt the Oedipus-conquest-triangle, Pérez offers her fictional world as a call for action. In her, rupture is made possible through language. Similar to the narrator's "island-scenario," Pérez compels the reader to break with addictions before entering her world. *Gulf Dreams*'s characters may be prisoners or victims of their past, but the readers might still be able to alter their own present and future by self-examining themselves. Simply put, with *sitios y lenguas* as discursive tactic, Pérez crushes with words the heteropatriarchal Chicana/o ideology that neither one of her characters was able to overcome in their fictional lives. In what is a clear example of performative writing, the narrator's states:

With phrases I create you. I create you here in my text. You don't exist. I never wanted you to exist. I only wanted to invent you like this, in fragments through text where the memory of you inhabits those who read this. You have no name. To name would be to limit you, fetter you from all you embody. I give you your identities. I switch them when is convenient. I make you who I want you to be. And all in my invention, no matter how much I try, you don't have the skill to love, to love me as I am. (Pérez, *Gulf* 139)

This quote offers much to consider. On the one hand, it is Pérez, and not the narrator, who is speaking. Admittedly, she unravels—similar to Clarice Lispector—the logics of her novel, placing in discourse the power of creation. Apparently addressed to the “young woman,” the phrase ends up dislocating her from her identity as a Mexican from El Pueblo. Rather, as an unnamed invention of the author, any other meaning or agent can replace her figure. “You have no name,” Pérez clarifies, “because to name would be to limit you, fetter you from all you embody.” My suggestion here, then, is that the unnamed woman symbolizes historically subjugated Chicanas from the U.S. Southwest just as she is also, like her husband, a metaphor for Aztlán—that is, both are the mestizo/a children of a colonized nation. By tracing her unsatisfied and painful desire for the young woman, Pérez also expresses her desire to track violence, her desire for decolonization, and her desire to rewrite a history that can liberate people from the myths underpinning Chicana/o culture.

Furthermore, Pérez’s ultimate desire is to find love and acceptance in a symbolic nation that, like the young woman, continually rejects her. As the narrator speaks to the young woman, she seems to be also addressing the nation: “You won’t love, can’t risk love. You fear loving someone like me” (Pérez, *Gulf* 145), “You refuse me, you shun me, reject me” (149), and “I’m tortured daily...I’m stuck with no other way, no doorways out. I live in self-effacing pity. I will release you” (149). The lover and the nation are one and only, both incapable of loving queerness. Moreover, Aztlán *is* every character. Ermila, Chencho, Pelón, the young woman, the people from El Pueblo, and the narrator herself have memorized pain. As persons who replicate the “law of the father,” Aztlán in

embedded in the psyche. By exposing the corrosive effects of such legacy, *Gulf Dreams* pushes us “to imagine subjectivities not anchored to a nation” (Minich 156).

Certainly, like every literary text, *Gulf Dreams* is open to various interpretations. However, for the reader who is familiar with Pérez’s critical work, the novel will clearly present itself as historical recovery. My main argument in this chapter is also partly shaped by Ross Chambers’s assertion that “stories are not innocent and that storytelling not only derives significance from situation, but also has the power to change human situations” (7). In thinking about the transformative powers of literature, I believe that more than simply narrating a story of queer frustrated love, Pérez urges us to read the novel’s subtext. And to give the novel its “point,” as Chambers refers to the subtext, requires us to acknowledge that liberation from a past of conquest depends on abandoning the source of harm and taking responsibility for our actions. In other words, Pérez asks for a new beginning and a new behavior. She states: “the individual is responsible for the collective” (“Sexuality” 174). Ultimately, turning to Pérez’s manifest enthusiasm in Pilar, from John Sayles’s *Lone Star*, saying “Forget the Alamo,” I dare say that the final, yet unspoken, words of *Gulf Dreams* are “Forget Aztlán” (*Decolonial* 126). Although the alternative world is not yet habitable, Pérez has delineated the path.

Chapter 3.

Mediation and Representation in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's

Sor Juana's Second Dream

*Entréme religiosa porque aunque conocía que
tenía el estado cosas (de las accesorias hablo,
no de las formales), muchas repugnantes a mi genio,
con todo, para la total negación que tenía al matri-
monio, era lo menos desproporcionado y lo más
decente que podía elegir en materia de la seguridad
que deseaba de mi salvación; a cuyo primer
respeto (como al fin más importante) cedieron y
sujetaron la cerviz todas las impertinencias de mi
genio, que eran de querer vivir sola; de no querer
tener ocupación obligatoria que embarazase la
libertad de mi estudio, ni rumor de comunidad que
impidiese el sosegado silencio de mis libros.
Esto me hizo vacilar algo en la determinación,
hasta que alumbrándome personas doctas de que era
tentación, la vencí con el favor divino, y tomé el estado
que tan indignamente tengo.*

—Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, “Respuesta a Sor
Filotea”

I had many vivid, lucid dreams of communicating with Sor Juana while working in the novel. Once, I dreamed I was talking on the phone with Sor Juana, asking her what kind of shoes she was wearing, while staring at my black wingtips. Was Sor Juana telling me she was a butch woman, or was I imagining her walking in my my own butch shoes?

—Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “The Sor Juana Chronicles”

Both familiar and foreign, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695) goes hand in hand with Mexico's daily life. With her head covered by the habit, and a book, two quills, and the convent's window to her left side, the current Mexican 200-peso note normalizes the seventeenth century nun's image, familiarizing the holder with the printed face. Yet there on the bill as cultural symbol, the tenth muse of the Americas, as the *criolla* nun and poet is hailed, remains distant for new generations that cannot identify with her baroque era.

Who was Sor Juana, some even ask, not knowing that if the bills are to tell Mexican history, she represents a glorious nationalist past together with Netzahualcoyotl, José María Morelos y Pavón, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, and Diego Rivera.

In contrast to the popular absent-mindedness, national and international literary circles have not stopped placing Sor Juana at the center of scholarly research, debate, and even marketing. If today her four volumes of work, *Obras completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*,¹ mostly captivate poets, philologists, and literary critics, the mysteries surrounding her life are rich source for novelists, painters, and playwrights that attempt to offer new answers to what Mexican critic Antonio Alatorre called “*los tres misterios de la vida de Sor Juana*” (Sor Juana’s three mysteries) (“Sor Juana y los hombres” 329). That is, what made Sor Juana enter the convent at twenty? What was her name before she became a nun? And, above all, why did she give up writing at the peak of her fame?

Following biographical research of critics who paved the path for him,² Mexican Nobel prize-winner Octavio Paz offered with *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* (1982) the definitive biography of the nun. For *sorjuanistas*, Paz’s book explained and shed enough light and thorough analysis on Sor Juana’s era and “mysteries.” As for the old rumor about Sor Juana’s possible lesbianism, Paz affirmed: “To think that she felt a clear aversion to men and an equally clear attraction to women is absurd...It is futile to

¹ Sor Juana’s *Inundación Castálida* was the first volume to be published, in Spain (Madrid) in 1689, under the order of La Condesa de Paredes. Centuries later, in 1951, Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, in Mexico, edited for the Fondo de Cultura Económica what today we know as Sor Juana’s “complete works,” four volumes of sonnets, plays, *villancicos*, and treatises that are often re-edited and updated by philologists and critics.

² From Father Callejas in the sixteenth century, to Amado Nervo in the early twentieth century, to Doroty Schons, to Georgina Sabat de Rivers, to Antonio Alatorre, and many more in different continents, Sor Juana’s life and work has been widely documented, analyzed, and interpreted.

try to learn what her true sexual feelings were. She herself did not know” (Gaspar, “Politics of Location” 48).

Unsatisfied with Paz’s heteropatriarchal framing of Sor Juana, across the Mexican border Chicana feminists have claimed the nun as “literary foremother to contemporary Mexicana, Chicana and Latina writers” (Rueda Esquibel 216). Grounded in Sor Juana’s defense of women’s rationality during a time where the Catholic Church, the Inquisition, and the Vice Regal Court ruled, many Chicana scholars and artists have shown a specific interest in questioning, challenging, and interpellating Mexican *sorjuanistas*’ traditional representations of the nun as an asexual body committed only to intellectual life. In particular, El Paso-born Alicia Gaspar de Alba’s work on Sor Juana stands out as the most thorough and provocative. Having dedicated more than twenty years to the study of the seventeenth-century New Spanish nun, Gaspar—a self identified lesbian feminist—has published widely in favor of rescuing Sor Juana’s sexuality from the grips of patriarchal and homophobic representations.

A well-known and prolific Chicana scholar, Gaspar de Alba’s hybrid essay “The Politics of Location” (1998), the historical novel *Sor Juana’s Second Dream* (1999), and the scholarly article “The Sor Juana Chronicles” (2014) overtly defy Mexican historical and literary establishment by representing Sor Juana as a “lesbian separatist feminist who crossed-dressed as a nun” (“Politics” 49). Using Sor Juana’s 1691 self-defense letter “*Respuesta a Sor Filotea*” as evidence, together with the nun’s love poems written for her two protectors and patrons, the vicereines Leonor Carreto, Marquesa de Mancera (1664-1669), and María Luisa Manrique, Condesa de Paredes (1680-1688), Gaspar de Alba

proposes the reader disidentify. Thus, she imagines an embodied desiring nun who chose life in a convent to safeguard her Sapphic tendencies, or rather, to avoid becoming heterosexual (see “Politics of Location” 47). Challenging the official narratives that have fixed the nun as a saintly intellectual, Gaspar de Alba asserts that Sor Juana was in love with both vicereines.

Gaspar de Alba’s argument on Sor Juana’s alleged lesbianism is most clearly articulated and justified in the recently published “The Sor Juana Chronicles.” Therein, Gaspar de Alba offers an overview of non-Mexican representations of Sor Juana. She begins with American hispanist Dorothy Schon’s unpublished novel *Sor Juana: A Chronicle of Old Mexico* (around the 1930s). Schons, Gaspar de Alba explains, represents Sor Juana as a heterosexual nun who enters the convent out of a broken heart. More interested in exposing Mexico’s social reality to the American public than in exploring the poet’s (lesbian) sexuality, Schons represents “the conquered Sor Juana” (“Chronicles” 251). For Gaspar, this means that in order to expose Mexico’s disparities, Schons centers her narrative on a “chronicle of old Mexico” (252) that can expose how Spaniards’ presence in New Spain established social inequalities that determine to date the huge gap between the rich and the poor, and more specifically, between Indians and mestizos.

Gaspar continues by analyzing fellow Chicana Estela Portillo Trambley’s play “Sor Juana” (1983). Portillo, Gaspar says, represents “the penitent Sor Juana” (“Chronicles” 252). A nun that develops a race- and class-consciousness, this Sor Juana is aware of her privilege as a *criolla* in relation to the precarious economic and social

conditions of Indians in New Spain. Having come of age during El Movimiento, Gaspar explains about Portillo, the play clearly reflects the Chicana loyalist slogan “The problem is the Gabacho, not the macho” (“Chronicles” 254). This prioritizing of race over gender, and class over sexuality, makes Gaspar consider Portillo’s representation nationalist, and therefore, dismissive of the poet’s legacy for women.

Framed under the title “Re-conocimiento, or, The Lesbian Sor Juana,” the third representation that Gaspar discusses is her own. Published almost fifteen years after *Sor Juana’s Second Dream*, which fictionalizes Sor Juana’s love relationship with the two vicereines, “The Sor Juana Chronicles” is, above all, Gaspar de Alba’s justification for queering Sor Juana. Hence, Gaspar explains that, as her overview demonstrates, female critics have also failed to adequately account for the nun’s (lesbian) desiring body. Aware of her provocation to the literary establishment, Gaspar describes how her close readings of Sor Juana’s poems evidence what others have so adamantly refused to see: Sor Juana’s friendship with both vicereines went well beyond the contractual relationship that the ruling seventeenth century patronage system established between courtier and Maecenas. In other words, Gaspar asserts that Sor Juana did not dedicate laudatory words to her patrons—in particular to la Condesa de Paredes—because they requested her do so, but because of Sor Juana’s love for them, along with a strong sexual attraction.

To ground her argument, Gaspar elaborates on how she has performed her own brand of Chicana lesbian feminism and decolonized Sor Juana. “Sex and desire,” she mentions, “are two male domains that the Sorjuanistas will not allow Sor Juana to access” (“Chronicles” 267). Emphasizing that such representational violence erases the

nun's body and desires from history, Gaspar clarifies her understanding of decolonizing. She states: "If we read Sor Juana as the colonized object of knowledge upon which the sorjuanista regime has imposed its colonial imaginary, then it follows that we have to decolonize her 'Otherness' if we expect to find the speaking subject" ("Chronicles" 267).

Gaspar de Alba's decolonizing effort—that is, her attempt to rewrite history by representing Sor Juana in mind, body, and desire—is the focus of this last chapter. Perhaps more than in Anzaldúa's and Pérez's reworking of dominant culture, *Sor Juana's Second Dream* reflects a clear disidentificatory practice. By proposing the reader to imagine Sor Juana as a lesbian that engages in sexual encounters with other women, Gaspar de Alba's novel condenses one of José Esteban Muñoz's many definitions of disidentifications. Disidentifying, Muñoz says, "can be summed up [to] the (re)telling of elided histories that need to be both excavated and (re)imagined, over and above the task of bearing the burden of representing an identity that is challenged and contested by various forces" (57). Prepared to provoke, Gaspar takes the public risk to rescue the desiring lesbian Sor Juana from silence, even though her writings suggest she was not completely silent.

Indeed disputed by scholars who claim to have the definitive word on Sor Juana, the New Spanish nun is a cultural symbol where (inter)national, political, and aesthetic agendas collide: who had the right to represent Sor Juana and with what purposes? In other words, if various literary critics are interested in saving Sor Juana from each other, then who can legitimize their authority to represent Sor Juana? Who had the task of securing Sor Juana's impeccable, rational portrait on the 200-peso bill in Mexico? And in

the United States, why is Sor Juana important as foremother of Chicana feminism?³

Furthermore, what personal and political interests lie between Paz's denial of Sor Juana's lesbianism and Gaspar de Alba's investment in demonstrating her lesbianism?

Although disidentifying challenges four centuries of accepted knowledge⁴ and invites readers to imagine Sor Juana as a desiring subject, in this chapter I read Gaspar de Alba's *Second Dream* as a challenge to disidentifications theory itself. Stated differently, I argue that while *Second Dreams*'s foregrounding of the lesbian body promises liberation, issues of representation in the novel test the limits of how much reworking and recycling of dominant culture can be done without damage when representing a historical figure. My interest is not to discard the value in Gaspar de Alba's long-time queer research, but to examine what really is implicit in the decision of "decolonizing" an *Other* so that the subject can speak. Represented as a masculine, violent nun that in different passages of the novel replicates the patriarchy that Chicana feminist tradition resists, the Sor Juana in *Second Dream* loses credibility as liberatory figure. Thus, my aim is to determine the limits of the novel's queerworldmaking.

Similarly, I consider that some of Gaspar de Alba's arguments in "The Sor Juana Chronicles" cast doubt on the reasons behind queering Sor Juana. In particular, Gaspar de Alba's textual diatribe against Octavio Paz—who died in 1998 probably without ever

³ Gaspar argues: "Given Sor Juana's class and cultural affiliations, her keen awareness of and resistance to gender-specific oppression, her empirical career in the camp of what we now know as women's liberation, her continual struggle for survival, her evolving nationalist consciousness, her separatist strategy, and her very postmodern sense of multiple identities, can it be argued that not only was Sor Juana a feminist, but, in fact, she was a symbolic foremother of Chicana lesbian feminism?" (Gaspar, "Politics" 48). Establishing a connection between New Spain and Aztlán, *criollas* and Chicanas, Gaspar attempts to rescue Sor Juana's legacy "for women writers and future feminists of the Americas" (Gaspar, "Chronicles" 254).

⁴ Father Diego Calleja, Sor Juana's epistolary friend, wrote the first biography.

reading Gaspar de Alba's work—reveal a personal desire to claim birthright. That is, the critic's personal interest in claiming authority to speak on Mexican matters competes with the proposal of giving Sor Juana her body, desire, and mind. For when Gaspar de Alba mockingly recreates what Paz would think of her audacity to defy him,⁵ she answers with a suspect hint of bitterness: “[W]ith a condescending shrug, Paz retreats into the shadows of his self-righteous upper-class, heteronormative Mexicanness. What can be expected of a Chicana, a polluted Mexican, I can almost hear him saying” (“Chronicles” 261). Although the irony in Gaspar de Alba's comment about her stained blood is a clear allusion to Paz's infamous essay “El pachuco y otros extremos,” her insistent one-way feud with Paz risks undermining her disidentificatory project by turning Sor Juana into a mere pretext to gain representational power.

Hence, without dismissing the value in the proposition of a lesbian Sor Juana for it certainly delineates new ways for interpreting history, I examine the role of the intellectual as a mediator of historical figures and the possibility for epistemic violence, or the harmful production of knowledge. In this sense, Gayatri Spivak's essay “*Can the subaltern speak?*” (1988) is essential to consider Gaspar de Alba's role as academic interlocutor. Through the case of the British misrepresenting the Indian widow self-immolation ritual (*sati*), Spivak proved that, inevitably, western discourses that attempt to render visible the unseen or give voice to the voiceless—even the most allegedly benevolent—end up reintroducing in their representations “the individual subject through

⁵ Gaspar de Alba imitates Paz: “How I dare contradict the word of this venerable patriarch, this self-ordained high priest of the Mexican psyche? How dare I question his meticulous dissection of this Mexican cultural icon and give more weight to Sor Juana's own words than to his own enlightened interpretation” (“Chronicles” 261).

the totalizing concepts of power and desire” (279). Over and over, intellectuals, projecting their own desires on the “object” of study (i.e., silenced subject), construct the subaltern (i.e., an “object” that is not allowed to become subject). Clearly, Sor Juana, a *criolla* who legitimized both the Catholic Church and the Viceregal Court, the two instances of power in New Spain, was not a subaltern. However, Spivak explains how by claiming complete authority over a woman’s subjectivity, the critic manipulates Sor Juana (the historical subject) to reflect the critic’s own desires.⁶ Thus, the heterophobic, irrational nun represented in *Second Dream* is probably more revealing of the mediator’s need to speak than of Sor Juana’s silenced voice.

In discussing the problems of representation, Spivak also demonstrates that the academic interlocutor actually effaces the subject (s)he represents. As the *sati* case study shows, the English saw themselves as “white men seeking to save brown women from brown men” (305). But by speaking for the *sati*, the British—unable to understand the essence of the now penalized self-immolation ritual—imposed ideological constrictions upon the widows. Rather than saving Indian women, Empire was once again silencing them. Similarly, while Gaspar saves Sor Juana from alleged homophobic biographers, a misunderstanding of Sor Juana’s time, and at times an overreaching in the arguments, hinders the recovery. Like the British “saving” *sati* women, Gaspar’s representation of Sor Juana actually prevents the nun from speaking.

This chapter offers a three-part reading that juxtaposes Sor Juana’s work with that of Antonio Alatorre, critic Jean Franco, and Gaspar de Alba. By looking into Alatorre’s

⁶ See Nicole Guidotti-Hernández’s critique of Jovita González in *Unspeakable Violence. Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries* (2011).

Obras Completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz I. Lírica Personal (2009) and Franco's *Plotting Women. Gender and Representation in Mexico* (1989), I examine Gaspar de Alba's methodology to queer Sor Juana, focusing on aspects that, if considered more closely, complicate Gaspar de Alba's representation of the New Spanish poet. First, I offer a brief consideration of the role that mediation, translation, and interference play in Gaspar de Alba's representation of Sor Juana as a lesbian separatist nun. Then, I analyze three moments from *Sor Juana's Second Dream* whose overtly violent and hierarchical approach contradicts the essence of disidentifications, while producing harmful knowledge. The first fragment I analyze foregrounds Sor Juana's practices of physical and psychic brutality as mechanism to discipline and control her slave Jane and her copyist Concepción (sulbalterns). The second fragment highlights Sor Juana's move to coerce Concepción to physical intimacy, and the third focuses on Gaspar de Alba's ultimate and contradictory representation of Sor Juana as an arrogant "seño[r]" (303), fascinated by the New Spanish Court and what such body politic epitomized in Mexico for three centuries: luxury, racial purity, power, and colonization.

In doing this, my aim is not to debate whether Sor Juana was a lesbian, like Gaspar assures, or not, like Paz argued. Neither is it to deny that Sor Juana was fond of the Condesa de Paredes, to whom she owed not only the publication in Spain of her *Obras*, but the economic support and protection to write in her two-story cell at the convent of San Jerónimo, where she kept more than four thousand books. Rather, my interest centers on exploring the stakes involved in Gaspar de Alba's representation of Sor Juana. What does Gaspar de Alba's meditation on Sor Juana tell us about the ethnic,

racial, sexual, and gender histories that she is representing? (see Guidotti-Hernández 2011). In rescuing Sor Juana's sexuality, what is forgotten? Wouldn't Mexican women and Chicanas be better represented through Concepción or Jane, the characters in the novel whose racialized bodies are subjected to the privileged class's will, than via a colonial figure like Sor Juana? In sum, I argue that while *Sor Juana's Second Dream* has the premise to queer worldmake, the ways in which the novel privileges intellect over race, and violent masculinity over femininity unwillingly leave intact the structures of oppression that disidentifications and embodied aesthetics resist.

A Methodology to Queer

Grounded in Gaspar de Alba's queer feminist reading of Sor Juana's *Obras*, together with the essays "The Politics of Location" and "The Sor Juana Chronicles," *Sor Juana's Second Dream* represents its protagonist in similar terms to what Jean Franco noted back in 1988 about the already common depictions of the nun, that is, "as a heroine pitted against a villainous Church...a woman fighting a male institution, an artist forced into conformity by official ideology, a woman whose talents were held in check by sexual repression [and here Gaspar adds the lesbian factor]" (*Plotting* 25). However, the problem with reinterpretations based on Sor Juana's poems, letters, *villancicos*, and plays is the mediated nature of her writings (Franco 1989; Alatorre 1986; Luciani 2004). On one hand, Sor Juana lived and wrote under a patronage system⁷ that paid her to glorify and legitimize the body politic of New Spain—the Catholic Church and the Viceregal Court. On the other hand, Sor Juana played the "'language games' of her times" by

⁷ *Patronazgo*, in Spanish.

imitating European literary models such as Luis de Góngora, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, and Félix Lope de Vega, among others (Franco 25). Because there is in Sor Juana's work an inevitable distance between the empirical "I" and the "I" that frames the utterance, Franco warned that "any attempt to trace the 'radiography' of [Sor Juana's] soul [was] a hazardous prospect" (25). In other words, Franco advised against conflating Juana Ramírez the subject, whomever she really was, with the Sor Juana that wrote under request and adopted different enunciating voices.

In contrast, Gaspar de Alba argues for the authentic and unmediated nature of Sor Juana's courtly poems to the Marquesa de Mancera (from here on, La Marquesa) and, in particular, to the Condesa de Paredes (from here on, La Condesa or Lysi). She insists: "It's all there, in the primary documents, the chronicle of this friendship, this love story, and yet, the Sorjuanistas have been denying, explaining, justifying, ignoring, or pathologizing" ("Chronicles" 264). For Gaspar, Sor Juana's commissioned poems are unquestionably "love" poems; and because Sor Juana wrote love poems to two women—both of them vicereines, no less—Sor Juana becomes a lesbian. Again, Sor Juana may have indeed felt attracted to women, but Gaspar de Alba's argument diminishes the fundamental role that the patronage system had in shaping Sor Juana's work, from her *villancicos* to her plays and love poems. As a daughter of the Church and favorite protégée of the Court because of her talent and wit, Sor Juana put her pen to the service of the clergy and the viceroys and vicereines in turn.⁸ While this fact does not mean that

⁸ Throughout her life, Sor Juana received protection from four viceroys: the Marquis of Mancera, Friar Payo Enrique de Rivera, the Marquis of La Laguna, and the Count of Galve (Paz 39). *Sor Juana's Second*

Sor Juana was incapable of feeling, it does remind us that caution should be taken in the matter.

Another aspect that an argument based only on Sor Juana's "primary sources" may elide is Sor Juana's well-known talent to speak from different positionalities, to adopt others' style, and to pass as a woman, man, or neuter. As Franco mentions, "Sor Juana multiplie[d] herself until she ha[d] as many 'I's as a peacock's tail" (*Plotting Woman* xxii). Elsewhere, Antonio Alatorre exemplifies such versatile quality with Sor Juana's burlesque sonnet 160:

*Aunque eres, Teresilla, tan
muchacha,
le das quehacer al pobre de
Camacho,
porque dará tu disimulo un
cacho
a aquel que se pintare más
sin tacha.
De los empleos que tu
mor despacha
anda triste cargado como
un macho,
y tiene tan crecido ya el
penacho,
que no puede entrar si
no se agacha.
Estás a hacerle burlas
ya tan ducha
y a salir de ellas bien estás
tan hecha,
que de lo que tu vientre
desembucha,
sabes darle a entender,
cuando sospecha,
que has hecho, por hacer su
hacienda mucha,
de ajena siembra, suya la
cosecha.*

Dream focuses in particular on Sor Juana's protection by the Marquis of Mancera (married to "La Marquesa"—Leonor) and the Marquis of La Laguna (married to "La Condesa"—María Luisa).

Chosen by Alatorre to demonstrate Sor Juana's genius wordplay and ability to imitate, the roughness of the sonnet (emphasized by the cacophonous *-acha*, *-ucha*, *-echa* rhymes that lead the flow), together with its misogynist content, would suggest that the piece was penned by the Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo (1580-1645) (see Alatorre, "Sor Juana y su mundo" 342). Foregrounding Teresilla, a cheeky and promiscuous woman that sleeps with other men while making her husband, Camacho, believe that the child she expects is his, the sonnet distances celebrations of la Condesa de Paredes's beautiful form and manners. Open to different interpretations, sonnet 160 could be read as Sor Juana's adoption of a masculine voice that mocks Teresilla, or rather, with Sor Juana celebrating Teresilla's ability to live her sexuality as she pleases without her husband noticing. In contrast to the previous examples, only offering as evidence the laudatory poems to the vicereines, Gaspar de Alba fails to incorporate in her arguments sonnets that reveal the poet's ability to camouflage and perform multiple subject positions.

Translation and Interference: (Mis)understanding Sor Juana?

Like Sor Juana's epigraph for this chapter shows, the nun's decision to choose the convent is exposed in the 1691 self-defense "*Respuesta a Sor Filotea*."⁹ Unlike most of Sor Juana's work, "*Respuesta*" was not a commission but a letter born out of the nun's need to, under the guise of humbleness and obedience, defend before the clergy her right to speak as a woman theologian and intellectual. The letter accounts for the nun's life-

⁹ Despite her privileged, long-time participation in the highly masculine society of New Spain, Sor Juana's "*Respuesta a Sor Filotea*" anticipates defeat before a powerful Catholic institution determined to cut, once and for all, years of relative free intellectual expression due to the protection she had from the Viceregal Court.

long struggle, from childhood to adulthood, to pursue her love of knowledge.

Foregrounding her natural tendency for literature, metaphysics, and science, Sor Juana explains how she strategically fought to protect what she calls her *inclinación a las letras* (inclination to letters) (*Obras Completas* 830). Like a deviant, given the constrictions of her gender and time, Sor Juana describes such a passion as a burden that has entailed distress, struggle, renunciation, and ultimately, accepting that her inclination for knowledge was stronger than anything else. As the letter progresses, Sor Juana interchangeably refers to her talent as curiosity, genius, a natural tendency, inclination, or a *negra inclinación* (black inclination)—the latter term suggesting the nun’s recognition of her “improper” interest in the profane.

In *Respuesta*, a letter whose publication was not intended, Sor Juana also explains that to safeguard her inclination she chose the convent as the lesser of two evils. In contrast to marriage and therefore motherhood, nunhood, even with its “repugnant things” (the nun does not specify what these are), proved to be the most reasonable. In fact, it was the only alternative for a *criolla* like her. With no husband and children to look after, Sor Juana explains, conventual life would at least provide her “*el sosegado silencio de [sus] libros*” (the calm silence of her books). As the nun asserts about her ability to write verses, “*Dios me inclinó a eso, y no me pareció que era contra su ley, ni contra la obligación de mi estado. Yo tengo este genio. Nací con él y con él he de morir*” (God inclined me towards that, and it did not seemed to me to go against his law, nor against the obligation of my condition. I have this genius. I was born with it and with it I

shall die). Not without the touch of arrogance (“I have this genius”), Sor Juana thus accepts her fate and inclination.

Skeptical of the veracity in Sor Juana’s words, Gaspar de Alba looks for coded messages. Thus, considering the Inquisition’s censorship, she ascribes new meaning to the nun’s use of the words “*negra*” and “*inclinación*” and suggests that Sor Juana lacked the contemporary language and the freedom to express her “true inclinations.” What if *inclinación*, Gaspar implicitly asks, contains more than knowledge? Opening the ground for new possibilities to emerge, Gaspar posits that “*dark inclination*” is in fact “a coded signifier of [Sor Juana’s] lesbian desire, something else she was born with and that motivated her choices, behaviors and attitudes throughout her life” (“Chronicles” 321). Thus, adding to what “Respuesta” claims, Gaspar affirms that although Sor Juana was unable to articulate it in her time, the nun’s sexual orientation is what really determined her entrance to the convent.

While Gaspar de Alba’s new interpretation of Sor Juana’s words points towards a queer recovery, the critic’s categoric assertion that “dark” necessarily means “lesbian” dismisses other possibilities. For example, the fact that contrary to the clergy’s expectations, Sor Juana was attracted to a world of literary possibilities that was outside the sacred. Also, surrounded by Indian servants and black slaves who belonged to lowest rank in New Spain’s colonial castes system, “black inclination” (the literal translation in Spanish) can be an allusion to Sor Juana’s interest in learning about *curanderismo* and black magic considered demonic by the Inquisition. That the critic does not consider other alternative meanings for the “coded signifier” casts a doubt of how authentic is the

interest in uncovering and not imposing. Certainly, by daring to imagine the nun's life in non-normative ways, Gaspar de Alba's query opens the possibility to consider Sor Juana's unspeakable desires. Yet it can be questioned whether speaking for the poet represents disidentification at its maximum or rather an arbitrary imposition of speech on somebody that can no longer speak back.

Because Gaspar de Alba grounds her argument about Sor Juana's lesbianism in the love poems she wrote to la Marquesa de Mancera and la Condesa de Paredes, I would like to briefly examine the English versions from "The Chronicles of Sor Juana." Gaspar de Alba admits that the greatest challenge in imagining the New Spanish poet was reading her in her original baroque Spanish (i.e., old Castilian of culteranist style) (see "Chronicles" 266). Although immediately after Gaspar argues that she is a fast auditory learner, most of the quotes on which she bases her argument are taken from Alan Trueblood's *An Anthology of Sor Juana* (1988) and not from Sor Juana's original *Obras*.

In the preface to *An Anthology*, Trueblood explains his translation methodology. First, he admits to changing Sor Juana's grammatical patterns to maintain the rhyme. Second, he warns about his presentation of excerpts rather than full versions of his selection of poems, arguing that "this is a license which Sor Juana's verse is able to tolerate in translation" (xiv). Given that Trueblood finds Sor Juana's rhetorical expansiveness repetitive and monotonous for a contemporary reader, he justifies that "where judicious pruning seemed desirable, or at least not harmful" he went ahead (xiv). Although honest, such clarifications question the reliability of his work, for editing down entails erasing Sor Juana's words. Thus, even though Trueblood's book is legitimized by

Harvard University Press and a foreword by Octavio Paz, Gaspar de Alba's use of Trueblood's "interlingual re-creation[s]," as he refers to his translations, contain imprecisions that, in English, fuel an argument that in Spanish cannot be fully proved (Trueblood xiii).

Because scrutinizing inaccuracies involves another type of investigation, I offer only one example of what I consider an over-translation in Alan Trueblood's *An Anthology*. In "Chronicles," Gaspar de Alba presents a fragment of Sor Juana's poem 91, "*Excusándose de un silencio*,"¹⁰ as evidence of how Sor Juana "is...unequivocal about her desire for Maria Luisa, her 'divina Lysi,' whom she confesses to adore in various poems, to whom she wants to belong like a slave belongs to her master, a crime whose punishment would be a reward" ("Chronicles" 263). Below are Alatorres's and Trueblood's versions of the fragment that inspire Gaspar de Alba's assertion on Sor Juana's "love" and subordination to la Condesa de Paredes:

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Poem 91 (fragment)

Antonio Alatorre, ed.	Alan S. Trueblood, transl.
<i>Que en mi amorosa pasión no fue descuido ni mengua quitar el uso a la lengua por dárselo al corazón... Y si es culpable mi intento, será mi afecto precito, porque es amarte un delito de que nunca me arrepiento. Esto en mis afectos hallo, Y más, que explicar no sé; Mas tú, de lo que callé, Inferirás lo que callo.</i>	<p>I love you with so much passion neither rudeness nor neglect can explain why I tied my tongue yet left my heart unchecked... Let my love be ever doomed if guilty in its intent, for loving you is a crime of which I will never repent. This much I find in my feelings— and more that I cannot explain; but you, from what I have said, may infer what words won't contain.</p>

¹⁰ "Excusing herself for silence, on being summoned to break it..." (Trueblood 43).

Certainly, the English-version of Poem 91 suggests boundless love: “I love you with so much passion.” However, Trueblood over-translates this line, for a more accurate translation for “*Que en mi amorosa / pasión*” would be “That in my loving / passion.” Subtler than “I love you with so much passion” (whose incorporation of the “I” sets forth an action that is absent in the Castilian version) the original poem is not that clear about a passionate dependency between the writer and the patron to whom the poem is addressed. Does the poem in Spanish suggest, like Gaspar argues, that Sor Juana wants to belong to her patron “like a slave belongs to her master”? And if she did, wouldn’t it be pertinent to consider Sor Juana’s position as a subordinate of the vicereines? That is, to not forget that Sor Juana’s duty was to glorify her patrons?

Another problem with the fragment that “Chronicles” presents is that Poem 91 begins with two lines that are eliminated in order to transplant the poem to a love context. The poem opens thus: “*Pedirte, señora, quiero / de mi silencio perdón*” (“My lady, I must implore / forgiveness for keeping still,” in Trueblood’s translation). In this version, Sor Juana requests forgiveness from la Condesa for not having written to her for a period of time, a circumstance that necessarily tones down the erotic content that Gaspar de Alba detects, for it reveals clear deference and servitude.

With this, my intention is not to adopt a posture against Sor Juana’s possible lesbianism but to examine the mechanisms by which Gaspar de Alba reconfigures Sor Juana as a lesbian separatist nun. While I welcome such a decolonizing project as a powerful opportunity to destabilize official narratives—for instance, to realize that if Mexicans believed Sor Juana was a lesbian her image most probably would not figure as

a cultural symbol in the 200-peso bill—the manipulation of information undermines the proposal’s impact. Of Gaspar de Alba’s theory, Spivak would ask, what is “the positionality of the postcolonial intellectual as investigating subject?” (296). Informing her interpretation of Sor Juana’s feminism with twentieth-century European feminisms together with her own subjectivity as a Chicana lesbian, Gaspar, as I think the second epigraph demonstrates, speaks for Sor Juana in a way that reflects what Gaspar *needs* her to say. In this manner, the rescued subject, like the *sati* case reminds us, is contradictorily silenced.

Sor Juana: Violent Masculinity and Power

Following the structure of a chess game, *Sor Juana’s Second Dream* foregrounds “Juana” as the onyx queen fighting the enemies Padre Antonio (her confessor), the bishop of Puebla Fernández de Santa Cruz, and the Archbishop Aguiar y Seijas. In this sense, each chapter represents a move that leads to the nun’s downfall. In order to trace Sor Juana’s sexuality—the core of Gaspar de Alba’s decolonial project—the novel alternates narrative forms that allow for different perspectives. From the use of a third-person narrator, to journal entries that recreate Sor Juana’s voice, to fictional correspondence between the nun and La Condesa, Gaspar de Alba weaves the first English novel on Sor Juana, and the second to date. As described by the author, the novel “pull[s] off [Sor Juana’s] habit and put[s] the flesh back on her bones” (“Chronicles” 270). Except for Concepción, Sor Juana’s *castiza*¹¹ personal assistant and copyist, all characters are real. Similarly, the events narrated are grounded in history and span all of Sor Juana’s life,

¹¹ Mixed European and Amerindian in the caste system of seventeenth century New Spain.

from early childhood to her death of plague at forty-three. Juana's loves and sexual encounters throughout the twenty-seven years she spent at the convent of San Jerónimo are product of Gaspar de Alba's imagination or dreams, as the second epigraph to this chapter suggests.

Besides affirming Juana's erotic tendency for women, one of the main statements in *Second Dream* is that, except for the viceroys, men are unpleasant. According to the novel's descriptions, men that surrounded Juana were filthy and violent. Representatives of the clergy are generally depicted in grotesque terms while family patriarchs are abusive. Thus, while the Bishop of Puebla, wearing oil stains on his sash, "reek[s] of garlic and cured meat" (*Second Dream* 8), Juana's uncle John's lowness is exposed through him slapping his wife in the face and by sexually molesting Juana as a child (a fictional event imagined by Gaspar de Alba). Including several scenes of the sort (men eating greedily or abusing women in one way or another), the novel strengthens its position in relation to men: misogynists, treacherous, and lascivious, they are dangerous and unworthy. Even Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, a good friend of Sor Juana, is described, like the Bishop, as a greedy man who devours "his plum in two bites and wipe[s] the juice from the corners of his mouth with his sleeve" (161). Sigüenza y Góngora's high education notwithstanding, he is depicted as gluttonous and voraciously as any other of the man caught between food and sexual temptations. Simply stated, representation of masculinity is tied to depravity.

Because of this aversion to men, chapter 16—near the middle of the novel—is particularly confusing in relation to the feminism that Sor Juana is allegedly meant to

delineate. By this time, Juana has been described as a witty, authoritative, and vain poet (all characteristics that to a certain extent can be traced in “*Respuesta*”) enjoying the many privileges she receives from the Court. Thanks to her patrons the Viceroy, Juana lives in her own two-story cell and has both the permission and the commission to dedicate most of her time to sacred and intellectual tasks. Because her fame has spread throughout Mexico City and even Spain, she has gained power and authority that prevent others in the convent, the mother superior included, from distracting her.

An essential part of Juana’s portrait, her sexuality has also been explored. Although at this point the nun has not yet had the opportunity to consummate love physically, she is clear about her sexual desire, or *inclinación*. A short romance with La Marquesa, recurrent erotic dreams, and masturbation have revealed Juana her body’s natural reaction to women. Remorseful and aware of her transgression, Juana alternatively refers to her same-sex desire as “illicit pleasure” (30), “ugliness” (45), and “pernicious inclination” (176). However, Juana only approves of lesbian relationships. Feeling a clear aversion for men, for example, she becomes infuriated when she finds out that her slave Jane, offered by her mother upon her entrance to the convent, is pregnant. Mad because Jane “want[s] to bring [her pregnancy] to term” and disgusted by “[t]he thought of Jane intercouring with men when she went to market” Juana can’t avoid nausea (*Second Dream* 212). In fact, invaded by “repugnance” Juana falls prey to her own violent impulses. The narrator describes:

Late one night, possessed by anger and disgust, Juana had gone downstairs to Jane’s room and beaten her out of bed, kicking her out of the bedclothes and striking her face, both sides of it, several times, as hard as she could. The rage possessed her as nothing ever had—stabbing her like a

cold blade in the spine—and she wanted to keep on beating and kicking, punishing that soiled body until she drew out its filth, but someone stilled her hand. (*Second Dream* 212)

Inasmuch as this description is shocking for it represents Sor Juana as an extremely violent, and even dangerous woman reproducing the masculine behavior she was against, the scene only serves to set the stage for more violence. Unable to control her rejection of motherhood and heterosexuality, Juana discharges her fury on the pregnant slave for a second time. Jane's belly the size of a "watermelon" notwithstanding, Juana, under the pretext that her servant is no longer useful, slaps both sides of the girl's face with such force that her hand stings and the girl's jaw cracks. "Jane shook her head and walked away again, holding her jaw," the narrator tells. "Juana saw the humiliation pouring down her face, the pain inscribed in her grimace, but by then it was too late to stop herself. She grabbed Jane by the back of the hair and pulled her to a stop" (*Second Dream* 213). Juana proceeds to kick out her slave: "I won't tolerate a whore for a maid, or bawling brat in my cell," she yells (*Second Dream* 214).

I must confess that interpreting such a scene is difficult, for I simply do not know how to locate it within a decolonial project. On the one hand, the scene reminds me of Mexican soap operas where the Catholic father finds out that his teenage daughter is pregnant and kicks her out on the street, after slapping her and calling her a "shame." On the other, these descriptions make me think of slave owners disciplining the bodies they own. If *Second Dream* is indeed grounded in Sor Juana's texts, then there is a misinterpretation for there is nothing in Sor Juana's work to suggest such cruel nature and extreme aversion for motherhood. While "*Respuesta*" indeed expresses Sor Juana's

choice to avoid motherhood, paralleling her personal decision with a generalized nausea before pregnant women is overreaching.

Likewise, the novel's depiction of violence to punish heterosexual love is troublesome, for it posits lesbianism in radical opposition to heterosexuality. Although disidentificatory queer worlds argue for non-normative behaviors, they do not, at least in Muñoz's sense, require exterminating difference—in this case, the girl's choice for men. Finally, such unequal displays of master-slave power questions the novel's representation of Sor Juana, and more importantly, even the author's choice of Sor Juana as foremother of Chicana feminism. Why, in other words, represent the nun with the worst attributes of men? Following Spivak, I would argue that the novel attempts to legitimize through Sor Juana the author's own desire to annihilate reproductive sex.

Following this passage, another troubling moment uses an ink stain on Concepción's *huipil* as pretext. The narrator describes what initially appears to be an erotic encounter between Juana and the copyist:

Juana wiped Concepción's face with the wet cloth, her other hand supporting the nape of the girl's neck. She wiped the forehead first, then the cheekbones and the cheeks, then the chin, then down over the neck, and back up to her temples and her eyelids and behind her ears. There was something remarkably alluring about the texture of Concepción's skin, like soft, worn suede. Juana could feel her nipples hardening under the linen of her habit, as if the night breeze wafting into the room were making her cold, and yet her face felt hot, her armpits moist. (*Second Dream* 219)

Taking the fragment alone, it is exemplary of the novel's queer worldmaking and embodied aesthetics. Sor Juana, incarcerated in her habit, is sexually excited by

Concepción's beauty, ready to let go and live her sexual desire. However, the violence that precedes the encounter undermines the process. In addition, one must consider that Concepción is Juana's servant, maintaining therefore a much lower status than the nun. Power, then, is at stake, limiting the possibilities that the erotic moment initially promises.

Aware of her authority over Concepción, a witness of her master's frequent violent impulses, Juana asks her twice to remove her blouse. When Concepción agrees, the nun is marveled by the copyist's beautiful, hairless skin. "That must be the Indian in you," the criolla nun tells her *castiza* servant (*Second Dream* 220). Touching the girl's breast and nipples, Juana then asks: "Have you let anyone touch you before? Some man?" (220). Concepción mentions a gypsy at the plaza, and, out of jealousy, Juana kisses Concepción. Then, jealousy growing inside her, Juana—with "moistness" between her legs notwithstanding—spits out: "You make me sick" (220).

Mixing arousal and violence, irrationality and cruelty, this scene confirms the novel's stance with regards to heterosexuality. Reiterating the message delivered through the episode with Jane—that heterosexuality is filthy and must be rejected because it is reproductive—Juana's words for Concepción reiterate that men and motherhood are the enemies to defeat. As seen with Concepción, the girl passes from being an exoticized, attractive body to a disgusting piece of flesh touched by the evil and filthiness of men. According to the novel, then, recovering Sor Juana from the grips of patriarchy entails destroying heterosexual (reproductive) love and sex. Contradictorily, the way to extinguish them is by enforcing repressive patriarchal behavior.

Finally, the ultimate reification of patriarchy and overt masculinized representation of Sor Juana appears towards the end of the novel, in chapter 23. Invited by La Condesa to spend the night at the viceroy's "mansion," Sor Juana arrives as a guest, accompanied by her niece Belilla. Given Juana's mother's sickness and ultimate death in Panoayán, the nun is allowed to leave the convent to say her farewells. In secret, Juana profits from the occasion to pay a visit to her *compadres*, a fictional kinship that the novel presents to remind the reader of Sor Juana's ties to Chicanas by alluding to *comadrazgo*.

Leaving aside the improbability that the real Sor Juana would have been invited (and allowed) to spend the night outside the convent, in the fictional world this moment represents freedom at its peak. For once, Juana is able to enjoy life outside the walls of the convent. Having threatened her niece about not saying a word about their secret visit to the viceroys, Juana is determined to enjoy herself despite her recent loss and the veil she wears to symbolize her mourning. The Viceroys welcome Juana and Belilla as special guests. The narrator describes such a familiar relationship between Belilla and the Viceroy's son, and between Juana and her *compadres*, that seventeenth-century ruling hierarchies of gender and class are forgotten. That night at the mansion, the narrator suggests, everyone is relatively equal. As such, during dinner Juana is offered wine. "Feeling the spirit of the vine," Juana begins to lose herself for that night she is free (*Second Dream* 303).

Unlike the other men in the novel, Don Tomás, viceroy of New Spain, is portrayed as an educated, affable intellectual. Truly interested in Sor Juana's

companionship and knowledge, he suggests spending some time alone with the nun. “I’ve always wanted to have a few cups with you, Juana Inés de la Cruz. You know what they say, Juana: poets and drunks always tell the truth. Rogelio, more wine!” (303), the narrator exclaims. Although Juana is deeply in love with La Condesa, Sor Juana delightedly accepts the privilege. Strangely, although throughout the novel Juana has been represented as a feminist who hates men, in this case she does not show antipathy towards the Viceroy, not even when he sends away his wife, La Condesa, to attend to her child so that he and Juana “can get to know each other sincerely, as equals” (303). As the narrator continues describing the interaction, it becomes clear that for Juana the Viceroy’s invitation exceeds any other priority. Obedient, La Condesa says: “Come, Belilla...it’s time for us to retire and leave the *señores* to their bacchanal” (303). Immediately after, the narrator emphasizes such masculinization by noting that Juana enjoyed “how la Condesa had placed her in the category of *señores*” (303). Thus the novel’s feminist project is explicitly revealed: educated, aristocratic manhood is a model to which seventeenth century nuns and Chicanas should aspire. Indeed, for a novel that has spent 301 pages pitting its heroine, to use Franco’s words, against voracious and repugnant men, it is contradictory to see that, in the end, all that Juana longs for is to be a *señor*—an elegant, well-versed, powerful man. Having been portrayed in disgust as to how men impose their will on their wives, Juana’s sudden satisfaction with the Viceroy’s command to exclude La Condesa from the conversation is also surprising. Suddenly, it is as if the novel suggested that La Condesa is mere body (incompetent for intellectual discussions), while the Viceroy is mind.

With Belilla and La Condesa gone, the two characters' fantasy of equality (men and women are equals, and so are nuns and viceroys) takes place. With two bottles of Rioja and cigars over the table, Don Tomás and Sor Juana open up to each other, the former even confessing the latter "the pride he felt for his son and the odd way that love had come back to him for his wife after his birth, and even the odder way in which María Luisa had withdrawn from him as a consequence of the same event" (304). When I argued earlier that *Second Dream* posed a challenge to disidentifications, this is part of what I meant. For even when imagining a different world order is possible and desirable, it is important to consider how contemporary judgment can distort the past. Furthermore, it becomes imperative to look closely at how colonialism, as Emma Pérez demonstrates in Chapter 2, is deeply imbedded in the psyche. Couched in a queer methodology, *Second Dream* is not liberating of the queer brown body, but rather celebrating the elites, patriarchy, and educated nunhood.

Drunk, Sor Juana heads back to her room near daybreak. Half-asleep, half-awake, she feels a naked body by her side on the bed. When Juana opens her eyes, she finds La Condesa next to her, already licking her cheek. Inspired on Sor Juana's poem 171 "Lámina sirva el cielo," an erotic portrait that celebrates the vicerreine María Luisa's body, what follows in the scene conflates voices. That is, more than in any other part, Gaspar de Alba incorporates Sor Juana's voice. On the one hand, the narrator's description of la Condesa's "satiny curves," "the soft folds of her waist," "the globes of those breasts," and "the swell of her belly, the round, cool flesh of her buttocks" draw from Sor Juana's poem (*Second Dream* 308):

*Bósforo de estrechez, tu cintura,
Cíngulo ciñe breve por tu zona;
Rígida, si de seda, clausura,
Músculos nos oculta ambiciosa.*

On the other hand, immediately after echoing Sor Juana's verses, the narrator incorporates a poem written by Gaspar de Alba: "If I could feel your knee brake the waters of my shame... If I could lay my cheek against the tender sinews of your thigh, smell the damp cotton that Athena never wore" (308). Imitating Sor Juana's style, the narrator thus conflates the two voices to narrate and legitimize the first and only sexual encounter between La Condesa and Juana in the novel. Having finally gained the rank of *señor*, the narration suggests, La Condesa gives herself to Juana. However, far from the queer, liberatory encounter one would expect the narrative climax to be, the love scene between the two women replicates heteropatriarchal roles: the feminine Condesa—a woman in all the senses of the word—makes love to Juana—a *señor*—because she sees the nun as a masculine figure whose power and allure has increased by proximity to don Tomás. In other words, Juana's performance of manliness or even butchness is a lure to la Condesa.

The Limits of Queer Worldmaking

Sor Juana's Second Dream, together with Gaspar de Alba's theoretical query to decolonize Sor Juana, open fertile ground to consider history in different ways and to indeed disidentify with traditional (i.e., official) representations of the nun. However, my analysis shows that abusive, patriarchal projections onto Sor Juana's body undermine recovering Sor Juana's mind, body, and desires. In this sense, even when *Second Dream*

advances an embodied aesthetics that challenges normative notions of what Octavio Paz would call “taste,” Sor Juana remains prisoned by the colonial and patriarchal attributes with which she is represented.

Like Emma Pérez, Gaspar de Alba turns to a disidentificatory language of desire to explore female sexuality. Unlike Pérez, however, who traces violence to its origin in an effort to decolonize the mind and deal with the pain inscribed upon the body, Gaspar de Alba’s project replicates the structures of domination that queer worldmaking, along with Tejana and Chicana feminisms, aim at reconfiguring. Similarly, in contrast to Anzaldúa, who proposes an inclusive, syncretic world, Gaspar argues for a world that categorically rejects normativity while employing normativity’s same mechanisms of repression.

Ultimately, I would like to clarify that my goal in this chapter is not to critique for the sake of critiquing. Rather, my interest lies in remaining critical of what historical recoveries and disidentifications may entail in terms of knowledge production. Not being able to answer back, Sor Juana’s voice becomes that of the critic.

Conclusion

*I refused to say good-bye. It's better
not to suspect when something is over.*
--Emma Pérez

*The affirmation of a glorious past becomes
the condemnation of a repressive present.*
--Rafael Pérez-Torres

Grounded in Muñoz's theory of disidentifications, Gaspar de Alba's query about Aztlán's influence in Chicanas' artistic work, a specific interest in Texas and a hypothesis that had to do more with impulsivity than with close reading, this thesis points at some of Tejana (and by extension Chicana) feminisms' complexities and challenges. In contrast to my initial approach, my analysis of Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar demonstrates that Tejana literature—which is not only made up by the authors herein—is not a monolith: resistance strategies vary, so as do methods, affects, and desires. A common history and mutual admiration between Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar notwithstanding, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *Gulf Dreams* and *Sor Juana's Second Dream* evidence that queer Tejana tactics to question and resist hegemony vary. I would say then that Anzaldúa, Pérez and Gaspar also exercise and propose through literature three different forms of Tejana feminisms. To use Norma Alarcón's words, each of them manifests their own particular desire to construct their own epistemologies and ontologies (2002), or, through Muñoz (1999), their own queer worlds.

Although in theory Anzaldúa's, Pérez's, and Gaspar de Alba's aim is to dismantle white supremacy, misogyny, sexism, classism, and every *-ism* that perpetuates the political and social erasure of brown bodies, their strategies and results differ precisely

because their own relationship to Aztlán varies. This means that, depending on their political and cultural attachment to the symbolic motherland, they propose worlds that modulate transgression in different ways. Read together, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, *Gulf Dreams*, and *Sor Juana's Second Dream* are evidence of an ongoing project to build inclusive, liberating sites that try to point, as Muñoz would have it, towards what “should be.” Similarly, they are clear examples of Tejana self-inscription. However, how Anzaldúa, Pérez, and Gaspar portray themselves and their history as queer women of color in the U.S. Southwest, whether through self-representation or fictional characters, reveals more difference than the word coalition suggests.

In general terms, this thesis argues that Anzaldúa does not reject or oppose Aztlán, but instead infuses its tenets with queerness, feminine spirituality and mysticism; eliminates that which hinders her project of becoming; and creates with *el mundo zurdo* an imaginary homeland that is open to everything and everyone, from languages to religions to (dis)abilities, politics, and ways of loving, looking, and speaking. Just as Aztlán promotes brotherhood among Chicanos, I see the left-handed world as a call for Chicana/o “queerhood.” In contrast to Anzaldúa’s free-spiritedness, Pérez turns to psychoanalytical theory and history to suggest—I believe—that Chicanas’ affective and political attachment to Aztlán is pathological and therefore harmful. Similarly, via *sitios y lenguas* Pérez demonstrates that no alternative worlds are possible until Chicana/os liberate themselves by taking personal responsibility and modifying behaviors, like its oppressive ideology. Rupture of harmful cycles, Pérez insists, is essential for new beginnings. Finally, through embodied aesthetics Gaspar represents Sor Juana’s body as

site origin. By imagining Sor Juana as a desiring lesbian, Gaspar attempts to create a world that liberates Chicana lesbian subjectivity. However, in her unconscious nostalgia for aristocrats, privilege, and educated nunhood, Gaspar replicates a colonial model of violent, racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies. This prevents embodied aesthetics from being fully able to articulate, and therefore create a queer world of transformative politics.

In more specific terms, my analyses of “*Matriz sin tumba*,” “Corner of 50th St.,” “Interface,” and “Letting Go” demonstrate that Anzaldúa, taking from here and from there, recycles the world to create her own *mundo zurdo*, which she infuses with both contradictory and complementary new energies, images and bodies. Faithful to “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” Anzaldúa reclaims the Southwest by establishing her historical connection to Texas soil, exalts racial pride and cultural unity, and grounds her mind and spirit in a mythic, glorious past. However, aware from experience that Aztlán, a signifier for home and Chicana/o culture, has no room for someone like her, Anzaldúa reformulates the symbolic motherland by infusing it with femininity. Echoing Audre Lorde, Anzaldúa warns: “If going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*—with my own lumber, my own bricks and a mortar and my own feminist architecture” (*Borderlands* 44). Based on my analysis of Anzaldúa’s four poems, I would argue that such feminist architecture utilizes Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, Tonantzin, and other “polyvalent name-insertions” to replace the Aztec emperors that rule Aztlán’s, and by extension, Mexico’s imaginary and thus inscribe the queer feminine experience (Alarcón 119). *El mundo zurdo* ultimately comes

into being through Anzaldúa's archive of keywords and poetics, that is, her poetic redundancy, her pedagogic aim to create ideology. Reiteration makes Anzaldúa's poetry performative, offering solace to the unwelcomed and socially aberrant while also challenging the ethno-racial, gender, and class categories that perpetuate unequal distribution of power. In sum, Anzaldúa's performative writing invites the reader to take another's perspective, in this case that of a mystic new mestiza (see Pelias 2014, 14). A catalog of keywords and poetics that outline life in difference (Sandoval 2000), Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* advances the possibility of a mystic, queer world that is both within and outside Aztlán, always part of it, always resisting it, and always open to dialogue.

For her part, Emma Pérez, the historian from El Campo, Texas, defies with *Gulf Dreams* the Oedipus-Conquest-Triangle that she claims dictates Chicana/os' laws, morals, and desires (see *Decolonial Imaginary* 1999). By presenting El Pueblo as a dystopia, Pérez foregrounds the pathological cycles that violently condemn and isolate those who do not conform to the normative tenets that prevail in Chicana/o communities. Far from victimizing discourses, Pérez exposes the dirty secrets of a community addicted to pain, uncovering the mechanism by which the colonized imitate the colonizer, and therefore compelling us to revise our own involvement in cycles of oppression. To question and subvert Anglo and Mexican heteropatriarchy, *Gulf Dreams* demonstrates, Tejanas must speak.

Although Pérez's scholarship argues for the urgency of colonial worldview coming to an end, *Gulf Dreams* somberly implies that Mexicans' and Chicana/o's

internalization of self-hatred and racial and gender hierarchies are hard, if not impossible, to break with. In other words, the novel shows that moving forward—that is, letting go of the law of the father and moving beyond the colonial imaginary—can only entail turning away from Aztlán, modeled after colonial structures. This does not simply entail shunning the motherland, but rather confronting its legacy, disrupting the doom of repetition, healing, and then building a symbolic world from scratch. Using a language of desire that overtly defies phallogocentric order, Pérez takes apart the myths on which history is constructed and its invisible psychic consequences. Ultimately, in speaking with a language that foregrounds female sexuality, Pérez articulates her innermost desire: the longing for a new Chicana/o land and imaginary.

Finally, Alicia Gaspar de Alba's scholarly and fictional work on Sor Juana challenges the limits of disidentifications theory and queerworldmaking. Muñoz explains that the task of disidentifying is to reformulate the world by excavating and reimagining neglected stories and identities that are contested by different forces. In this sense, Gaspar de Alba's essays and novel are indeed disidentificatory. However, Gaspar de Alba's extreme revisionist history of Sor Juana's legitimizes the same structures that disidentification aims at dismantling—patriarchy, racial, gender, and class privilege and authoritarianism. Also, by giving Sor Juana a voice that—to use Pérez's words—is ensconced in phallogocentric discourse, Gaspar undermines the political efficacy of disidentifications and the promising power in embodied aesthetics.

If the female body can signify “place” for Chicanas, as Gaspar proposes in “There's No Place like Aztlán,” then Sor Juana's body would need to be, in order for *Sor*

Juana's Second Dream to create a queer world, liberated from colonial tenets. In other words, I believe that in wanting to propose an embodied aesthetic that can liberate Chicanas from the constraints of patriarchy, *Sor Juana's Second Dreams* reveals a contradictory reification of power, privilege, and masculinity. Because of this, the main question in *Sor Juana's Dream* is, where can the women of color—Mexicanas and Chicanas—find their experiences mirrored in *Sor Juana's Second Dream*? Can the authoritative and privileged Sor Juana that Gaspar imagines speak for Chicanas? Because I wasn't able to find an affirmative answer to these questions, I would argue that Gaspar de Alba's project on Sor Juana leaves race, gender, and class to the side, proposing thus a (failed) lesbian liberation that involves replicating the same violent masculine practices that have kept women, queer working-class women in particular, at the margins.

Ultimately, in studying Tejana queer worldmaking, I have examined the extent to which queer Tejana writers apply or oppose Chicano patriarchal ideology in their own literary constructions. Or, as Emma Pérez would have it, to trace the degree to which the Oedipal Conquest Triangle has permeated Chicano and Chicana psyches alike, emerging (un)consciously in their literature. With this, I have shown the complex nature of regional identity and cultural production as varying, multi-layered, and at times, contradictory. Also, to close with Lourdes Portillo's words, I hope that considering these aspects might help us navigate life with a question in mind: "What is there in me of that conqueror of yesterday?" (Ramírez Berg 204). In a context in which "decolonization" has become *the* key term in most academic discussion regardless of whether "decolonization" is actually practiced or not, I find this question very useful. While I myself can't propose a model

for breaking away with the ideological structures inherited from colonial times, I believe that keeping Portillo's words in mind daily, consciously, might in fact be the first step to liberating ourselves and stop oppressing others.

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