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# Hijas Rebeldes: Chicana Spirituality and the Re(claiming) of the Indigenous

## Abstract

Though the Chicano nationalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s helped Chicanas/os embrace an indigenous identity traced back to the Aztecs of Mexico, it nevertheless proved alienating to Chicanas. In response to patriarchal structures of control within the Chicano movement and Western culture, Chicanas developed a mestiza consciousness. The grounding of this new epistemic tradition in ancient indigenous practices creates a Chicana spirituality and a method for identifying with the cosmology and goddess mythology of the Aztecs. Though critics of Chicana spirituality question the authenticity of Chicana claims to indigenous traditions, Chicanas employ their spirituality as tool to transform them into agents of their own identity.

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Carl Raschke

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Bernadette M. Calafell

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HIJAS REBELDES: CHICANA SPIRITUALITY AND THE (RE)CLAIMING OF THE  
INDIGENOUS

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by

Daisy Vargas

June 2012

Advisor: Luis D. Leon

Author: Daisy Vargas

Title: HIJAS REBELDES: CHICANA SPIRITUALITY AND THE (RE)CLAIMING OF THE INDIGENOUS

Advisor: Luis Leon

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### ABSTRACT

Though the Chicano nationalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s helped Chicanas/os embrace an indigenous identity traced back to the Aztecs of Mexico, it nevertheless proved alienating to Chicanas. In response to patriarchal structures of control within the Chicano movement and Western culture, Chicanas developed a mestiza consciousness. The grounding of this new epistemic tradition in ancient indigenous practices creates a Chicana spirituality and a method for identifying with the cosmology and goddess mythology of the Aztecs. Though critics of Chicana spirituality question the authenticity of Chicana claims to indigenous traditions, Chicanas employ their spirituality as a tool to transform themselves into agents of their own identity.

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## Introduction: Why the need for a Chicana Spirituality?

In this work, I argue Chicana spirituality creates and nurtures processes by which Chicanas become agents of their identities and culture. The adaptation of indigenous cultural processes in Chicana spirituality reflects the rejection of dominant religious expectations. The following chapters present the different avenues Chicana feminists use in helping create a new reality by confronting oppressions caused by the patriarchal cultures of the indigenous and the Western. This study is strictly based on written sources, though I take an interdisciplinary approach to these readings. I use Gloria Anzaldúa's, 1987 work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Cherrie Moraga's *The Last Generation*, Ana Castillo's *Massacre of the Dreamers*, and David Carrasco's *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmovision and Ceremonial Centers* as primary sources, supplementing them with more recent scholarship on Chicana spirituality.

This study will refer to the term "spirituality" as a way to differentiate between dogmatically sanctioned practices, approved by official religious organizations, and an unstructured, unfiltered understanding of the divine through creative and subversive practices. Spirituality, though not necessarily characterized by adherence to a specific religious tradition, does share the belief in a transcendent state, or being. Chicana

spirituality refers to the practices rooted in ancient religious beliefs, but may take practices of other cultural traditions, as needed. In spiritual practice, of this sort, there is no power structure, or authority, enforcing appropriate behaviors.

Also, though Mexican Americans are often categorized under the term “Chicana/o,” my own understanding, and use, of the term includes a political dimension. In using the term Chicana/o I refer to Mexican-Americans who recognize their pre-Hispanic roots and “have formed a movement to liberate themselves from Anglo stereotypes, political oppression, poverty, unequal opportunity, and spiritual doubt.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the term Chicana/o is used to self-identify—Chicana/o identity is discovered, not imposed. The term “*mestiza*” will also be used, and will refer to the racial miscegenation considered characteristic of conquered peoples of the Latin Americans. *Mestizaje* indicates the mixing of indigenous and European races, resulting in *mestizos*, those with mixed-race blood.

As a Chicana familiar with the complexities of navigating between Western culture and Mexican heritage, as well as a political stance recognizing indigenous roots, I illuminate themes and criticisms dominating discussions regarding Chicana spirituality in this study. Norma Alarcon writes, “In such a setting, to speak or translate in one's behalf rather than the perceived group interests and values is tantamount to betrayal.”<sup>2</sup> Though I situate myself as an insider to Chicana feminist perspectives, my opinions are not representative of the whole community. As an academic, I also locate myself as part of

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<sup>1</sup> Carrasco, David. *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 166.

<sup>2</sup> Alarcon, Norma. "Traduttora, Traditora: A Paradigmatic Figure of Chicana Feminism." *Cultural Critique* 13 (Autumn 1989): 63.

academia. While writing about one's own community runs the risk of creating essentializations, refusing to contribute to the larger academic discourse ensures limiting Chicana scholarship. Chicanas often navigate between insider and outsider status, as I do in this study.

Most Chicana/os trace their origins to the mythical homeland of the Aztecs, Aztlan. Tradition places Aztlan in the United States' southwest, believed to be the location from which the Aztecs began their migration south to Tenochtitlan over 1000 years ago. The Chicano Nationalist struggle of the 1960s and 1970s was centered on the desire for cultural and national autonomy outlined and granted by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo which guaranteed (but was did not uphold) land rights for Mexicans living in the annexed territories of the Southwest. El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan, written at the First Annual Youth Conference, held in Denver, Colorado in 1969, demanded a separate nation for Chicanos, with demands for, "economic self-determination, self-defense, and land reclamation, and included [an] autonomous taxation and judicial system,"<sup>3</sup> By the next decade, the focus of the political movement began to make itself relevant to the broader context of American culture, especially the disproportionate percentage of Chicanos, and other people of color, drafted to fight the war in Vietnam. While the movement lost its radical fervor and its militant approach, best represented by the creation of the Brown Berets, the cultural expressions promoted by the Chicano movement continue to be utilized in the formation and maintenance of Chicana/o

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<sup>3</sup> Moraga, Cherrie. "Queer Aztlan: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe." In *The Last Generation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993), 156.



identity. For Chicana feminists, the waning of the movement was caused by the “machismo and homophobia” found among Chicanos in the movement.

According to Michael Hames-Garcia three important characteristics of Chicano cultural nationalism include: (1) *indigenismo*, and the need to identify with indigenous cultures, and stake a territorial claim with the Southwest as a way to justify ancestral ties to the land; (2) A unified/homogenous Chicano identity, that refused to recognize religious, sexual, socio-economic, of cultural differences among Chicana/os; (3) “dependence on a conservative ideology of the family and gender roles”<sup>4</sup> Acting defensively against their emasculation by dominant white culture, Chicanos adopted, and performed, patriarchy by drawing from aspects of Aztec and Mexican culture which privileged the male over the female.<sup>5</sup> Chicano men served as leaders of the movement, attempting to embody characteristics valued in Aztec warriors, relegating women to lesser roles and expecting them to serve as a support system for men. As Cherrie Moraga describes, women were expected to perform “the three fs- feeding, fighting, and fucking.”<sup>6</sup> The misogyny of the Chicano nationalist movement also limited dialogue regarding sexuality—hetero-normative practices and behaviors were the standard. Any deviation from this was met with censorship and hostility, denying any contribution by female and queer Chicana/os.<sup>7</sup> Chicana feminism was born out of the fight against male oppression within, and outside of the Chicano nationalist movement. Acting in solidarity

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<sup>4</sup> Hames-Garcia, Michael. "How to Tell a Mestizo from an Enchirito®: Colonialism and National Culture in the Borderlands." *Diacritics* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 104.

<sup>5</sup> Moraga, “Queer Aztlan,” 156.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

with queer Chicanos, Chicana feminists continue to claim, and perform, indigenous identity as a way to create community and demand attention to their social condition. For Chicana feminists, patriarchy (both white and colored) oppresses all those who do not conform to hetero-normative practices and traditions.<sup>8</sup> While the use of indigenous elements in identity, and agency, formation fit within Chicana spirituality, there are questions/concerns that Chicana spirituality may be New Age appropriation of indigenous cultures. Instead, I argue *mestiza* epistemology provides a method and place for Chicanas to become agents of their own spirituality, creating spaces of inclusion. Though claiming affiliation to cultural traditions to which they do not hold ancestral claim, Chicana epistemic frameworks allow for identity formation with multiple origins. By (re)membering the goddesses, Chicanas become agents of their sexuality and reposition the female to a prominent role, ending the silences imposed on the female by patriarchal religions. The use of indigenous elements provides an alternative to dominant Western concepts of knowledge and identity.

Chapter one, “Re-claiming Indigenous Epistemologies” will explore the writings of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, focusing on her rejection of Western epistemic traditions in favor of indigenous ways of knowledge. Chapter two, “Reclaiming the Goddesses” will present the mythologies of four Aztec goddesses: Coatlicue, Coyolxauhqui, Cihuacoatl, and Tonantzin, as well as the re-interpretation of these myths by Chicana feminists in the re-claiming of their identities. Here, I argue that re-interpretation of these myths facilitates the rejection of patriarchal structures of authority

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 165.

making Chicanas agents of their own expressions (verbal and sexual). Though relying on ancient indigenous traditions to craft their spirituality, Chicanas are not necessarily concerned with the problem/question of “authenticity.” The final section of this work will address, with more specificity, the debate over whether Chicana spirituality is another form of cultural appropriation.

## Chapter One- (Re)claiming an Indigenous Epistemology

In this chapter, I discuss the main themes of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and ways in which they are connected to Aztec mythology, focusing on the centrality of duality in Aztec cosmology. Written after the wane of the Chicano nationalist movement, and as a response of the misogyny of Chicano and Western culture, Anzaldúa introduces the concept of "mestiza consciousness," creating an epistemic option for Chicanas (as well as other marginalized groups) who wanted to address their problems with Western rationalist epistemology. While the discussion of her book focuses on "mestiza consciousness," I use the term inter-changeably with Chicana spirituality; Anzaldúa's new epistemic vision did not present a world where matters of the spirit, body and mind were relegated to separate realms. For Chicanas, a mestiza consciousness allows them to become agents of their own identity, as they decide what to claim as part of their reality.

The concepts of spiritual and physical harmony were central to the Aztec understanding of health. For the Aztecs, "the body [was] composed of both hot and cold properties, and wellness [was] dependent on maintaining these dichotomous energies in

equilibrium.”<sup>9</sup> The essential qualities of the divine, as understood by the Aztecs, were composed of complementary dualities as evident in their reverence of Omoteotl (Ometechutli/Omecihuatl) who contained female and male characteristics and properties and lived in Omeyacan, the place of duality, the thirteenth level of the Aztec heavens. As Miguel Leon-Portilla writes,

Whatever pantheism there might be in the wise men’s concept of the Divine and of the world could only be described by such a hybrid term as the dynamic “omeyotization” (“dualization”) of the universe. For to the [Aztec] mind all activity was determined by the intervention of Omoteotl. There was always the need for an active masculine aspect and a passive or conceiving feminine counterpart. And that was precisely the origin of the countless dual deities; in every area they symbolized the activity of Omoteotl. Generation and conception were moments inseparably unified in the dual divinity. They made possible his very existence and that of all things.<sup>10</sup>

Omeyotization, the division of the universe into dualities (heat/cold, male/female, upper/lower), required the maintenance of natural equilibrium. When one part of the duality was too dominant, or not present, physical and spiritual maladies became manifest.<sup>11</sup>

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa proposes a “mestiza consciousness” in an effort to bridge the gap between subject and object in order to promote proper dialogue.<sup>12</sup> The border is in “a constant state of transition.”<sup>13</sup> She refers to the physical border delineating Mexico and the United States, but also acknowledges

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<sup>9</sup> Leon, Luis D. "Soy Una Curandera Y Soy Catolica." In *Horizons of the Sacred: Mexican Traditions in U.S. Catholicism*, by Timothy M. Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 101.

<sup>10</sup> León, Portilla Miguel. *Aztec Thought and Culture; a Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 99.

<sup>11</sup> Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987) 103.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

the “psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands, and the spiritual borderlands” existing universally.<sup>14</sup> Though the Chicana experience is different for each woman, all compartmentalize aspects of who, and what, women should be causing them to internalize these conflicts. When Chicanas reconcile the conflicting realities, the gap that exists between cultures is acknowledged, bridged and an entirely different consciousness is created. Grounding herself in Aztec cosmology, Anzaldúa proposes the union of perceived opposites, existing in harmonious balance.

As Irene Lara argues, Anzaldúa recognizes the creation and propagation of rationalist epistemology (“the major paradigms for reality- the scientific, the democratic paradigms”) as a result of colonial expansion and post-colonial hegemony.<sup>15</sup> The imposition of borders by conquerors, by colonialists, by imperialists, and by dominant culture pushed the indigenous to the margins, to the borders of epistemology and geography, who then imposed divisions that did not exist prior to their arrival. Anzaldúa writes that, “Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them.”<sup>16</sup> The “dividing line” of the border creates a state of transience, one “vague” and “undetermined” and born out of the, “emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.”<sup>17</sup> However, rather than propose the complete rejection of Western epistemic traditions, she calls for the creation of “a new paradigm that comes partially from outside

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>15</sup> Lara, Irene. "Daughter of Coatlicue: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa." In *Entre Mundos/among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 51.

<sup>16</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

and partially from inside the dominant paradigm.”<sup>18</sup> Again, the Aztec concept of duality and harmonious balance is instrumental in Anzaldúa’s theory; seemingly contradictory elements co-exist in equilibrium.

The Aztec concept of *nepantla* plays prominently into Anzaldúa’s rejection of epistemic boundaries. The first recorded instance in which *nepantla* is used is in a conversation between Diego Duran, a Dominican friar in Mexico and an elderly indigenous man. In the conversation, the elder refers to being in a state of transition, continuing to practice indigenous customs while beginning to practice Christianity.

Duran writes,

I insisted that he tell me in what middle it was in which they found themselves. He told me that since they were still not well rooted in the faith, I should not be surprised that they were still neutral, that they neither answered to one faith or the other or, better said, that they believed in God and at the same time keep their ancient customs and demonic rites.<sup>19</sup>

While some scholars interpret the concept of *nepantla* in negative terms, to mean “indecisiveness and confusion,” Lara Medina takes a different approach.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Medina proposes the neutrality of *nepantla*, and a conscious decision on the part of the indigenous to practice both their traditions and their own Christianity as a survival mechanism for navigating emerging cultural and epistemic boundaries. For her, *nepantla* is also a duality, “a multifaceted psychic and spiritual space composed of complementary

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<sup>18</sup> Lara, “Daughter of Coatlicue,” 52.

<sup>19</sup> Durán, Diego. *Historia De Las Indias De Nueva Espana y Islas De Tierra Firme*. Trans. Doris Heyden (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1967), 268. quoted in Medina, Lara. “Nepantla Spirituality: Negotiating Fluid Identities, Faiths, and Practices.” In *El Mundo Zurdo: Selected Works from the Meetings of The Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldua 2007 & 2009*, edited by Norma E. Cantu, et. al. ( San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2010), 207.

<sup>20</sup> Lara Medina, “Nepantla Spirituality,” 208

opposites: obscurity and clarity.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, as feminist writer AnaLouise Keating reflects, Chicanas are *nepantleras*,

threshold people: they move within and among multiple, often conflicting worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual group, or belief system. This refusal is not easy: nepantleras must be willing to open themselves to personal risks and potential woundings which include, but are not limited to, self division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusation of disloyalty. Yet the risk taking has its own rewards, for nepantleras use their movements among divergent worlds to develop innovative, potentially transformative perspectives.<sup>22</sup>

Chicanas, as nepantleras living in the state of nepantla, make the same conscious choice as the indigenous man in Diego Duran’s account. Rather than relegate themselves to a strict epistemic paradigm, Chicanas choose to engage in different traditions as they understand the importance of maintaining balance between different paradigms. Nepantla serves as a place of empowerment and agency from which Chicanas form identities and world views.

Throughout the text, especially in “La Herencia de Coatlicue”, Anzaldúa uses imagery of female deities to “stand and claim [her] space.”<sup>23</sup> The destruction of the feminine, and the cultural degradation of women is a main theme in her work, and as she rebels against traditionally “unquestionable, unchallengeable” roles imposed “by those in power-men.”<sup>24</sup> Her rebellion is against “the slavery of obedience, of silence and acceptance.”<sup>25</sup> Anzaldúa traces the Chicana condition as reflected in the myth of

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<sup>21</sup> Lara Medina, “Nepantla Spirituality,” 209.

<sup>22</sup> Keating, AnaLouise. “From Borderlands and New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change.” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-knowledge* IV (Summer 2006): 6

<sup>23</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/Fronteras*, 44.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.



Coyolxauhqui's death at the hands of her brother Huitzilopochtli- the repression of both indigenous and feminist ideals at the hand of male dominance. As will be explored in the next chapter, Anzaldúa (and other Chicanas) reinterpret the murder of Coyolxauhqui as the beginning of patriarchal Aztec culture and the diminution of feminine influence. By reinterpreting the myths of old Mexican indigenous beliefs, Anzaldúa reclaims the repressed femininity and indigeneity of the Chicana. Chicana problems with the Chicano cultural nationalist movement included the dominant mythology propagated by the male-centric leadership of the movement, such as the hyper-valuation of the Aztec warrior trope and the mythological founding of Aztlan. Anzaldúa, and other Chicanas, assert the need for "a cultural mythology that arises out of the contemporary cultural realities of Chicanas."<sup>26</sup> While Chicanas continue to look back at their historical and cultural past, they also choose to reconcile the past with the context Chicanas find and locate themselves in. This new mythology, forms "a national culture predicated on adaptation to future needs, to change and multiplicity."<sup>27</sup>

As part of her discussion of domination, Anzaldúa presents the "'Shadow-Beast'—that part of ourselves that we disavow and project onto others." The Shadow Beast are all aspects of oppression masked as protection. As Hames-Garcia explains, Chicana identity is marked by the violence of oppression enacted on Chicanas, who represent the Shadow- Beasts in dominant cultures. Chicanas "as the embodiment for a whole collection of fears and anxieties... of Anglo, Chicano, Indian, Mexican, and Spanish culture" experience, what Anzaldúa calls "choques" when they try bridge the

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<sup>26</sup> Hames-Garcia, "How to tell a Mestizo," 107.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 107.

boundaries of forced identity. In the case of Chicana identity, this would include the bridging of the indigenous and the European, or “feminism and nationalism.”<sup>28</sup>

According to Anzaldúa, these aspects of identity continue to contradict each other, and remain incompatible until cultures of dominance recognize the circumstances and conditions that have created the Shadow-Beast.

The ability to perceive a deeper significance than what appears on the surface of material structures is, what Anzaldúa calls, *la facultad*. The devaluation of Anzaldúa’s spiritual nature, by her own accounts, occurred under dominant “white” culture. Like other indigenous people, Anzaldúa accepted that the rational world defined the reality of existence’- what cannot be explained by reason simply does not exist. People at the margins, forced to fend for themselves as their differences cast them away from central roles of power and influence, develop ways of coping and perceiving the world. Denied the privilege of belonging, outcasts (by virtue of sex, sexual orientation, race, et al.) receive this spiritual endowment. Only through the experience of pain can *la facultad* develop. This ability is an additional sense of perception, as natural as smell, taste, and touch. There is no calculated reasoning in it, as it is “mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide.”<sup>29</sup> For Anzaldúa, oftentimes entering into a state of distress and pain is necessary in the reception of *la facultad*; she calls this the Coatlicue state, from which individuals can enter into and be reborn with a new understanding of the world.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>29</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 59.

The Coatlicue state describes the descent of the mestiza into a primal state, an underworld of unresolved cultural issues and painful transformation. The use of Coatlicue to describe this spiritual state is due to the “coatl” in Coatlicue which means “snake” in Nahuatl. The Coatlicue state, as a place of birth or rebirth, is similar to the shedding and re-growth of snake skin. In the Coatlicue state, the mestiza faces the darkest parts of her psyche. In the painful shedding of her skin, the mestiza sheds her reliance on Western dichotomies. Her emergence from the Coatlicue state represents new ways of knowing and perception. The mestiza, in essence, emerges with a new skin of understanding, healed of the wounds created by Western rationality; her body and spirit emerge from the darkness in balance, as complements rather than opposites.

Anzaldúa’s identity as a queer woman-of-color informs her theory of a mestiza consciousness. Boundaries defining and separating sexual norms are also blurred. As the Aztec god/dess of duality Ometecuhtli (Ometeotl/Omecihuatl) contained both masculine and feminine properties, Anzaldua acknowledges the fluidity of human sexuality. Boundaries of gender exclusion, and hetero-normative practices are discarded in favor of inclusivity.

The rejection of Western epistemic boundaries, reflects a continuance of the Aztec healing tradition. Mestiza consciousness recognizes the existence of dualities, and contradictions, but insists on the existence of them in harmony. Anzaldúa’s creation of a mestiza consciousness allows the bridging of a “pluralist totality and a recorded life

experience of ‘multiple little selves’ coexisting within ‘the big self.’”<sup>30</sup> She locates her argument from a spiritual dimension, separate from western rationalism and postmodern skepticism. Mestiza consciousness places value on “imagination, fantasies, and dreams”, which are usually de-valued in favor of objective and scientific knowledge. In a mestiza consciousness, knowledge is inclusive.<sup>31</sup> For Anzaldúa mestiza consciousness, or alternate ways of knowing, point to a new direction of epistemology. Rather than relying on dogmatic institutions for mediating contact between the physical world and the spiritual, or rejecting the spiritual dimension outright, mestiza consciousness moves beyond limits of control. The point is to blur the boundaries in favor of inclusion. While the term “spirituality”, interpreted in a literal sense, is the anti-thesis of the material world, mestiza spirituality concerns itself with the political realities of Chicanas as well as other marginalized cultures.<sup>32</sup>

Anzaldúa explains, her identity as a Chicana is “grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance.” For Aztec women, silenced by the dominant male patriarchy, mourning during funeral rites presented an opportunity to protest “the cultural changes which disrupted the equality and balance between female and male, and protesting their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration.”<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to the essentialist mythology of Chicano nationalism, concerned with the preservation of an authentic recounting of Aztec history, Anzaldúa’s mestiza

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<sup>30</sup> Levine, Amala. "Champion of the Spirit: Anzaldúa's Critique of Rationalist Epistemology." In *Entre Mundos/among Worlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa*, by AnaLouise Keating (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 171.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Hames-Garcia, “How to tell a Mestizo,” 109.

<sup>33</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 43.

spirituality revels in its contamination as it seeks to create cultural, sexual, and political hybrids.<sup>34</sup> Cultural pollution is not perceived in a negative manner. Rather, the crossing of cultural borders and the mutual exchange of cultural traditions is the main characteristic of Chicana spirituality as it breaks down traditional epistemic boundaries.

A mestiza/Chicana spirituality “enacts an alternate mode of perception, a holistic” view of the world that dissolves barriers between the spirit and the material world. As Keating writes, Anzaldúa’s understanding of a world without divisions

allows her to develop a highly positive self-image that affirms her personal agency and enables her to resist the various forms of oppression she experiences both from the dominant culture and from her own culture.”<sup>35</sup>

While she creates a new identity for herself, the new mestiza also enters into a state of being that allows connections to others. Opening the door to the spirit world illuminates the interconnectedness of all living things through the spirit.<sup>36</sup>

Chicanas, like the Aztecs to which they claim a lineage, create an epistemic view in which dualistic concepts operate together, regardless of contradictions. As epistemic boundaries are crossed and blurred Chicanas, create points of access to otherwise unavailable sources of spiritual knowledge and understanding. The (re)claiming of Aztec female deities provides new ways of understanding female nature, as well as assists the transformation of Chicanas as agents of their own expression (sexual and otherwise).

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<sup>34</sup> Hames-Garcia, “How to tell a Mestizo,” 109.

<sup>35</sup> Keating, AnaLouise. “Forging El Mundo Zurdo: Changing Ourselves, Changing the World.” In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, by Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 520.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

Chicanas begin to relate to one another, as they acknowledge the universality of spirit which connects them through each other through it.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Medina, Lara. "Los Espiritus Siguen Hablando: Chicana Spiritualities." In *Latina/o Healing Practices: Mestizo and Indigenous Perspectives*, by Brian McNeill and Joseph Michael. Cervantes (New York: Routledge, 2008), 226.

## Chapter Two- (Re)claiming the Goddesses

The theme of silence found throughout Anzaldúa's borderland brings to mind Latin American theorist Paulo Freire's work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as it presents a relevant way to understand silence and silencing as it applies to the Chicana experience. For Freire, the basic act of affirming one's humanity occurs in the action of speech. When cultures are denied this fundamental right, they become convinced they are undeserving of it.<sup>38</sup> For Chicanas, both Aztec and Western patriarchy created a culture of silencing the female. Anzaldúa reflects that the mestiza does not name herself; mestiza identity has traditionally been manipulated and defined by those in power.<sup>39</sup> Without a name (without the ability to name herself), the mestiza cannot claim her place in the world. The mestiza's existence is denied.<sup>40</sup> The instinct to survive under oppressive conditions has forced women to deceive themselves into believing dominance and marginalization is necessary for the protection of females, so they propagate behaviors that keep them subservient.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin, 1996), 88.

<sup>39</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy*, 88.

<sup>41</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 39.

In “How to Tame A Wild Tongue,” Anzaldúa writes of the Mexican culture of silence. She describes the cultural traditions and impositions on the verbal expressions of women by using common proverbs and sayings used to describe women who did not control their speech. Anzaldúa reflects that though she has been oppressed simultaneously through her culture and the dominant powers that oppress her culture, she rebels through speech (37). She demands the right to name herself and the right to be recognized not only for the characteristics made important by the patriarchy, but for those that have been forcefully repressed by it (44). The mestiza has been dehumanized by her own people; the name *hocicona* (literally snout-mouth) makes her synonymous with an animal. Rather than acknowledge the mestiza as a valid source of knowledge, she is cast aside and her creativity discounted. Though the mestiza struggles with Western oppression, Chicanas trace the beginnings of their struggle to the Aztecs. The myths presented in this section, are central to my understanding of Chicana spirituality and resistance.

In this section my thesis the re(claiming) and (re)membering of the indigenous goddesses are tools with which Chicanas claim agency of their bodies is presented, specifically as it relates to sexuality and expression. I will emphasize the lack of female voice in Chicana/o culture, and the methods used to silence female expression in Aztec goddess mythology. According to Aztec mythology, the god Huitzilopochtli appeared to the nomadic tribe, then located in the American Southwest, instructing them to travel south until they saw an eagle, perched on a cactus plant, with a serpent in its beak. This



would signify that the place where the center of the empire would be established.<sup>42</sup>

Anzaldúa interprets the Aztlan myth as the first step towards the institution of patriarchy. The symbol of the eagle with the serpent in its beak represents the subjugation of the female under the dominion of men. Anzaldúa recognizes the eagle as a symbol of Aztec patriarchy, and the serpent as the feminine.<sup>43</sup> The symbol for the rise of Aztec culture is also a metaphor for the de-valuation of feminine attributes.

While the rise of the Aztec empire coincides, and is propelled, by the rise of the warrior-god Huitzilopochtli, the pantheon of Aztec religion includes deities of neighboring, conquered tribes. As the Aztec empire spread, it adopted the customs and religious rituals of conquered territories, “integrat[ing] them into the imperial pantheon of Tenochtitlan.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, there were often numerous deities deemed responsible for the same category of occurrences. Likewise, some gods and goddesses absorbed the characteristics of others and many deities were known to have multiple names, and incarnations. The four goddesses introduced in this chapter represent, the most important deities to Chicana feminists, and the most re-interpreted. Coatlicue, the mother goddess of the Aztecs, gives birth to the warrior-god who ushers in an era of patriarchy when he kills his sister. Chicana’s reclaim the dead sister as one of their own, the first of the rebellious daughters and symbolic of their own struggle against oppression. Included in this discussion is Malintzin Tenepal, also known as La Malinche, and her connection to

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<sup>42</sup> Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> Hames-Garcia, “How to tell a Mestizo,” 106.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, Michael Ernest. “Creation Death and the Gods.” In *The Aztecs* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers 1996), 198.

La Llorana. A discussion of the goddess Tonantzin is also presented, as well as her manifestation as the Virgin of Guadalupe.

One of the main obstacles in Mesoamerican historical scholarship is the lack of information found in the region after the destruction of texts during the conquest. Of those books that survived, most do not reside in Mexico; they continue to be part of the collections of countries that colonized the region. A large portion of pre-Hispanic knowledge may be gleaned from surviving, oral traditions that continued to exist despite having evolved since the Conquest.<sup>45</sup> Castillo points out that the destruction of Aztec scholarship during the colonization of Mexico leaves scholars to draw conclusions from a fragmented, incomplete historical account (mainly Spanish). Chicanas “reconstruct [their] history with what is left unsaid and not what has been recorded by those who have imposed their authority on [them].”<sup>46</sup> When there is a loss of history, one cannot help but create memories to fill it. The act of being “named” identifies individuals with a specific community; when we cannot identify, when we cannot self-define, when there is a loss of history, we cannot help but create memories to fill that emptiness. While some scholars contest the portrayal of Aztec society as patriarchal and with tendencies towards violence, pointing to the lack of historical documents to support these conclusion, Chicana writers such as Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Castillo support the popular theory.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mignolo, Walter. *The Idea of Latin America* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 128.

<sup>46</sup> Castillo, Ana. *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), 111.

<sup>47</sup> Garza, Teresita. "The Rhetorical Legacy of Coyolxauhqui: Re(collecting) and (Re)membering Voice." In *Latina/o Discourse in Vernacular Spaces: Somos De Una Voz?*, edited by Michelle A. Holling and Bernadette M. Calafell (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2011), 38.

## COATLICUE AND COYOLXAUHQUI

In Aztec mythology, Coatlicue, “Lady of the Serpent,” is one of the mother goddesses, representing both fertility and death. The statue of Coatlicue, discovered in the Zocalo in Mexico City in 1970 depicts her wearing a skirt made of serpents as well as a necklace made of human hands. The body of Coatlicue is decapitated, her head replaced with two serpents. Her skirt is belted with human hearts and held together by the skull of a human. Her feet are the talons of an eagle, and she wears no garment to cover her breasts. As the goddess controlling both the creation of life and the end of it, the duality she rules over is represented by the serpent heads- the snakes represent birth, and rebirth.<sup>48</sup> According to Mexican historian Justino Fernandez, in his 1954 study of Coatlicue, the goddess is a symbol of the value placed on warriors and warrior deaths believed to maintain cosmic balance for the Aztecs.<sup>49</sup> The discovery of the statue in the 18<sup>th</sup> century resulted in its reburial in 1805, after indigenous Mexicans began making pilgrimages and performing ceremonies in honor of Coatlicue.<sup>50</sup>

In 1978, an electrical crew working in Mexico City discovered the Coyolxauhqui stone, a round stone disc carved with a depiction of the fall of Coyolxauhqui (“The One with Painted Bells”).<sup>51</sup> The image found on the stone depicts Coyolxauhqui as beheaded and dismembered- “blood streams are depicted as precious fluid symbolized by jewels

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<sup>48</sup> Franco, Jean. "The Return of Coatlicue: Mexican Nationalism and the Aztec past." *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesía* 13, no. 2 (August 2004): 209

<sup>49</sup> Franco, “The Return of Coatlicue, 212.

<sup>50</sup> Contreras, Sheila Marie. "From La Malinche to Coatlicue: Chicana Indigenist Feminism and Mythic Native Women." In *Blood Lines: Myth, Indigenism, and Chicana/o Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>51</sup> Scolieri, Paul. "Coyolxauhqui's Impact: Aztec Historiography and the Falling Body." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 14, no. 1 (2004): 92.

attached to the blood,” and her dismembered body parts are encircled by two-headed snakes. Coyolxauhqui’s feet don sandals of royalty, a reminder of how great her fall was.<sup>52</sup>

The Florentine Codex, “a twelve volume, 16<sup>th</sup> century ethno-history of pre-conquest Aztec culture compiled by Spanish missionary Bernardino de Sahagun,” describes Coatlicue as the mother of Coyolxauhqui. According to the myth recorded by Sahagun, one day while sweeping the temple on Coatepec (Serpent Mountain), Coatlicue is impregnated by a ball of feathers, fallen from the sky. Her daughter Coyolxauhqui, insulted by Coatlicue’s impregnation, raises an army comprised of 400 brothers and sisters, “gods of the south” to kill their mother.<sup>53</sup> At the moment of Coatlicue’s death, “Huitzilopochtli [springs] from his mother’s womb full grown, dressed as a warrior, and engage[s] his brothers and sisters in combat.”<sup>54</sup> He decapitates Coyolxauhqui, throws her head to the heavens, and she becomes the moon.

Chicana feminist writer, Ana Castillo, describes the long history of Mexico’s patriarchy beginning with the Aztecs. The rise of the Aztecs over other Mesoamerican tribes, such as the Toltecs and Zapotecs, meant the disregard of ancient traditions of matrilineal tribal affiliations and reverence of female goddesses, queens, and warriors. Women in Aztec society did not receive formal education, and were not permitted to participate in positions of civil service. They were relegated to motherhood, strictly policed and expected to fulfill prescribed roles of motherhood and religious martyrs (as

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<sup>52</sup> Carrasco, David. *City of Sacrifice: The Aztec Empire and the Role of Violence in Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 75.

sacrificial victims). Divorced women were cast to the margins of society, living out the rest of their lives as prostitutes, or sold into slavery.<sup>55</sup> David Carrasco writes that the death of Coyolxauhqui “became one of the legitimations for mass human sacrifice, including the ritual killing of children and women among the Mexicas.”<sup>56</sup>

The propagation of the myth of Coyolxauhqui coincides with the rise of the Aztec empire as an imperialist and patriarchal power. The sacrificial rites based on the death of the goddess were meant to distribute the power of the sacrificial female to physical surroundings, just as the murders of Coyolxauhqui and her siblings allowed Huitzilopochtli to possess their spiritual status. As part of the rites, female sacrificial victims were skinned so that male priests could wear them “deliberately to impersonate the goddesses and to claim the power for their own.”<sup>57</sup> Female agency is both mythically and physically usurped by males in the sacrificial rites; males claim it as their own possession.

Cherrie Moraga, Chicana writer, retells the myth of Coyolxauhqui in her essay, “La Fuerza Femenina.” In the reinterpretation, Coyolxauhqui’s anger at Coatlicue is fueled by the knowledge that Huitzilopochtli will usher in an era of war and violence and “conspires to kill Coatlicue rather than submit to a world where War would become God.”<sup>58</sup> Coyolxauhqui’s attempted killing of her mother represents her refusal to submit

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<sup>55</sup> Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Carrasco, Carrasco, David, and Robert L. Sagarena. "The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldua: Borderlands/La Frontera as a Shamanic Space." In *Mexican American Religions: Spirituality, Activism, and Culture*, by Gaston Espinosa and Mario T. Garcia, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>57</sup> Caputi, Jane. "Afterword: Goddess Murder and Gynocide in Ciudad Juarez." In *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*, by De Alba, et. al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 286.

<sup>58</sup> Moraga, Cherrie. "En Busca De La Fuerza Femenina." In *The Last Generation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1993), 73.

to a culture steeped in “misogyny, war, and greed.”<sup>59</sup> Huitzilopochtli’s victory over his sister is the victory of patriarchy over the matriarchal lineage of the goddesses. According to Chicana feminists, this marks the beginning of patriarchal oppression over Chicanas, even before the Spanish conquest.

Communication studies scholar, Teresita Garza, interprets the Coyolxauhqui myth as one of “voice, agency, and vocality.”<sup>60</sup> Coatlicue’s depiction in the original Aztec myth denies her the power to make choices. She is impregnated with no choice in the matter; she does not look to Coyolxauhqui, or her other children, for comfort. Instead, she stays silent, complacent in her oppression. Coatlicue’s (in)action can also be interpreted as support for the patriarchy. In contrast, Coyolxauhqui displays strong “rhetorical skills” when she convinces her brothers and sisters to take arms against the unborn Huitzilopochtli.<sup>61</sup> The dismemberment of Coyolxauhqui can also be read as a disarticulation, as in the process of cutting her body into pieces, he silences her speech by cutting off her tongue.<sup>62</sup>

The title of this thesis, “Hijas Rebeldes” is taken from Moraga’s work on Coyolxauhqui. She reinterprets the legend of Coyolxauhqui, positing her as the first Chicana feminist, who attempts to slay her mother as an act of defiance against allowing the forces of misogyny and violence to rule the world. Moraga rejects the long history of patriarchy, naming of Coyolxauhqui the archetypal rebellious daughter, willing to sacrifice herself for the protection of other women:

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>60</sup> Garza, “The Rhetorical Legacy of Coyolxauhqui,” 43.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Caputi, “Goddess Murder,” 281.

Huitzilopochtli is not my god. And although I revere his mother, Coatlicue, Diosa de la Muerte y La Vida, I do not pray to her. I pray to the daughter, La Hija Rebelde. She who has been banished, the mutilated sister who transforms herself into the moon. She is la fuerza femenina, our attempt to pick up the fragments of our dismembered womanhood and reconstitute ourselves. She is motherhood reclaimed and sisterhood honored. She is the female god we seek in our work, la Mechicana before the “fall.”<sup>63</sup>

The re-memberance of Coyolxauhqui, and the identification of her rebellion with the agency expressed through Chicana spirituality turns the traditional exaltation of the Aztec warrior on its head. Coyolxauhqui, the warrior-goddess, gathers her fellow brothers and sisters to murder her mother. For Moraga, and other Chicanas, reverence for Coyolxauhqui implies a desire and a commitment to working against oppressive culture. Moraga, and other queer Chicanas, recognize Coyolxauhqui as an ally. Coyolxauhqui’s banishment from the earth represents queer marginalization by Chicano and dominant culture. The re-claiming of Coyolxauhqui by queer Chicanas re-locates the female to a position of influence. By re-membering Coyolxauhqui, literally re-assembling her broken body, Chicanas do not forget to include Coyolxauhqui’s tongue. Re-membering Coyolxauhqui allows Chicanas to discover and create their own modes of agency.

#### MALINTZIN TENEPAL/CIHUACOATL/LA LLORONA

The myth of the goddess, Cihuacoatl, La Llorona becomes intertwined with the account of the real-life Malintzin Tenepal . Malintzin Tenepal was thought to have been born sometime around the year 1505, to an Aztec cacique, making her a princess in Aztec nobility. After the death of her father, and the re-marriage of her mother, Malintzin was

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<sup>63</sup> Moraga,” En Busca de la Fuerza,” 74.

sold into slavery to a Mayan tribe; her mother eliminated Malintzin of the family inheritance, granting it instead to her son. At the age of fourteen, Malintzin was gifted to the conquistador, Hernan Cortez, after his defeat of the inhabitants of the Tabasco region.<sup>64</sup> Malintzin was gifted to Cortez's senior captain, but soon caught his eye as her talent for languages became evident. Fluent in Nahuatl by way of her upbringing, as a slave Malintzin also learned Mayan, and quickly became fluent in Spanish. Malintzin, known as Marina after her encounter with the Spanish, facilitated exchanges between Cortez and neighboring tribes of the Aztecs.<sup>65</sup> Malintzin eventually served as interpreter between Cortez and Moctezuma.

In Mexican nationalist interpretations, Malintzin's role in facilitating exchanges and treaties between Cortez and indigenous tribes eager to see the Aztec empire defeated, as well as her sexual relationship and subsequent children with Cortez, make her a traitor to her nation. Malintzin is also known as la Malinche, and to be labeled a Malinchista in Mexican and Chicano communities implies selfishness and treachery. Known also as "La Lengua" or "The Tongue" blame for the conquest of Mexico is placed on an individual female, Malintzin, in her role in guiding the Spanish to their spoils. For Mexican writer, Octavio Paz, Malintzin is also "La Chingada," literally the fucked one, the mother from which all Mexicans descend : "The Chingada is the Mother forcibly opened, violated or

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<sup>64</sup> Del Castillo, Adelaida R. "Malintzin Tenepal: A Preliminary Look Into a New Perspective." In *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, by Alma M. Garcia (New York: Routledge, 1997), 123.

<sup>65</sup> Elenes, C. Alejandra. "Malintzin/Marina/Malinche: Embodying History/Reclaiming Our Voice." In *Transforming Borders: Chicana/o Popular Culture and Pedagogy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 144.



deceived. The hijo de la Chingada is the offspring of violation, abduction or deceit.”<sup>66</sup> In Paz’s interpretation, she is the mother of all mestizos, and through rape and coercion become a whore. Malintzin, a human woman, becomes the mythic mother alongside the pantheon of mother goddesses, who like Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui are condemned and de-valued for their roles in the subversion of dominant Aztec culture. As Adelaida R. Del Castillo writes,

when Dona Marina is accused of being “una traidora a la patria” one wrongly assumes that there was a “patria.” The fact is, there were many Indian nations within the Aztec Empire and these nations were always attempting, through one rebellion of another, to regain their former independence.<sup>67</sup>

Neighboring Aztec tribes suffered violence and taxation under Aztec rule, and took part in numerous rebellions against the empire. The idea of nation, in the modern sense, does not apply to the cultural landscape of Mexico at the time of the Conquest. The participation of indigenous tribes in Cortez’s conquest had much more to do with the desire for tribal autonomy than with the political and personal motivations of Malintzin and a desire for revenge against the people who sold her into slavery.<sup>68</sup>

In transforming Malintzin into a mythic mother figure, her identity has been connected to the Aztec goddess, Cihuacoatl and the legend of La Llorona. Cihuacoatl was another mother goddess for the Aztecs- a woman made of stone and dressed completely in white who wandered the streets weeping in agony over the loss of her sons. Her wailing is central to the legend of La Llorona, a frightening story told to young children. While the telling of the story varies, the common theme is a woman, slighted and

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<sup>66</sup> Paz, Octavio. *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (London, England: Penguin Books, 1990), 79.

<sup>67</sup> Del Castillo, “Malintzin Tenepal”, 125.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

scorned, drowns her children in an act of vengeance. Remorseful for her actions, La Llorana wails for the lost children, condemned to wander in search of them. According to Luis Leal, Malintzin and La Llorona become intertwined because of the circulation of a popular story among Mexicans, in which Malintzin refuses to allow Cortez to take their son to Spain, and instead kills him. In her grief, Malintzin's soul escapes her body and wails eternally with grief.<sup>69</sup> In another version of the story, after bearing Cortez a son he gives her away to one of his soldiers. This betrayal causes Malintzin to kill her son, and also wail in mourning.<sup>70</sup>

During the Chicano nationalist movement, men and women who contested its dominant male culture were deemed malinchistas. Norma Alarcon reflects

in the eyes of the conquered (oppressed), anyone who approximates la lengua, or Cortes (oppressor), in word or deed, is held suspect and liable to become a sacrificial "monstrous double."<sup>71</sup>

Chicanas, eager to create their own narrative separate from the male dominated culture of the Chicano nationalist movement, have re-claimed the myth of La Malinche. They recognize the similarities in the function of serving as translator between different spheres, navigating and juggling between different identity markers. Recognizing their roles as insiders to the Chicana experience, but seeking also to contribute an academic world, often with oppositional values, Chicana feminists embody the role of Malintzin Tenepal, existing in the spaces between dominant Western culture and indigenous ideals.

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<sup>69</sup> Leal, Luis. "The Malinche-Llorona Dichotomy: The Evolution of a Myth." In *Feminism, Nation and Myth: La Malinche*, by Rolando Romero and Amanda Nolacea. (Houston, TX: Arte Publico Press, 2005), 137.

<sup>70</sup> Vigil, Angel. *The Eagle on the Cactus: Traditional Stories from Mexico* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2000), 17.

<sup>71</sup> Alarcon, "Traddutora, Traditora," 59.

In my interpretation of La Llorona myth, Chicanas, as agents in their own identity formation find ways of expression outside of dominant paradigms. La Llorona, and La Malinche, like the Aztec women sending sons to war, wail in an act of protest. Chicanas find their voice in these myths, reclaiming Malintzin's tongue as their own.

#### TONANTZIN/GUADALUPE

In contrast to the whore/traitor figure of Malintzin Tenepal is Our Lady of Guadalupe, the virgin. The virgin/whore dichotomy of Malintzin and Guadalupe is prevalent in Mexico and Chicano communities- while Malintzin is blamed for the destruction of the Aztec empire, Guadalupe is given credit for creating unity under a banner of peace.<sup>72</sup>

The widely accepted Guadalupe narrative, as officially sanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church, begins with a poor *indigena*, Juan Diego. According to the story, on December 9, 1531, Juan Diego, on his way to mass, began to pass by Mount Tepeyac in an effort to get to Tlatelolco. As he passed Tepeyac, he had a vision of bright light and music, followed by a harkening female voice to climb to the tip of the hill. There appeared to him the Virgin Mary, who spoke to him in his indigenous tongue, Nahuatl, calling herself his mother. She asked Juan Diego to appeal to the Bishop Zumurruga for a shrine built in her honor. He implores the Bishop, who dismisses him in disbelief. She appears to him again, asking him to return and ask the Bishop once more. After his second attempt to convince the Bishop proves unsatisfactory, the Virgin Mary provides a sign, to show the Bishop the reality of the apparition. Though roses are out of season in December, Juan

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 58.

Diego finds a rose bush. He takes a bouquet, wrapping it in his *tilma*. The Bishop is astounded when Juan Diego opens his cape to reveal the roses and the image of the Virgin Mary appears on it. The Bishop builds a shrine in honor of the Virgin Mary, in Tepeyac where she appeared. Scholars disagree on the historicity of the apparition.<sup>73</sup> Whether or not it was an event orchestrated by the Roman Catholic Church in an effort to facilitate indigenous conversions will not be discussed in this section. Rather, I will focus on the symbolism and implications present in the representation of Guadalupe.

Mesoamericans had long worshipped an earth mother, called Tonantzin, on mount Tepeyac. Historian of colonial Mexico, Sahagun speculated that the Aztec goddess Tonantzin had also absorbed the ancient goddesses Cihuacoatl, known as “the Snake-Woman.” Others believed she was Centeotl. For the ancient Mesoamerican tribes, the name the primary Earth Goddess, was worshipped on numerous mountains, called “tonan.”<sup>74</sup> For many of the indigenous at the time, the apparition of the Virgin Mary served as another manifestation of Tonantzin, the Earth Mother, also known as “Our Mother.” While the Roman Catholic Church named this apparition, “The Virgin of Guadalupe,” Chicanas reflect on the way in which she named herself to Juan Diego. According to Anzaldua, she called herself Maria Coatloapeuh, referring to herself as “The one who has dominion over serpents.” Others interpret Coatloapeuh as “The one who crushed the serpent.” The different interpretations of the Nahuatl name for Guadalupe reflect the differences in interpretations of the apparition’s symbolism.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, 111

<sup>75</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 51

In the apparition at Tepeyac, Guadalupe is dressed in a green (almost turquoise-colored) mantle, or *rebozo*, covered in stars. The white gown she wears underneath has elaborate designs on it, and she wears a black sash around her waist, tied with a bow. Her hands are folded in prayer, and her head is bowed. Guadalupe's skin appears to be a darker color, similar to the skin of many *mestizos*. She stands on a crescent moon, held up by a cherub. Around her body radiates a golden sun. In this apparition, the Virgin Mary is pregnant, wearing a black fertility sash common in colonial Mexican society.<sup>76</sup>

While the Guadalupe apparition holds a wide appeal to Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans, interpretations of its possible symbolic meanings differ. For some, she represents the survival of indigenous cultures conquered by the Spanish. To others, the apparition prophesies the growth of Christianity. Ana Castillo's description of Guadalupe places the goddess into an Aztec framework. She imagines the olive skin of Guadalupe to be gold, instead, since in ancient Meso-America gold was used by royalty and deities. Guadalupe does not wear a mantle, like the Spanish, but instead a quetzal-colored *rebozo*.<sup>77</sup> Her image appears on a distinctly Mexican peasant garment- a *tilma* made from the maguey. Some Mexicans understand the apparition of Guadalupe to represent the rise of Christianity in Mexico. As writer F. Gonzalez Crussi states, the presence of Guadalupe in front of the sun denotes the power over the sun-deities of the Aztecs, as does her position over the crescent moon. Her stance is of a woman ready to walk the world and

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<sup>76</sup> Gonzalez-Crussi, F. "The Anatomy of a Virgin." In *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, by Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 11.

<sup>77</sup> Castillo, Ana. "Introduction." In *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), xx. The quetzal bird was a highly prized bird in the Meso-American region. Plumes from the bird were reserved for nobility.

missionize. The color of her face and her mestiza facial features are “prophetic, announcing the foundation of a new race.”<sup>78</sup>

Sandra Cisneros re-discovers the ancient roots the forgotten sex-goddesses in Guadalupe the Sex Goddess, her interpretation of the Guadalupe myth. She writes that the characteristics of the fertility goddesses were stripped away by the Roman Catholic Church. Contained within Tonantzin are “a pantheon of other mother goddesses” such as Tlazolteotl (Totzin), and Tzinteotl.<sup>79</sup> All of the goddesses controlled fertility and sexual desires: Tlazolteotl controlled fertility and sexual urges; Tzinteotl was the patron of whores and sexually active women. Tzazolteotl, like most other gods of the Aztecs, worked dualistically, stirring ones sexual urges to a passionate state, and purifying the body and soul after sexual debauchery. Cisneros lumps Coatlicue into this pantheon, as she represents the forces of creation and destruction.

To Cisneros, a woman unwilling to revere gods or goddesses without human attributes, Guadalupe’s connection to the ancient goddesses is in their connection to humanity. Rather than accept the divine as a transcendent being with no cultural or sexual markers, she returns gender and sexuality to Guadalupe. In “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” Cisneros speculates on the appearance of Guadalupe’s genitalia, wondering whether or not her vulva is the same shape and color as hers. Cisneros refuses to allow Guadalupe to remain an accessory to the Christian god. Guadalupe is restored to a prominent place of power, as a divine agent. As she reflects, in order to open herself up to

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<sup>78</sup> Gonzalez-Crussi, “The Anatomy of a Virgin,” 11.

<sup>79</sup> Cisneros, Sandra. “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess.” In *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, by Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 49.

the revering of Guadalupe, “she had to be a woman like [herself].”<sup>80</sup> For Chicanas, allowing Guadalupe to remain a perpetual virgin, promoting chastity, denies the natural sexuality of women. Returning her identity as one of the ancient goddesses opens up her identity to one closer to the nature of human women.

In many societies, power structures control male and female modes of behavior in an effort to control large populations. Chicanas “reviv[ing], reconstruct[ing], and reclaim[ing]” of the indigenous goddesses is a subversive practice against mechanisms and structures of control.<sup>81</sup> My understanding of the Coyolxauhqui myth focuses specifically on her assertiveness; I imagine her dismemberment involved the cutting off of her tongue. In (re)claiming the goddess, Chicanas, figuratively, sew Coyolxauhqui’s tongue back on and discover their own agency. They become rebellious daughters, ready to warn other women of impending danger and able to gather others like them in solidarity. Claiming Guadalupe is an extension of the pantheon of sexual goddesses creates a connection to divine aspects of their own physical bodies, as well as an option with which to subvert male dominated discourses on Guadalupe as virgin mother.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>81</sup> Randall, Margaret. "Guadalupe, Subversive Virgin." In *Goddess of the Americas: Writings on the Virgin of Guadalupe*, by Ana Castillo (New York: Riverhead, 1996), 116.

## Chapter Four: A Question of Authenticity

In her study on Day of the Dead traditions in the United States, Regina Marchi wrestles with the question of authenticity, as it applies to the Chicano Day of the Dead processes. For Chicana/os, Day(s) of the Dead ties them to an indigenous past, as they choose to revere their ancestors by building altars, making offerings, and performing ceremonies rooted in indigenous cultures. Mexican writer Carlos Monsivais contends that after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Mexican government propagated the idea that all Mexicans shared a common Aztec past in an effort to unite the country. Men were compared to Aztec warriors, encouraged to be stoic in the face of danger, and revolutionary soldiers facing firing squads were portrayed as the pinnacle of Mexican male identity. As Marchi writes,

Powerful ideological work is accomplished by asserting claims of lineage from pre-Colombian iconography... This has both positive and negative consequences. On one hand, identifying with Mexico's ancient cultures has helped create a sense of unity, distinction, and cultural pride among Mexicans and... Chicanos. On the other hand, claims that Mexicans are still inked to an ancient past reinforces essentialized, exotic stereotypes of Latinos, who are typically portrayed in the media as "steeped in tradition," "closer to nature," and "more spiritual" than Anglos.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Marchi, Regina M. *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 29.



While Marchi's work focuses solely on the tradition of Day of the Dead, she presents points relevant to the question of authenticity in Chicana spirituality. Day of the Dead is part of the same Mexican neo-indigenist nationalist movement claiming direct lineage to an Aztec past. While Chicana processes of re-claiming indigenous goddess mythologies are commonly justified by biological/ancestral links to Mesoamerican cultures, the adaptation of spiritual and religious traditions found outside of Mesoamerican proves problematic for some critics. This chapter will explore arguments that Chicana spirituality may be a New Age appropriation of ancient indigenous traditions, favoring the Aztecs and ignoring the plethora of indigenous cultures found elsewhere in Mexico. Also questioned is the inclusion of Eastern esoteric traditions and African-based spiritual traditions, like Santeria, in Chicana spirituality. As with any rebellion, critics are ready to question the legitimacy and authenticity of alternatives to dominant paradigms. For Chicanas, questions arise about the legitimacy of reclaiming indigenous practices and deities as adopting cultural practices to which they have no ancestral link. As agents of their own identity, however, Chicanas create spiritual practices according to their personal circumstances, understanding that boundaries delineating cultures from each other correspond to structures of power and control.

Gloria Anzaldúa's use of mythological language and symbols in *Borderlands/La Frontera* is central to her concept of the new mestiza consciousness. Her rejection of epistemic borders allows her to feel free to employ the spiritual practices of the Santeria, as well as the "curanderismo... shamanism, Taoism, [and] Zen" traditions to rid the self

of Western epistemic impositions.<sup>83</sup> Randy Conner, close friend of Anzaldúa, reflects on her “spiritual eclectic[ness],” defending her practices and beliefs against critics who charge her with nostalgic and uninformed appropriation of cultures to which she does not have a claim.

Critics of Anzaldúa argue that though her epistemic stance fights against the necessity of borders and barriers of knowledge inherent to rationalist epistemologies, “as it weaves its answer to paternalism, patriarchy, and homophobia,” she nevertheless employs the jargon and methods of analysis characteristic of Western traditions of history and anthropology.<sup>84</sup> Anzaldúa’s incorporation of the indigenous into the new mythology of Chicanas reinforces the historical divide between Chicanas and their indigenous heritage. Placing the indigenous into myths takes them out of historical contexts, and ancestral links to the Aztecs cannot be legitimated.

Also, though Anzaldúa’s new mestiza consciousness aimed to create a Chicana identity separate from the Chicano nationalism of the 1970s, it continued to attempt to connect Chicana/os to an indigenous past with territorial ties to the Southwest by connecting Chicana/os to a mythic, Mesoamerican past. In claiming the indigenous goddesses as part of a Chicana spiritual identity, Anzaldúa casts them into forces living in shadows and representing elements of the feminine which have been devalued by colonialism and Western religions. For Contreras, Anzaldúa’s insistence on the hyper-valuation of characteristics labeled “indigenous” promotes the essentialization of indigeneity—namely, that they are spiritual beings, more concerned with the state of their

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<sup>83</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 91.

<sup>84</sup> Contreras, “From Malinche,” 116.

souls than the world around them. Also, as Contreras writes, Anzaldúa's emphasis on the feminine relies on "recasting the negative terms of primitivism, while continuing to rely on conventional associations with the body, sensuality, femininity, and sexuality."

Anzaldúa hyper-valorizes parts of the feminine deemed inferior, such as uncontrollable sexuality and lack of rational thinking. For Contreras, Anzaldúa's re-packaging of these elements does not deviate very far from the patriarchy she is trying to denounce.<sup>85</sup>

Maria Saldana-Portillo, in her essay in *Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and Age of Development*, also critiques the use of indigenous customs for identity formation in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She charges that Anzaldúa's use of mestizaje, and re-claiming of indigenous heritages through mythology fails to recognize the existence of indigenous people with traceable biological claims to their heritages. The implied indigeneity of Chicana/os alienates them from connections and alliances with "contemporary U.S. Native Americans or Mexican Indians."<sup>86</sup> Indeed, when the emphasis is on indigenous traditions of the past, contemporary indigenous groups are also relegated to historical memory. As Carlos Montemayor writes,

To be an Indian in Mexico is not just to have a particular physical appearance. It is also to speak an Indian language, to live on ancestral lands, to practice traditional customs, and to hold the age-old values of the community in which you live.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>86</sup> Saldana-Portillo, Maria J. "Epilogue Toward an American "American Studies": Postrevolutionary Reflections on Malcolm X and the New Aztlan." In *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 282.

<sup>87</sup> qtd, in Ramonet, Ignacio. "Marcos Marches on Mexico City." In *The Zapatista Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2002). 137.

For Saldana Portillo, Anzaldúa's mistake is in not locating herself in the First World, as a member of a privileged class, who can pick and choose identity markers as desired. Saldana-Portillo equates Anzaldúa's use of indigenous symbols to the choosing of symbols "in a kind of pastiche grab bag of Indian spiritual paraphernalia," as she, "decides what to keep and what to throw out, choosing to keep signs of indigenous identity as ornamentation and spiritual revival."<sup>88</sup>

Responding to these critiques, Conner notes that though Anzaldúa does look towards the past for identity formation, she is also concerned with the present predicaments of all indigenous people. According to Conner, Anzaldúa held a strong belief and desire for people of indigenous heritage to unite with other marginalized people to combat the evils of imperialism and colonialism, especially when it came to matters of healing the body. Her performance of indigenous spirituality reflected her commitment to the indigenous and oppressed of all parts of the globe.<sup>89</sup> Also, though no official documented lineage exists to connect Chicanas/os to particular indigenous tribes, Chicanas continue syncretic Christian and indigenous traditions of spiritual healing passed down through oral tradition by females.<sup>90</sup>

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa presents her own critique of cultural appropriation, which in her opinion is symptomatic of a Western culture cut off from its spiritual nature. She writes that, "Modern Western painters have 'borrowed,' 'copied,' or

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<sup>88</sup> Saldana-Portillo, "Epilogue Towards," 286.

<sup>89</sup> Conner, Randy P. "Santa Napatla: A Borderlands Sutra Plenary Speech." In *El Mundo Zurdo: Selected Works from the Meetings of The Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldua 2007 & 2009*, edited by Norma E. Cantu, et. al. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2010), 185.

<sup>90</sup> Medina, "Los Espiritus Siguen Hablando," 223.

otherwise extrapolated the art of tribal cultures” to create modernist art, Western musicians have appropriated musical traditions, as it continues to exploit natural resources. Anzaldua urges “White America” to participate in mutual learning and understandings of other cultures, engaging in spiritual practices to heal the wound created by the exclusion of spirituality.<sup>91</sup> For Anzaldúa, cultural appropriation occurs when the intent of the “borrower” is misplaced; by adding a dimension of reciprocity and sincerity cultural appropriation becomes authentic participation in foreign practices.<sup>92</sup>

As Conner notes in his plenary address for the Society for the Study of Gloria Anzaldúa in 2009, Anzaldúa was no stranger to the “study of transpersonal psychologies, esoteric philosophies, spiritual traditions, and healing, divinatory, and magical technologies.”<sup>93</sup> Throughout her lifetime she studied Eastern philosophical traditions, including yoga techniques. Her involvement with Western esoteric practices included “alchemy, astrology, numerology, the I-Ching, the Kabbalah, and the Tarot.”<sup>94</sup> Anzaldúa was also a regular visitor to botanicas, and she practiced candle magic to bless and invoke the divine during her scholarly work. Her close work, and friendship, with Santeria practitioner, Luisah Teish, initiated her into beliefs and traditions of invoking ancient spirits and ancestors. Her experiences with Teish made Anzaldúa a strong follower of Yemaya, the Yoruba goddess of the ocean and fertility, popular among female artists as the patron saint of “dreams and female secrets, ancient wisdom, and the collective

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<sup>91</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 90.

<sup>92</sup> Contreras, “From Malinche,” 129.

<sup>93</sup> Conner, “Santa Nepantla,” 180.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

unconscious.”<sup>95</sup> Her devotion to the deities of Santería is evident in her poetry to Yemaya, as well as her invocation of Eshu in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In describing her transition to a mestiza consciousness she offers a chicken as a sacrifice to Eshu, the Santería deity in charge of transitions and crossroads.<sup>96</sup>

Anzaldúa, in an interview with Irene Lara, describes the Chicana practice of adopting indigenous customs as a “new tribalism.” New tribalism places the power of identity formation in the hands of the individual; Chicanas find agency in deciding which cultural practices are appropriate for their condition and situation. She explains,

Instead of somebody making you a hybrid without your control, you can choose. You can choose a little Buddhism, a little assertiveness, individuality, some Mexican views of the spirit world, something from blacks, something from Asians.<sup>97</sup>

For Anzaldúa, new tribalism is a necessity when breaking down cultural and epistemic categories, and creating new forms of identity. As Teish explains in an interview with AnaLouis Keating, borrowing traditions from other cultures is an important characteristic for Chicana (and other borderland people). Any deviation from institutionalized religions, which have long enjoyed unquestioned control over the spiritual identities of followers, is an act of resistance and moving beyond Western epistemic traditions.<sup>98</sup> Anzaldúa’s entire being is consumed with a spirituality that includes all aspects of the self, as well as other religious traditions.

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<sup>95</sup> Murphy, Joseph M., and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. "Espiritismo: Creole Spiritism in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States." In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, by Margarite Fernandez Olmos (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 247.

<sup>96</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 102

<sup>97</sup> Lara, “Daughter of Coatlicue,” 42.

<sup>98</sup> Moraga, Cherrie, and Gloria Anzaldúa. "O.K. Momma, Who the Hell Am I?: An Interview with Luisah Teish." In *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983), 224.

Anzaldúa's theory of new tribalism brings up an interesting paradox. While the idea of tribe in the understanding of indigenous cultures, such as different Mayan tribes of Chiapas, is often linked to specific claims to ancestral territories and shared ancestral lineage, Chicanas/os, many of whom descend from immigrants from different parts of Mexico and others who can claim multi-generational ties to the Southwest United States, share imagined ancestral ties. Rather than interpreting new tribalism as an extension of the traditional definition of tribe, I argue it is instead as anti-tribalism. Understanding new tribalism as anti-tribalism removes the need for territorial and ancestral markers of inclusion. Instead, identity formation from new tribalism unites seemingly contradictory cultural markers allowing individuals the choice of inclusion. To be part of a tribe, while rejecting traditional definitions of tribe, though paradoxical, is possible within the framework of a new mestiza consciousness. As nepantleras, in a state of nepantla, Chicanas navigate the seeming contradictions of new tribalism choosing to exist in the paradoxical space.

Through imagined ties to a common ancestral past, and claiming Aztec cultures elements, Chicanas become agents in identity formation. As, Hames-Garcia theorizes,

Anzaldúa's Chicana feminist mythology attempts to give us an original relation to the past. By an "original relation," I mean something different from a simple return to the past. An original relation to the past represents a new way of relating to the past; it responds to the needs of the present and remains dynamic, rather than traditional or custom-bound.<sup>99</sup>

While critics like Contreras see Chicana use of indigenous traditions as an extension of the Chicano nationalist movement, Hames-Garcia's theory places Anzaldúa's philosophy

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<sup>99</sup> Hames-Garcia, "How to tell a Mestizo," 113.

of “new mestiza” in stark opposition to the nationalist identity proposed by the Chicano movement. Instead of trying to preserve the indigenous past, Anzaldúa seeks an original relationship and (re)clamation of the past. By (re)claim, I refer to the (re)formation of the past without calling for the preservation of the original; while some characteristics of it may still exist, they are repackaged, made relevant, and contextualized.

Castillo, though a proponent for the adaptation of indigenous practices in identity formation, argues that Chicanas must be discerning in their choices. Chicanas must not blindly adopt spiritual practices without ensuring an understanding their significance in the context of their original cultural, as well as the history behind it. Only then, can Chicanas adopt it for their use.<sup>100</sup> When Chicanas adopt indigenous cultural practices, they must learn to accept guidance from others with cultural roots already embedded in those practices.<sup>101</sup> In seeking ways to make themselves feel fully human, there must be a mutual reciprocity occurring- Chicanas must also acknowledge and respect the full humanity of those whose cultural traits they are adopting.

The renewal and re-claiming of indigenous spiritualities and practices speak to the force and power of the imagination and intuition; the mind-body dichotomy fades as Chicanas rely on spiritual methods to heal the violent rupture between body and spirit. For Castillo, the healing is evident in the autonomy discovered by Chicanas, as well as the breaking with ties binding them to labels of servitude and complacency. Chicanas assert their independence by taking part in behaviors and modes of expression once relegated strictly to males. Castillo differentiates between Chicana spirituality and New

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<sup>100</sup> Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, 145.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



Age cultural appropriation by the intentions of the practitioner; Chicana spirituality is opposed to capitalism, while the New Age movement of the last few decades is primarily white, affluent, and concerned with monetary gain.<sup>102</sup> Conner's sentiments mirror Castillo's. He also asserts the need for mutual reciprocity, and credits teachers, such as Teish, with the ability to create inclusivity, marked by their willingness to share spiritual knowledge with diverse seekers.<sup>103</sup> A true change in consciousness

must not be used to profit the individual, neither through monetary gain, nor personal aggrandizement, by exploiting the vulnerability of people, who despite their race, class, and sex privilege, are alienated from their spiritual selves, which is, in fact, the self.<sup>104</sup>

Luisah Teish explains the power dynamics of claiming feminist spiritualities.

While it would seem natural to rebel against institutionalized religion by claiming no spiritual reality exists, Chicana feminists assert not only the existence of the spiritual dimension, but also its compatibility with the material world.<sup>105</sup> The "earth-based" spirituality embraced by feminists of color, "embraces indigenous, shamanistic, and goddess-revering traditions nurtures collective effort to ameliorate life on the earth and insists upon political opposition to forces of oppression."<sup>106</sup> For Anzaldúa, the re-discovery of a Chicana spirituality is discovered by re-claiming and re-memembering the goddesses of the indigenous.

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>103</sup> Conner, Conner, Randy P.L., and David H. Sparks. "'And Revolution Is Possible': Re-Membering the Vision of This Bridge." In *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, by Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 514.

<sup>104</sup> Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers*, 158.

<sup>105</sup> Moraga and Anzaldúa, "OK MOMMA," 224.

<sup>106</sup> Conner, "And Revolution is Possible," 5 14

Chicana writer Lara Medina's understanding of the differences between New Age spirituality and mestiza spirituality lie in their necessity to individuals and communities, as well as the outcomes of adopting a spiritual view. Medina characterizes New Age spirituality as chosen by individual fastidiousness, the choosing of specific traditions because of personal preference and convenience, "implying a lack of consciousness or even recklessness; mere consumers of the American spiritual marketplace."<sup>107</sup> In contrast, Chicana spirituality, the adoption of different cultural traditions, is a move towards an inclusive world view, away from a world defined by dualistic boundaries. For Chicanas, adopting a spirituality based on the indigenous is a necessary tool to combat the looming threats of oppression and silence, which occur daily in the lives of women of color. They are "tools or strategies of resistance for personal and communal healing, they challenge the norms of the dominant culture."<sup>108</sup> Practicing their own form of spirituality is necessarily a political act for Chicanas. It allows for autonomy from male dominated centers of power, allowing Chicanas to create and (re)create as necessary. Through (re)creation and (re)affirmation Chicanas to act as agents of their own identities; Chicana spirituality, ideally, de-centers loci of power by subverting them.<sup>109</sup>

As people on the border, Chicanas learn ways to cross borders and blur them; adopting different cultural traditions necessitates an ethic viewpoint. An ethics based on nepantla spirituality requires Chicanas to honor the cultures and contexts from which these traditions come from. As Medina writes, while syncretism provides a historical

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<sup>107</sup> Medina, "Nepantla Spirituality," 206.

<sup>108</sup> Medina, "Los Espiritus Siguen Hablando," 238.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 229

understanding in the ways in which colonized cultures have found agency by original forms of Christian expression, nepantla spirituality does not strive to create a syncretic tradition. Syncretism, “silences complex historical contexts, power relations, and the psychological distress in which syncretic traditions evolved.”<sup>110</sup> Nepantla/Chicana spirituality instead allows traditions to exist within a framework that allows their full appreciation. There is no diminishing or dilution of different cultural traditions; they exist on equal terms.

At the heart of the debate, is the question of authenticity. Do Chicanas have any right to claim indigenous practices as their own, ancient or otherwise? Do Chicanas have more in common with New Age movements than indigenous movements? For Chicanas, the question of authenticity is a personal one. As agents of their own identities and self expression, Chicanas hold the power to create, and (re)create modes of expression which may be difficult to categorize as they continue to change and shift in cultural contexts. In reflecting on whether or not Aztec mythologies have any historical accuracy, or Chicanas/os have any ancestral ties to the Aztecs, David Carrasco writes,

It is a special gift of the religious imagination that allows people, after five hundred years of colonialism, dependency, oppression, and resistance, to turn to the ancient Mesoamerican past for symbols of a cosmovision that help make the world meaningful, give it a standing center, and provide for social and spiritual renewal.<sup>111</sup>

The concept of “invented tradition” resonates strongly in this case. Through invented tradition, communities find a sense of unity by enforcing morals and values believed to be linked to a fictitious past. Communities formed around invented traditions subvert

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<sup>110</sup> Medina, “Nepantla Spirituality,” 210.

<sup>111</sup> Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 15.

dominant expectations of linear, uninterrupted connections to historical culture. While traditions linking Chicanas to an indigenous Mesoamerican past may have been borrowed from Mexican nationalist movements after the Mexican revolution, it nevertheless provides a method of creating a unified community of spiritual believers.<sup>112</sup>

Chicana (re)interpretations of goddess mythologies blur boundaries of past and present; while they hearken back to an ancient past, the goddesses are employed to address issues of contemporary life. Likewise, boundaries of body and spirit are transcended in mestiza modes of consciousness- Chicanas learn to exist among various cultural contexts, choosing cultural expressions relevant to their personal situations. These are tools of resistance and subversion. Whether or not Chicanas display any of the pre-requisites their critics have decided are necessary to employ indigenous methods of understanding and cultural expression, the utility of Chicana spirituality cannot be discounted. Through new modes of understanding the world and the confines of Western cultural traditions, Chicanas become their own sources of power and expression.

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<sup>112</sup> Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA*, 43. Referring to Eric Hobam and Terrance Ranger's concept of "invented tradition."

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