

Erotics as Decolonization and Pathway to Spiritual Activism in Chicana Literature:

Demetria Martínez's *Mother Tongue* and Alma Luz Villanueva's *Naked Ladies*

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This dissertation titled
Erotics as Decolonization and Pathway to Spiritual Activism in Chicana Literature:
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ABSTRACT

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Erotics as Decolonization and Pathway to Spiritual Activism in Chicana Literature:

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“Erotics as Decolonization and Pathway to Spiritual Activism in Chicana Literature: Demetria Martínez's *Mother Tongue* and Alma Luz Villanueva's *Naked Ladies*” examines the inherent conflicts faced by the Chicana as a result of Spanish and U.S. colonialism and the direct effects on the Chicana body, sexuality, and spirituality. Through what I term “erotics as decolonization,” the Chicana resists Colonialist and patriarchal paradigms in order to gain sexual agency, and become practitioners of spiritual activism.

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INTRODUCTION

This study examines the various representations of the female body in contemporary Chicana literature. It is broken into two parts. Part One articulates the need to move away from Western theorizations of the body in order to examine the ways that the Chicana spiritual/sexual body has been oppressed by colonialism, particularly through the cultural inscriptions of the iconic figures of Malinche and Guadalupe, as well as the ways that contemporary authors work to re-vision these figures to create a rhetoric of resistance. Part Two explicates this rhetoric of resistance through the use of erotics as decolonization and the inherent link to spiritual activism in two novels: *Naked Ladies* by Alma Luz Villanueva, and *Mother Tongue* by Demetria Martínez.

Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez points out that many of the Chicana novelists and short-story writers of the 1980s and 1990s exhibit characters that not only act on their own sexual desires, but also determine for themselves how or whether the sexual experience will affect their lives; this she notes, signals an important change for Chicana literature. She describes this type of fiction as a “fiction of cultural resistance” that includes “an inner discourse of resistance to patriarchal traditions in Chicano culture,” significant because these writers do not simply demonstrate political contempt for the male, but “the strength of the female subject in its own entity” (E. Martínez 132). In her analysis of Chicana fiction, she rightly finds that the Chicana characters she evaluates exhibit a “sexuality or sexual gratification

traditionally denied them and considered whorish, lacking in dignity and self-control, while remaining true to their heritage and continuing to establish a Chicana identity. Thus, they rewrite the roles of gender within their culture” (E. Martínez 133). While this is evident in the fiction that I analyze, what I add to the discussion is a particular emphasis on the spirituality that is reinfused into the sexuality of the protagonists in the texts by Alma Luz Villanueva and Demetria Martínez. Critics of Chicana literature have studied both novels, although not extensively, but these studies focus primarily on either the sexuality *or* the spirituality that is represented, and not the inherent link between the two. In addition, I argue that the authors’ reconfiguration of female sexuality leads to a spiritual activism that works as a decolonizing force.

The first chapter examines the critical debate surrounding Western theorizations of the body that provide a largely hegemonic and/or phallogentric view of the body while also emphasizing the Cartesian split between the mind and body, and argues the need for a specific locus from which to examine the Chicana body. Building on Elizabeth Grosz’s argument, which calls for racially, culturally, and gender-specific examinations of the body, I assert that the Chicana body has been inscribed by the values, laws, and morality of the Colonizer, the machinations of the Spanish during the Mexican Conquest, as well as by the cultural imperative for the oppression of women, the internal and psychic inscriptions of the lived Chicana experience. Finally, in this chapter, I legitimize my use of U.S. Third World feminists and Chicana authors and theorists, in particular the auto-ethnographies of Gloria

Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Ana Castillo, as the basis for my later evaluations of Chicana literature.

In chapter two, I look at the cultural figure Malinche (also known as Malintzín and Malinalli), translator and mistress to Hernán Cortés, to expose the resultant internalization of racism inherent to Chicana identity. Although Malinche is not Chicana, she is identified culturally as the traitor/whore and mother of the bastardized mestiza, and is the historical memory that becomes inscribed on the Chicana body, resulting in the “epidermalization” of inferiority based on skin color and sexuality. In order to exemplify this, I examine Anzaldúa’s essay “La Prieta,” and Moraga’s essay “La Güera.” In addition, I explore the calls for “a rebellion in the flesh” that is expressed by many Chicana authors who reinscribe Malinche as feminist icon and expose the sexual political themes that oppress them.

In the third chapter, I investigate the Spanish Catholic appropriation of Coatlicue in the figuration of Guadalupe, Malinche’s “monstrous double.” As Malinche represents the traitor/whore, Guadalupe represents the chaste, pure virgin, requiring not only a repressed Chicana sexuality, but also the submission to patriarchal/religious law which relegated women to the role of wife and mother. Additionally, I scrutinize the way in which the Catholic Church removed spirituality from sexuality in order to secure the female body as profane in service to patriarchy. It is in the chapter, too, that I introduce Audre Lorde’s essay “The Erotic as Power” to illustrate how the reconfiguration of a spirit-infused sexuality works as resistance to the dominant powers:

Because their bodies have historically served as sites of multiple oppressions, women of color find it almost impossible to exclude their physical selves from their struggles for consciousness, opposition, and change. Perceived through distorted images and representations of race and sexuality, many women are in effect “dispossessed” of their own bodies; to overcome these numerous levels of domination, women of color thus must first seek out a material and personal form of resistance (Rojas, “Recuperating the Erotic” 135).

I examine Alma Luz Villanueva’s *Naked Ladies* in the fourth chapter. This text not only illustrates the socially and culturally enforced suppression of the female sexual body, but it also links this oppression to the abuse of the men who serve patriarchy. Alta, the protagonist, moves through the stages of what Anzaldúa defines as “conocimiento,” the process one goes through after recognizing his or her oppression in order to create a new life story. AnaLouise Keating, in “From Borderlands to New Mestizas to Nepantlas and Nepantleras: Anzaldúan Theories for Social Change,” argues that too much attention has been paid to *Borderlands*, and that the other, equally important aspects of Anzaldúa’s work have been overlooked—in particular her vision for social change. Conocimiento is one such theory. For Alta, this process is aided by her development of an erotic sensibility that not only serves as a decolonizing force in the way that it challenges and subverts the dominant culture’s demands on her Chicana and sexual self, but also leads to the development of a spiritual activism, “spirituality for social change,

spirituality that recognizes the many differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation” (Keating, “Nepantlas and Nepantleras” 11). This allows her to take her newly formed sexual knowledge to the healing of a larger community.

In *Mother Tongue*, by Demetria Martínez, this process of spiritual actualization and activism is also gained through the protagonist María’s development into an actualized Chicana identity; this is also based in her development of an erotic sensibility, but also in the expression of spiritual activism that is gained in writing the body. María achieves this through her relationship with José Luis, a Salvadoran refugee. This process includes “[r]esurrecting ancestral memory, connecting to indigenous roots, retrieving legend and oral tradition, returning to spirituality, and controlling self-representation” as “mechanisms by which Chicana writers recover and resist” (Córdova 385).

PART ONE: THEORIZATION

Chapter One

Theorizing the Chicana Body

With my mother in the throes of Alzheimer's
as my unwitting Zen teacher, I came to
understand that memories are stories we
tell ourselves, and then we forget the most
thoroughly constructed ones, the ones with
the greatest conviction, and what remains is
only the body's knowing.

~Cherrie Moraga, *A Xicana Codex
of Changing Consciousness*

Gloria Anzaldúa begins her monumental text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* by describing the “1,950 mile-long wound” that divides “a pueblo, a culture,” the U.S.-Mexican border as “*una herida abierta*,” an open wound, “where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds” (25). Those who live in this region are “the prohibited and forbidden . . . the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (25). This reference to the geographical border that divides the United States and Mexico and the “prohibited and forbidden” who occupy this space “[runs] down the length of [her] body,/ staking fence rods in [her] flesh” and, ultimately, “splits [her]” (24). This border becomes the physical barrier that divides the body from the self, and complicates Anzaldúa, and the Chicana’s, connection to her identity, denies her connection to the body. This border region is not only a geographical space, but what it represents—the continued legacy of the Conquest—is also physically

inscribed in and on the body; the wound that Anzaldúa describes is representative of the inscription of conquest by those whose lives and bodies became inferior to the colonialists who came to power. It creates a “border culture” from which her identity is produced, and from which she and other Chicanas must heal. Once this process has occurred, she and other Chicanas are able to transform themselves, to become liberated from the limits placed on them by the dominant culture, to move away from the shame of the “wound felt from the inside.” An examination of this inscription of colonialism and its liberatory transformation forms the basis of the study.

What has been difficult in beginning this study, however, is finding what I feel to be the most appropriate theoretical framework with which to work, simply because few of those available are truly rooted in the body. In discussing the need to create a theoretical framework that necessarily links a “race-critical (and gender-critical and sexuality-critical and class-critical) consciousness,” Jacqueline Martinez notes that the theoretical effort is often removed from the immediacy of experience:

Despite these dangerous tendencies of portending liberatory practice in a detached theoretical effort, we need theory to develop more powerful and sophisticated tools for engaging the fleshy rootedness of human-world experience. The challenge (and responsibility) lies in bridging the gap between those theoretical tools and our flesh, putting them concretely to the lived experiences through which it has been

possible for us to speak, hear, see, feel, and do in the first place.

(Martinez 27)

I. BODILY INSCRIPTION

Elizabeth Grosz argues that an evaluation of the body as a surface of inscription is necessary, but that this is, in many ways, problematic. There are currently two approaches to theorizing the body. The first she calls “inscriptive,” and is derived by the work of Nietzsche, Foucault, Kafka, and Deleuze; this approach conceives the body as a surface which is inscribed on by values, social law, and morality (33). The second, which she calls the “lived body,” stems from psychoanalysis and phenomenology; this examines the lived experience of the body through the body’s “internal or psychic inscription” (32):

The body can be regarded as a kind of *hinge* or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more sociopolitical exteriority that produces interiority through the *inscription* of the body’s own surface. Where psychoanalysis and phenomenology focus on the body as it is experienced and rendered meaningful, the inscriptive model is more concerned with the process by which the subject is marked, scarred, transformed, and written upon or constructed by the various regimes of institutional, discursive, and nondiscursive power as a particular kind of body. (Grosz 33)

I do, ultimately, use Grosz's definition of inscription in my examination; my research has revealed that the Chicana body has been inscribed by regimes of power, in particular that of colonialism, but that it is also imperative, to truly understand the role of the Chicana body in relation to identity, to examine the lived body and the psychological effects of colonialism. Of course, any author that sets out to examine the way culture and history have been inscribed on the body, as I will do in this examination of the Chicana body and Chicana authors that write the body, can not do so while dismissing the theoretical concepts of bodily inscription as put forward by Nietzsche, Kafka, and Foucault, who have all crafted important theories of bodily inscription, especially in the way that these authors theorize the way the body as effected by regimes of power. However, the theories put forth by these authors fall short in many ways for an examination of the Chicana body and the way in which it is historically and culturally inscribed. In order to examine these failings, I will first give an overview of the theories presented by Nietzsche, Kafka, and, primarily, Foucault.

II. INSCRIPTION BY REGIMES OF POWER AND HISTORY

One of the most important aspects of the theories of bodily inscription put forth by Nietzsche, Kafka, and Foucault is the assertion that bodies are inscribed by regimes of power. According to Nietzsche, the body is biological and organic; it is an "organism" to which the will to power is basic. The will to power is not simply about preservation, but a drive to "absorb and dominate other organisms, other bodies,

and thus add to the body's 'quanta of power'" (Lash 11). In addition, he asserts that civilization carves meaning onto and out of bodies not through education or reason, but coercion and cruelty (*The Genealogy of Morals*); therefore, social morality is corporeally inscribed through an institutionalized system of torture. The will to power, then, is bodily agency, and the reproduction of power through domination, drives a need to absorb and dominate other bodies. Kafka's short story, "The Penal Colony," describes quite literally the inscriptive infiltration of the body's surface through punishment enforced by law, showing that Nietzsche's model of bodily inscription need not be regarded as metaphorical or with only psychological results. Foucault also stresses the normalization of bodies through discipline but concludes that bodies are acted on directly in order to reconstitute them in the image of power. In *Discipline and Punish*, he borrows Nietzsche's concept of "memory," where punishment and discipline, through a kind of socialization process, creates an unconscious "memory" in both the offender and society in general. This memory functions as an agent of social control (Lash 2-3).

III. NOT A WHITE, BLANK PAGE

Judith Butler, in a paper entitled "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions" does assert that the theory of the body as constructed by history is immediately linked to Foucault. She writes, "The body is a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves, a nodal point of nexus for relations of juridical and productive power," but points out that this suggests a "pregiven" body,

already “existentially available” for its own construction. For her, bodies are historical artifacts, but not passive as Foucault claims. She writes,

Foucault wants to argue—and does claim—that bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes, and that there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of any one of those specific regimes, his theory nevertheless relies on a notion of genealogy, appropriated from Nietzsche, which conceives the body as a surface and a set of subterranean “forces” that are, indeed, repressed and transmuted by a mechanism of cultural construction external to that body. Further, this mechanism of cultural construction is understood as “history,” and the specific operation of “history” is understood, and understood problematically, as inscription.

The problem, therefore, is the figuration of the body as “a ready surface or blank page available for inscription, awaiting the ‘imprint’ of history itself.” She argues that viewing bodies in this way is in itself a cultural act. “Hence, for Butler, every supposed description of bodies’ inherent characteristics arises internally to a complex of power relations that effectively shapes bodies and *makes* them be as they are described” (Stone 11). Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz asserts that Foucault writes about “the” body as if it is a white, blank page that has no agency. What results from this is an abstract reduction of the body into a masculinist model of an

anonymous, universal (male) body, a body of “indefinite generality” (Grosz, 37; Butler, “Paradox”). In *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism*, Grosz asserts:

It is problematic to see the body as a blank, passive page, a neutral “medium” or signifier for the inscription of a text. If the writing or inscription metaphor is to be of any use for feminism . . . the specific modes of materiality of the “page”/body must be taken into account: one and the same message, inscribed on a male or a female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text. (156)

Gender norms are thus “a contemporary way of organizing past and future cultural norms, . . . an active style of living one’s body in the world” (Butler, 1989 131).

Butler does not, however, take race into any serious consideration of the body.

While she references the need to do so in her follow up to *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, she does not insert race into her own analysis/discussion in any meaningful way. Although she analyzes how sex, sexuality and gender are introduced, assumed, and how performativity is constructed, “there are no parallel discussions of how race is performed, or how exactly race is interpolated [*sic*] by what Butler calls ‘racializing norms’” (Silah 64). I will return to the matter of race later in the chapter.

III. THE CULTURALLY AND SEXUALLY SPECIFIC BODY

Elizabeth Grosz, in the essay “Bodies and Knowledge: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason,” and her subsequent book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward A Corporeal Feminism*, attempts to bridge this gap when she examines the crisis resulting from the “historical privileging of the purely conceptual or mental over the corporeal,” which she argues both renounces and relies upon the role the body plays in the construction and understanding of knowledge (26). The foundational theories on bodily inscriptions are reflected in this crisis. She argues that if the body is not acknowledged effectively as an aspect of knowledges, then “the sexual specificity of bodies must be a relevant factor in the evaluation of these knowledges” (26). The problem, or crisis, as she puts it, is one of “self-validation and methodological self-justification, ‘formulated in different terms within different disciplines and periods,’ it is the crisis of reason’s “*inability to rationally know itself*, to enclose and know itself from the outside: an inadequation of the subject and knowledge” (Grosz 26).

Grosz identifies the crisis as the inability to know the subjects of knowledge, which should be understood as a “*crisis of specificity*, a crisis of the limits or the particularity of knowledges—a crisis in status and at the level of self-representations of the (sexual) specificities at play in the production of knowledges” (31). The results from limited value of objectivity in such areas such as the humanities and social sciences whose approaches to the human subjects generally ignore “the specificities, the singularities of the subject” in favor of universalist terms, and the inability of knowledges to understand their own production, particularly through their own historicity and materiality (29-30). Grosz asserts that

there is always in political investment in the production of knowledges, and that this, in conjunction with the lack of emphasis on the specificities and singularities of the subject, results in a crisis of “perspectivism”: “To admit that knowledges are but perspectives—points of view on the world—is to acknowledge that other, quite different positions and perspectives are possible” (30).

One of the issues with which Grosz struggles is that within the feminist approach, there is still a “strong reluctance to conceptualize the female body as playing a major role in women’s oppression” (31); feminists instead focus on such issues as abortion, contraception, body-image, sexuality, etc.—but through theories wrought with charges of biologism, essentialism, ahistoricism, and naturalism and their relation to patriarchal society. She writes, “Analysis of the *representation* of bodies abound, but bodies in their material variety still wait to be thought” (31). In *Volatile Bodies*, she returns to this idea, but specifies further:

If women are to develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge male knowledges and paradigms, the specific nature and integration (or perhaps lack of it) of the female body and female subjectivity and its similarities to and differences from men’s bodies and identities need to be articulated. The specificity of bodies must be understood in its historical rather than simply its biological concreteness. Indeed, there is no body as such: there are only *bodies* – male or female, black, brown, white, large or small – and the gradations in between. Bodies can be represented

or understood not as entities in themselves or simply on a linear continuum with its polar extremes occupied by male and female bodies (with the various gradations of “intersexed” individuals in between) but as a field, a two-dimensional continuum in which race (and possibly even class, caste, or religion) form body specifications . . . If the mind is necessarily linked to, perhaps even a part of, the body and if bodies themselves are always sexually (and racially) distinct, incapable of being incorporated into a singular universal model, then the very forms that subjectivity takes are not generalizable. Bodies are always irreducibly sexually specific, necessarily interlocked with racial, cultural, and class particularities. (“Refiguring Bodies” 19)

Similarly, Oyèrónkè Oyêwùmi, in her essay “Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects,” asserts that the idea that “biology is destiny—or better still, destiny is biology,” along with the notions that “difference and hierarchy in society are biologically determined” and that “difference is expressed as degeneration” continue to permeate Western thought. She argues that “the notion of society that emerges from this conception is that society is constituted by bodies and as bodies—male bodies, female bodies, Jewish bodies, Aryan bodies, black bodies, white bodies, rich bodies, poor bodies,” and refers to both the corporeal body as well as metaphors of the body (3).

Grosz does argue, in “Bodies and Knowledges,” that a sociocultural conception of the body is possible, and could ultimately “serve to reposition

women's relations to the production of knowledges; this requires an accounting of bodies "in the stuff of their corporeality" (31). In order to do this, she proposes five ways of reconfiguring concepts of the body that are relevant to feminism and the structure of prevailing knowledges:

1. Because of the privilege given to binaristic categories governing Western reason (mind over body, culture over nature, etc.), "it is necessary to examine the subordinated, negative, or excluded term *body* as the *unacknowledged condition* of the dominant term, *reason*" (32). Therefore, an understanding of "*embodied subjectivity*, of *psychical corporeality*, needs to be developed" (*Volatile Bodies* 32).
2. It is necessary to examine the "phallogentric alignments" of the cross-correlation between binary pairs, particularly in regards to male vs. female, where the body is still closely related to the feminine, while the mind is associated with the masculine. (32)
3. Because sexual differences, like those of class and race, *are* bodily differences, the body must be reconceived, not in opposition to the culture but as its preeminent object. Any attempt to create a representation of "the human" must take a specific mode of corporeality as its ideal or "it is doomed to erase difference, to convert difference to variation" (32).
4. Feminists can meaningfully talk about women as an oppressed group or a site of possible resistance only by specifying the female body and

its place in locating women's experience and social positions: "As pliable flesh the body is the unspecified raw material of social inscription that produces subjects as *subjects of a particular kind*" (32).

5. Power must, then, be seen to "operate directly on bodies, behaviors, and pleasures" in order to extract the information needed for the social sciences and humanities to construct knowledges efficiently (32).

Anzaldúa's approach to this is the creation of what she terms "mestizaje theories." In the introduction to the anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras*, Anzaldúa explores the fact that "what is considered theory in the dominant academic community is not necessarily what counts as theory for women-of-color" (xxv), and argues for new kinds of theories and theorizing methods that will account for the particularity of their experiences, which many theorists-of-color are in the process of doing. These theories are "marginal" theories that operate "partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference," theories that articulate the "'in-between,' Borderland worlds of ethnic communities and academies, feminist and job worlds" (xxvi):

In our *mestizaje* theories we create categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We recover and examine non-Western aesthetics while critiquing Western aesthetics; recover and examine non-rational modes and "blanked-out" realities while

critiquing rational, consensual reality; recover and examine indigenous languages while critiquing the “languages” of the dominant culture. And we simultaneously combat the tokenization and appropriation of our literatures and our writers/artists (xxvi).

These mestizaje theories are crucial to the analysis of Chicana texts because these texts purposely distort Western aesthetics while bringing into focus non-Western realities through a mixture of Spanish and English, and indigenous languages; these strategies rebuke the dominant culture while providing an accurate representation of a specific Chicana cultural a identity.

Jacqueline M. Martinez’s text *Phenomenology of Chicana Experience & Identity: Communication and Transformation in Praxis* offers a mestizaje theory of the body that is culturally and sexually specific. She bases her examination of Chicana experience and identity in phenomenology because “As a theoretical perspective, phenomenology focuses our attention on the life world and the lived experience of persons”; it takes this focus “because it recognizes the inherent interrelatedness of human conscious experience and the fact of our locations *in time, place, history, and culture* (ix; emphasis mine). Significantly, she also notes the importance of the body in such an examination:

[W]hat I come to experience at any given moment is a dynamic interrelation between what my culture, community, time, and place offer for the meaningfulness I might make and the fact that it is my *body* located in this time and this place that allows certain things to

coalesce in certain ways such that I end up having this particular experience, awareness, feeling, or understanding. (Martinez x; emphasis mine)

IV. BODIES HAVE HISTORY

In order to truly create this marginal theory, however, and examine the culturally and sexually specific body, the influence of a culturally specific history on that body must be considered. In regards to history, Grosz importantly argues that:

[T]he body, or rather, bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type. (*Volatile Bodies* x)

Therefore, in examining the corporeality of the Chicana body, this approach must importantly, then, recognize the influences of violence and sexuality; consequently, considerations of colonialism and conquest must be brought into any examination of the Chicana body.

The conquest of the indigenous by the Spanish was a colonialist effort that was literally enacted through violence to their physical bodies—through rape, outright massacre, the spread of disease, and enslavement. This is reinforced by Norma Alarcón in her essay, “Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of ‘the’ Native Woman.” She writes, “In short, the body, certainly for the past 500 years in the Americas, has been always already racialized. As tribal ‘ethnicities’ are broken down by conquest and colonizations, bodies are often multiply racialized and dislocated as if they had no other contents” (250). As Jacqueline M. Martinez notes, in learning about the history of the southwestern United States from the perspective of Chicanas/os and considering it in the context of her father’s life choices, based in an effort to achieve success through assimilation, she has “come to understand something of how traces of history live in the present, how they function preconsciously and unknowingly,” that they “carr[y] forward the legacy of racist practices,” continuing to “encourage assimilation of all sorts” (55). Therefore:

If we understand that habits of consciousness and experience are a function of the lived body’s semiotic boundedness to the social and discursive world, then it follows that the lived body is also connected to a history—not merely a history of that’s body’s conception, birth, and growth, but also of that body as a cultural body that carries the flow and pressures for previous generations forward as well as the expectations of a likely future backward. The cultural body, like the

lived body of the person, embodies the terms of its very existence.

(Martinez 10-11)

Additionally, the gender of this racialized/colonized body must also be considered.

Suzanne Bost reminds us that sex, gender, and sexuality all shape cultural memory.

She notes, importantly, that “the violence of conquest and enforced *mestizaje* in

Mexico was experienced by women in an explicitly sexual manner, since it is

through the bodies (and the rapes) of women that *mestizaje* was formed” (Bost 43).

And it is not the violence and conquest experienced in the past that is significant, but

rather the way in which cultural/historical memory influences the present. All of

these taken together create a very specific locus of experience for the individual

Chicana/India/mestiza.

V. MEMORY AND THE BODY

While Grosz addresses the need to focus on a sexually and culturally specific body, her own analyses of the body ultimately describe a body that has no memory.

In her complimentary exposition of Deleuze and Guattari in her essay “Refiguring

Lesbian Desire,” she points out that “sexuality and desire are not fantasies, wishes,

hopes, aspiration,” but, instead, “energies, excitations, impulses, actions,

movements, practices, moments”—mere surface events. She goes on to state,

“Surfaces come together—fingers on velvet, toes in sand. They come to have a life of their own. They have no memory” (qtd. in Pérez 108).

The notion that bodies have no memory is incompatible with notions of the Chicana body. Emma Pérez, in *The Decolonial Imaginary* writes that “Genealogy as a method thematizes the body, power, and social institutions where fictive truths and values are enacted upon the body” (101), but insists that the body does have memory: “The body remembers” (108). Pérez responds directly to the assertion that the body forgets what it knows:

How can the body forget its habits, its longings? How does the mind forget the past and its imprints upon the skin? The flesh comes to know someone or something in a certain way, whether through a scent or a touch; a gesture seen or experienced will remind the imagination how the body itself has its own memory. Memory as history, as social construction, as politics, culture, race—all are inscribed upon the body. Inscriptions upon the body are memory and history. The body is historically and socially constructed. It is written upon by the environment, by clothes, diet, illnesses, accidents. It is written upon by the kind of sex that is practiced upon the body and that the body practices. (Perez 108)

Her efforts emphasize how bodies do in fact bear the traces of history. Teresa Córdova, in “Anti-Colonial Chicana Feminism,” also reinforces the fact that colonialism has directly influenced the Chicana/o relationship to the body and that the body has memory when she states, “Colonialism has imbedded its memory in our spirits.” Pérez’s attempt to write Chicanas into history through the Decolonial

Imaginary, then, “speaks for, or gives voice to, women on the bottom of a historically economic and political structure” (Alarcón 250), because it “embodies the buried desires of the unconscious, living, and breathing in between that which is colonialist and that which is colonized. Within that interstitial space, desire rubs against colonial repressions to construct resistant, oppositional, transformative, diasporic subjectivities that erupt and move into decolonial desires” (Pérez 110). Memory factors into this because memory as history, according to Pérez, becomes a catalyst for change: “Memory as history is often the motive for revolution, for transformation, whether the transformation is of society and its collective memory or of the damaged individual who is part of some collective” (Pérez 105).

VI. DISMISSING THE MIND/BODY SPLIT

An additional problem in Western approaches to the body, especially in regards to an examination of the Chicana body, is that the majority of Western theorizations of the body separate the mind and the body, which is insufficient to this exploration because all of the Chicana authors and texts I explore demand the inherent link between the two. Also, the traditional split between body and soul is no longer viable because of its “pernicious legacy for woman” and the fact that it “is being erased by today’s woman, writing affirmatively and with a common purpose across the boundaries of nationality and ethnicity” (Ordóñez 62). While I explore this connection more thoroughly in the third chapter, I will note here that one of the projects of many Chicana authors and theorists is “putting back together” the

connection between the body and the spirit, a split that occurred only after colonization. In an interview with Debbie Blade and Carmen Abrego, Anzaldúa stated, “My whole struggle in writing, in this anticolonial struggle, has been to put us back together again. To connect up the body with the soul and the mind with the spirit” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 220).

Anzaldúa was an ardent critic of the Western mindset for privileging “the mechanical, the objective, the industrial, the scientific” (*Interviews/Entrevistas* 163) while denigrating imagination, fantasies, and dreams as equally legitimate modes of knowledge. In addition, her vision does not disdain the physical body, but includes an embodied mode of perception and being in the world that includes her creativity, sexuality, and political activism. This requires a dismissal of the Cartesian dualities placed between the mind and the body. Part of what is central to my examination of the Chicana body is the idea that the mind and the body are inherently linked, that they do not operate one outside of the other as separate aspects of bodily experience, but that they in fact work in conjunction with one another to create an embodied identity. It is for this reason that the privileging of Chicana authors and theorists is so key to this project, because, as Grosz points out, Western theorists have for too long separated the two. “To ignore spirit reinscribes a false split between political activism and spirituality which can limit social change. Indeed, validating, nurturing, and learning how to use all of our facultades—our body-mindspirit—will help us be revolutionary” (Lara 47). Anzaldúa says that the dismissal of this connection creates an energy that says, “You’re not fighting for

human rights. You're not fighting for civil rights . . . The spirit is not basic to our struggle," an attitude that she argues the body takes on (qtd. in Lara 48). Therefore, the mind/body split so prevalent in the construction of knowledges of the body must be dismissed in order to examine how the two work inseparably.

VII. NOT WESTERN, BUT CHICANA THEORY

Based on the needs I have articulated above, I have chosen to base my arguments about the Chicana body and experience primarily in the theories written by Chicanas themselves, resisting what I perceive as an academic imperative to apply Western, dominant theories to all research interests. Instead, I base my examination on the theories of Chicana authors themselves, because "those who occupy positions within culture that are the most multiply marked or marginalized would be more capable than others to expose the racist sexist, and other unjust aspects of the dominant culture" (Martinez 18). The writings that I use and examine have established four main points: "

(1) the Chicana is not inherently passive—nor is she what the stereotype says she is; (2) she has a history rooted in a legacy of struggle; (3) her history and her contemporary experiences can only be understood in the context of a race and class analysis; and (4) the Chicana is in the best position to describe and define her own reality. (Córdova 13).

The majority of my analysis stems from the auto-ethnographical writings of Chicana authors Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Ana Castillo, privileging their viewpoints over those of Eurowestern descent. As Suzanne Bost notes, “The work of Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Castillo emerged in the era of consciousness-raising, and their autobiographical writings seem to participate in the confessionalist mode of feminist truth-telling, with a particular emphasis on *how bodies bear the marks of their political situations*” (36; emphasis mine):

As texts whose color, shapes, scars, and diseases narrate both personal and communal histories, bodies tell us about how people are shaped by their material contexts and vice versa. The physical pain that often accompanies these corporeal markings clarifies the violence of historical passing. Moreover, as the literal and metaphoric site and creation and destruction, birth and death, bodies have something to say about genealogy, metamorphosis, repetition, and regeneration. Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Castillo use autobiographical narrative, poetry, plays, and novels to give body to the myths that mark them as Chicanas. Fastening these myths to the body (real or textual) gives them life, voice, and mobility (real or textual) with which to subjectify the myth and to act up against history. (Bost 51)

Bost asserts that these writers illuminate “the continued (undead) monstrosity of how *cultural norms are grafted onto bodies*” (Bost 52; emphasis mine). Additionally, Bost argues that Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Castillo share an awareness of “how painful

it is to be marked by (racial, sexual, national, or medical) power structures and a search for a (visual or textual) vocabulary with which to represent this pain . . . Their self-portraits then fuse history and contemporary politics *on the landscape of the human body* . . . They use their own bodies to make apparent the violence of the worlds that surround and shape them” (73; emphasis mine). This history of the Chicana feminist writer involves her fight for recovery and survival from the “memory of molestation,” from the “penetration” by those who tell her she is not good enough. She is finding her voice to express her pain and her experiences, to rename herself in her own image, to recover mythic and historical female symbols that reconnect her to her past, and to celebrate and learn to love herself. The Chicana feminist writer reconstructs her self to liberate it from the oppression of the colonialist construct whose only purpose is to debase and control her. And as Moraga notes, “it is historically evident that the female body, like the Chicano people, has been colonized. And any movement to decolonize them must be culturally and sexually specific” (*Generation* 149).

I attempt to show how this process occurs in the Chicana body through cultural constructions based on Malinche and Guadalupe and the internalized colonialism that results from lived experience as racially othered as Indian. In the next two chapters, I argue that the cultural icons of Malinche and Guadalupe are directly tied to the psychological and phenomenological experience of the Chicana because of the forced assimilation by the Spanish colonialists by these women into a sexually submissive patriarchal paradigm and by the internalization of inferiority

based on skin color and the perpetuation of the virgin/whore dichotomy that these icons represent. The colonialists refigured La Virgen de Guadalupe as the “spiritually pure mother” and La Malinche “as physically defiled concubine”—the racialized “good Mary and the bad Eve” of Spanish Christian medieval and early-modern discourse; together they represent the virgin/whore dichotomy and the “negative of effects in the development of female subjectivity” which has become a foundational theme in Chicana feminist thought (Lara 99). They have also been integral to the inscription of colonialism on the Chicana body. I explore Malinche and Guadalupe via the texts of Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Castillo, and ultimately expose the ways in which these authors articulate an “oppositional consciousness” through their use of these icons and what they represent as tools for liberation and decolonization.

Chapter Two

“Caught Between *Los Intersticios*”: Malinche and Chicana Inferiority

How will our lands be free if our bodies
aren't?

~Richard Bracho

Color, rather than saying simply ethnicity,
in addition to class and gender, as well as
conscientización, all determine one's
identity and predict one's fate in the
United States.

~Ana Castillo

In the previous chapter, I identified the wound of the border region between the United States and Mexico that begins Anzaldúa's treatise, as well as the ways in which this wound represents the historical/cultural inscription of the Conquest because “[t]he violence of conquest and enforced *mestizaje* in Mexico was experienced by women in an explicitly sexual manner, since it is through the bodies (and rapes) of women that *mestizaje* was formed” (Bost 43). In this chapter, I go on to explore the significance of Malinche to Chicana consciousness. While Malinche is Indian, not Chicana, the fact that she is credited/blamed for the creation of the *mestizaje* is directly linked to Chicana consciousness because of the epidermalization of the inferiority of the India aspects of the Chicana body and the internalized racism that results. Malinche is also central to the oppression of Chicana sexuality, which is crucial to this project, because her supposedly deviant sexuality is directly tied to her Indianness. In addition, I argue that Chicana feminists engage in a re-visioning of Malinche in order to work through the interstitial spaces

of colonialism towards a decolonized approach of the body through self-love and acceptance.

I. MALINCHE AND THE BETRAYAL

In “The Homeland, Aztlán / *El otro México*,” Anzaldúa traces the history of the border region between the U. S. and Mexico in order to illustrate how this border culture, border identity, came into being. She traces its roots to the absorption of Northern Mexico by the United States with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo on February 2, 1848. The Texas border was pushed down 100 miles, leaving 100,000 Mexican citizens on the U.S. side of the border. It was at this point that “*Tejanos* lost their land, and overnight, became the foreigners” (Anzaldúa 28). As a result, the Mexicans and Indians that were native to this region “were jerked out by the roots, truncated, disemboweled, dispossessed, and separated from our identity and our history” (Anzaldúa 30).

While the geographical border between the U. S. and Mexico was created in 1848, the separation from identity and history for the Mexicana and India began much earlier, initially with the accidental arrival of Cristóbal Colón, and then with the Conquest and the influence of the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés. The connection to the Chicana is cemented first with the “betrayal” by the Indian princess Malinalli Tenepal, *Malintzín*, or Malinche, who became interpreter and mistress to Cortés during his conquest of Mexico, effectively “selling out” her people to the Spaniards. Commonly referred to as La Malinche, she is the only woman named in historical

accounts at the time of the conquest. Debra J. Blake, in *Chicana Sexuality and Gender: Cultural Refiguring in Literature, Oral History, and Art* states that what is known about Malinche comes from the Spanish chronicles of the Conquest, although little can be substantiated (37). It is not known exactly how she became a slave, although it is thought that she would have been raised in a wealthy or royal family because of her linguistic knowledge (she spoke Nahuatl and Maya, and learned Spanish quickly). She was eventually presented to Cortés, along with twenty other women, as a gift; Cortés initially gave her to one of his men, but then took her as his companion when he learned of her linguistic abilities. She bore Cortés a son, and was soon after married off to one of his lieutenants (Blake 37). While she was initially regarded highly by both the Spanish and the indigenous peoples for her leadership and role as translator, this was short-lived. She became the scapegoat for the Mexica defeat, an attribute that still resonates (Blake 36). As Norma Alarcón points out, “Her historicity, her experience, her true flesh and blood were discarded” and her “excruciating life in bondage was of no account, and continues to be of no account” (*This Bridge* 182). It is what she has come to represent, and the influence of what she signifies that contributes to the Chicana sense of inferiority, and her “true” story has been largely dismissed.

Malinche’s name has come to signify traitor, as she went from “heroine to betrayer/whore” in public sentiment; because she supposedly acted voluntarily in her actions as mistress to Cortés, she was branded unreliable and impure (Blake 40). The conception of Malinche as betrayer/whore was amplified by Octavio Paz,

in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*; he identifies her as La Chingada—which is translated as “the fucked one” or “one fucked over”—and ties the violation of Mexico by the Spanish to Malinche’s “voluntary” sexual relationship with Cortes. Paz sees her, and the female in relation to her, as “defenseless and passive” and equates la chingada with “nothingness” (Blake 41). He argues, “she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition” (qtd. in Blake 41); this metaphor is ultimately extended to all women of Mexican descent. According to Blake, who rightly criticizes Paz’s phallogocentric approach, by his reasoning:

Not only is Malintzín condemned for sleeping with (being forced to sleep with) the enemy but she and all women are responsible—by their alleged passivity and openness—for violations committed against her, themselves, and Mexico . . . Women are robbed of subjectivity, agency, and identity; if not for their abject bodies they would be obliterated from being.

The result of this thinking for Mexicanas and Chicanas as the “symbolic daughters of La Malinche” is that “their sexuality, whatever its form, is stigmatized” (Mirandé and Enríquez, *La Chicana*, qtd. in Baker 42).

Sandra Messinger Cypess, in *La Malinche in Mexican Literature: From History to Myth*, explains the contradiction. She states, “La Malinche has been transformed from a historical figure to a major Mexican and Latin American feminine archetype, a polysemous sign whose signifieds, for all their ambiguity, are generally negative” (2). She studies Malinche as a palimpsest, and as such, finds that representations of

her reinforce Blake's findings. She describes how Malinche became baptized into the figure of Doña Marina, who the Spanish texts of the conquest show to be heroic in her ability to help the Spaniards defeat the Aztecs; as protector of the foreigner, she was considered the Great Mother (Cypess 9). After the War of Independence, however, Doña Marina was transformed from the Spanish cultural form of Great Mother "to a version circumscribed by the patriarchal culture developing in a newly independent Mexico": "Desirable Whore/Terrible Mother," linked to the serpent of Eden. She then becomes linked to the Mexican Eve, the traitor and temptress. Ultimately, Cypess finds, "Textual analysis of the figure of La Malinche demonstrate how the cultural myth has evolved through time and how it continues to serve as a paradigm for female images in Mexico, for ways men and women relate to each other" (7). The conquest, then, "was the crucial event in the formation of male-female relations" as Cortés is seen as having been "served" by Malinche. Therefore, "In the way a Mexican man enjoys dominating a woman, wants service from her, and expects to impose his will and body on her and then dispose of her, he repeats the pattern Cortés established with La Malinche" (8). Blake also notes the contradictory way in which Malinche has been depicted in history textbooks and in popular culture, which "represent the ambivalent and still changing position" she inhabits in Mexican culture. Ventura Loya, from whom Blake gathered an oral history, exemplifies this contradiction:

What I know about Malinche is that she was an Indian who was the interpreter for Hernán Cortés when he was in Mexico. She was his

lover. Somehow learning the language, she was able to communicate with the two sides. But for some reason, people talk about, “hijo de la Malinche,” like “son of a bitch.” Or sometimes there are little jokes about that. But I never heard explanation about why they would say that Malinche was considered bad . . . The way that the history books described her is that she was a smart woman who’d been able to learn and help. (Blake 39)

Loya’s oral history reveals the prevailing myth about Malinche; even if described in textbooks as a smart woman who was “able to learn and help,” she is still culturally constructed negatively.

Ana Castillo also explores Malinche’s connection with Eve; in a discussion of Malinche, La Llorona, and Coatlicue, in relation to Eve and Lilith, Castillo remarks that the importance of these figures is that they make it evident that it is female sexuality that is at fault since it is woman who conceives and gives birth; and Malinche gave birth to a new race (Castillo 109). Therefore, “When La Virgen de Guadalupe came into prominence as the nationalistic sign of the liberated Mexico, La Malinche was rewritten as the anti-Virgen, the traitor-whore” (Blake 41). Norma Alarcón, in “Chicana’s Feminist Literature: A Re-Vision Through Malintzín/ or Malintzín: Putting Flesh Back on the Object,” furthers this sentiment, arguing that Malinche is seen as an “evil goddess” who is embroiled in a “family quarrel” where “many male members often prefer to see her as the mother-whore, bearer of illegitimate children, responsible for the Spanish invasion” (Alarcón, *This Bridge*

182) and describes the subsequent mythic dimensions of her as a male one because her betrayal lies first and foremost “in her very sexuality” which makes the vagina “the supreme site of evil” (Alarcón, *This Bridge* 183). What is significant here is the way that the myth of Malintzín/Malinche has been entrenched in Mexicana/Chicana consciousness:

Because the myth of Malintzín pervades not only male thought but ours too as it seeps into our own consciousness in the cradle through their eyes as well as our mothers’ who are entrusted with the transmission of culture, we may come to believe that indeed our very sexuality condemns us to enslavement. An enslavement which is subsequently manifested in self-hatred. (*This Bridge* 183)

This internalization is omnipresent: “The pervasiveness of the myth is unfathomable, often permeating and suffusing our very being without conscious awareness” (*This Bridge* 184). The myth, as Alarcón articulates it, contains the following sexual possibilities:

Woman is sexually passive, and hence at all times open to potential use by men whether it by deduction or rape. The possible use is double-edged: That is, the use of her as pawn may be intercultural—“amongst us guys,” or intercultural, which means if we are not using her then “they” must be using her. Since woman is seen as highly pawnable, nothing she does is perceived as a choice. Because Malintzín aided Cortes in the Conquest of the New World, she is seen

as concretizing woman's sexual weakness and interchangeability, always open to sexual exploitation. Indeed, as long as we continue to be seen in that way we are earmarked to be abusable matter, not just by men of another culture, but all cultures, including the one that breeds us. (*This Bridge* 184).

The result is that "consciously and unconsciously the Mexican/Chicano patriarchal perspective assigns the role of servitude to woman particularly as heterosexual relationships are conceived today and in the past" and any woman who questions the "servitude/devotion/love" complex is seen as refusing her "obligation" and duty, and is therefore a traitor (Alarcón 186).

II. THE MARK OF THE BEAST

Malinche's supposed rejection of the indigenous in favor of the foreigner is named malinchismo, and this has become a term used even today to condemn the actions of any Mexican who rejects the homeland and its people by crossing the border literally or figuratively to the other side; for example, in the 1960s and 70s, Chicanas who married Anglo-European men, embraced feminism, or pursued higher education were called "malinches" for adopting Eurocentric ideas (Blake 41).

Malinche has also become synonymous with *la Chingada*—the fucked one—which has become an integral part of Chicana identity: "She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a day from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with

contempt" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 44). Malinche, or la chingada, then, is the historical memory that becomes culturally inscribed on the Chicana body. It is because of the cultural attitudes about Malinche that causes the Chicana to internalize a hatred for the Indian in themselves, something Anzaldúa sees as a betrayal: "The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, *indias y mestizas*, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her" (*Borderlands* 44). And it is patriarchal male culture that enforces and reinforces this attitude: "Male culture has done a good job on us. *Son las costumbres que traicionan. La india en mí es la sombra: La Chingada, Tlatzoletotl, Coatlicue. Son ellas que oyemos lamentando a sus hijas perdidas*" (These are the customs that betray. The India in me is the shadow: The Chingada, Tlatzoletotl, Coatlicue. It is they who listen to me lamenting their lost daughters) (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 44; my translation). This attitude becomes a physical inscription of the mestiza's crisis of identity, along with the domineering attitude of disloyalty from her own people:

Not me sold out my people but they me. Because of the color of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people (and in Mesoamerica her lot

under the Indian patriarchs was not free of wounding). (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 44)

The result then is that the Chicana is “alienated from her mother culture.” And because she is “alien” in the dominant culture, “the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 42). In “La Macha,” Ana Castillo reinforces this idea when she explains the fact that a young woman who is in all likelihood unable to assimilate into the dominant society because of skin color, poverty, and/or sexuality is apt to identify as peculiar, alien: “a young woman who is poor and/or dark skinned and who must depend on her own resources to deal with the horrendous rejection by society, usually identifies strongly with her difference. This sense of being different is not always felt as positive” (*Massacre* 137).

Suzanne Bost, in *Encarnación: Illness and Body Politics in Chicana Feminist Literature* analyzes the way in which Norma Alarcón discusses “the mark of the Beast” in “Chicana Feminism: In the Tracks of ‘The’ Native Woman.” Alarcón writes:

The most relevant point in the present is to understand how a pivotal indigenous portion of the *mestiza* past may represent a collective female experience as well as “the mark of the Beast” within us—the maligned and abused indigenous woman (Anzaldúa 1987). By invoking the “dark Beast” within and without, which many have forced us to deny, the cultural and psychic dismemberment that is

linked to imperialist racist and sexist practices are [*sic*] brought into focus. (Alarcón, “Chicana Feminism” 375)

Bost rightly focuses on Alarcón’s use of “dismemberment” to describe “something as intangible as a female feeling through ‘very material language’” which “brings to focus the way in which the ‘Indian in us’ is something that is collectively female and physically felt” (46). As Bost claims, “there is a suggestion that history is trauma for women of Mexican descent” (46). The fact that this dismemberment is both physical and “psychic” is reflective of what Frantz Fanon refers to as “epidermalization” in *Black Skin, White Masks*—the inscription of race on the skin. In the Introduction, Fanon states that his project examines the psychology of the inferiority complex caused by the “disalienation of the black man” through a “brutal awareness” of the social and economic realities he faces. He states that this inferiority complex is attributed to a “double process”: “First, economic. *Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority*” (xiv-xv; emphasis mine).

This epidermalization is very much inscribed on the Chicana body; because Malinche sets the standard for devious, unacceptable behavior, the Chicana is inscribed with the expectation of just how she should behave. Anzaldúa describes this epidermalization of the Chicana in the Introduction to *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras*:

“Face” is the surface of the body that is the most noticeably inscribed by social structures, marked with instructions on how to be *mujer*, *macho*, working class, Chicana. As mestiza—biologically and/or

culturally mixed—we have different surfaces for each aspect of identity, each inscribed by a particular subculture. We are “written” all over, or should I say, carved and tattooed with the sharp needles of experience. (xv)

What is “written” on the Chicana body, then, is the perpetuation of the negative conception of Malinche, and woman, as traitor and whore, reinforced and contained by her skin. In addition, “when our *caras* do not live up to the ‘image’ that the family or community wants us to wear and when we rebel against the engraving of our bodies, we experience ostracism, alienation, isolation, and shame” (xv), so Chicanas feel obligated to wear masks in order to pass. These are “steeped with self-hatred and other internalized oppressions,” which have detrimental effects:

We who are oppressed by Racism internalize its deadly pollen along with the air we breathe. Make no mistake about it, the fruits of this weed are dysfunctional lifestyles which mutilate our physical bodies, stunt our intellects, and make emotional wrecks of us. Racism sucks out the lifeblood from our bodies, our souls. (xix)

III. DARK SKIN AND THE MOTHER’S SIN

In Anzaldúa’s essay “La Prieta,” she reveals the condemnation of the Indian in her, as well as the epidermalization she experienced. She describes how her darkness set her apart from the rest of her part German family. “When I was born, Mamagrande Locha inspected my buttocks looking for the dark blotch, the sign of

indio, or words, of mulatto blood” and notes that it was “too bad” that she was “morena, *muy prieta*, so dark and different from her own fair-skinned children”; it was “too bad” that she “was dark like an Indian” (Keating, *Reader* 38). In her mother and grandmother’s eyes, to look Indian was worth alienation. As a child, she was told not to go out in the sun because, according to her mother, “If you get any darker, they’ll mistake you for an Indian” (38); she was also told to keep her clothes clean so as not to be seen as a “dirty Mexican” (38). Her dark skin is directly tied to her mother’s sexual digressions, as well: as the child of a premarital sexual liaison, Anzaldúa was marked “con la seña,” her Indianness representative of her mother’s, and Malinche’s, sin. She notes that at three months, she was already menstruating. The doctor’s reaction to this was to tell her mother that “She’s a throwback to the Eskimo . . . Eskimo girl children get their periods early” (Keating, *Reader* 39). Her mother, horrified by the direct link her child had to the Eskimo (read Indian), did everything to hide “the deep dark secret between us”—“her punishment for having fucked before the wedding ceremony, my punishment for being born” (39). Anzaldúa’s claim that her dark skin reflected her mother’s sin is linked directly to Malinche/Malintzín and the prevalent negative attitudes towards Mexican Women. As Cherríe Moraga, in “A Long Line of Vendidas,” notes, the “‘bastardization’ of the indigenous people of México” is blamed on Malintzín:

Malintzín, also called Malinche, fucked the white man who conquered the Indian peoples of México and nearly obliterated their cultures. Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race,

and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this historical/sexual 'transgression' . . . There is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under Malinche's name, even if she never hears directly of the one-time Aztec princess. (*Loving* 92)

For Anzaldúa, the negative attention paid to her skin color manifested in an early sense of alienation. From a young age, Anzaldúa saw herself as "strange," "abnormal," "QUEER" (Keating, *Reader* 40). Even her tomboyishness (and eventually lesbianism) was equated to her darkness; her mother would call her "Machona-india ladina" (masculine-wild Indian; translation hers) because she did not act the way a young Chicana girl should act—eschewing traditional women's roles, wearing boots, etc. (Anzaldúa qtd. in Keating, *Reader* 41). Ultimately, these things instilled in Anzaldúa a belief that "white is better than brown"—something she notes that many people of color "will never unlearn" (Keating, *Reader* 43).

IV. MORE WHITE THAN BROWN, AND STILL OPPRESSED

In "La Güera," Cherríe Moraga compares her own life with that of her mother and concludes, like Anzaldúa, that the attention paid to the color of her skin—in this case, more white than brown—also caused her to internalize a sense of alienation that lies not just on, but under, the skin, because "In a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it" (*This Bridge* 33). What shocks her most is the realization that this internalization does not just come from outside forces, but also from within: "[at] the age of twenty-seven, it is

frightening to acknowledge that I have internalized a racism and classism, where the object of oppression is not only someone outside of my skin, but the someone inside my skin. In fact, to a large degree, the real battle with such oppression, for all of us, begins under the skin" (*This Bridge* 30).

For Moraga, the comparison she makes between her mother and herself makes this clear. Her mother was pulled out of school to work in the fields and by the age of fourteen was the main support for her family. While her mother was "largely illiterate," Moraga, in contrast, took college-prep classes in school and was educated so that she would have an easier life: "I was educated, and wore it with a keen sense of pride and satisfaction, my head propped up with the knowledge, from my mother, that my life would be easier than hers" (*This Bridge* 28). But Moraga notes that it was not just her education that would spare her the life of labor that her mother had, but her education paired with the fact that she is light-skinned. She writes, "I was educated; but more than this, I was 'la güera': fair-skinned. Born with the features of my Chicana mother, but the skin of my Anglo father, I had it made" (*This Bridge* 28). Reflecting back on her upbringing, Moraga realizes that her lightness and her Anglicization were very much encouraged by her mother. "No one ever quite told me this (that light was right), but I knew that being light was something valued in my family (who were all Chicano, with the exception of my father). In fact, everything about my upbringing (at least what occurred on a conscious level) attempted to bleach me of what color I did have" (*This Bridge* 28). She was not taught Spanish at home despite the fact that her mother was fluent, and

even though her mother and her family had been poor and farm workers, her mother referred to “other lower-income Mexicans” as “braceros,” indicating that she and her family were from a “different class of people” when, in reality, they were not (*This Bridge* 28). The reason for this came down to the simple fact that to Moraga’s mother, “on a basic economic level, being Chicana meant being ‘less’” (*This Bridge* 28). Her own internalization of the racism she faced caused her to want something different for her children: “It was through my mother’s desire to protect her children from poverty and illiteracy that we became ‘anglicized’; the more effectively we could pass in the white world, the better guaranteed our future” (*This Bridge* 28). From this, Moraga internalized a disparity between what she “was born into” and who she would “grow up to become” (*This Bridge* 28). She cites Emma Goldman:

It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our response to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own. (qtd. in Moraga, *This Bridge* 27)

Moraga understands that her mother’s life is a part of her, “because, (as Goldman suggests) these stories my mother told me crept under my ‘güera’ skin” (*This Bridge* 28). She had no choice but to enter her mother’s life.

The oppression that Moraga faced became truly apparent to her and sealed her connection to her mother when she recognized her lesbianism: “It wasn’t until I

acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism in the flesh, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression—due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana—was realized" (*This Bridge* 28). Because her lesbianism alienated her further, "What I am saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. . . . In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor" (*This Bridge* 29). Moraga realizes that she had always felt different, but it wasn't until she "put the words 'class' and 'color' to the experience" did this feeling of difference make sense.

V. NEITHER MEXICAN NOR AMERICAN

Ana Castillo, in *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*, also expresses the way in which her body, her skin, limit her and other Chicanas, as well as how the racism experienced has been internalized. For Castillo, this is tied to her inability to be truly Mexican or U.S American:

As a mestiza born to the lower strata, I am treated at best, as a second-class citizen, at worst, as a non-entity. I am commonly perceived as a foreigner everywhere I go, including in the United States and in Mexico. I am neither black nor white. I am not light skinned and cannot be mistaken for "white"; because my hair is so straight I cannot be mistaken for "black." And by U.S. standards and according to some

North American Native Americans, I cannot make official claims to being india. (*Dreamers* 21)

Because she is a “foreigner” and neither white, black, nor India, she is unable to truly identify with any of these groups. Castillo notes that most Chicanas born in the United States or brought to the U.S. during childhood have no “intellectual” or “emotional link” to Mexico, leaving them invisible, hoping to be accepted, and praying they will be awarded the benefits of acculturation. This invisibility and the hopes that come as a result of having no connection to the homeland, also results in the internalized racism articulated by Anzaldúa and Moraga:

Looking different, that is, not being white nor black but something in between in a society that has historically acknowledged only a black/white racial schism is cause for great anxiety. Our *internalized racism* causes us to boast of our light coloring, if indeed we have it, or imagine it. We hope for light-skinned children and brag to no end of those infants who happen to be born güeros, white looking; we are downright ecstatic if they have light colored eyes and hair. We sometimes tragically reject those children who are dark. (*Dreamers* 38; emphasis mine)

The inability to stake a claim in either the United States or Mexico and the internalized racism that occurs often results in the temptation by Chicanas to assimilate to the dominant culture (Castillo, *Dreamers* 26).

VI. RECLAIMING THE CHICANA BODY

Because the cultural and historical inscription of Malinche has had such long-lasting and deeply negative effects, many Chicana authors are looking for ways to reclaim the Chicana body and sexuality in order to heal this wound. As Chela Sandoval wrote: “We had each tasted the shards of ‘difference’ until they had carved up our insides; now we were asking ourselves what shapes our healing would take” (qtd. in Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xxvii). In the Introduction to the section “Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Moraga and Anzaldúa argue for “a theory in the flesh” to capitulate this healing:

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. . . We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh and blood experiences to concretize a vision that can begin to heal our ‘wounded knee’ (Chrystos)” (*This Bridge*, 23).

This is reinforced in *Borderlands*, where Anzaldúa demands a rebellion from the split caused by white imperialism and calls for a rebellion that is enacted in the flesh. In “*Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan*,” she writes that rebellious movements are in the Mexican’s blood, and that they overflow her veins; this rebellion exists in her flesh: “*Esos movimientos de rebeldía que tenemos en las sangre nosotros los mexicanos surgen como ríos desbocanados en mis venas...en mi*

está las rebeldía encimada de mi carne “ (“Those rebellious movements that we have in our Mexican blood surge like rivers overflowing in my veins...rebellion exists in me on the surface” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 37; translation by Sonia Saldívar-Hull 4). This rebellion is not just on the surface, however, as *mi carne* also translates as “my meat” or “my skin/flesh.” Anzaldúa’s rebellion requires “an accounting with all woman “has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century . . . For 300 years she was invisible, she was not heard” (*Borderlands* 44-5). Anzaldúa argues that she must “fight for her own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world—a perspective, and homeground where she can plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample *mestiza* heart” (*Borderlands* 45). By writing in order to account for all three cultures, the dark-skinned woman is no longer invisible, and a new bodily space in which one can inhabit is formed. A new geographical space becomes possible, as well. Once the rebellion takes shape in the world, a new geographical space is forged: “[If] going home is denied me then I will have to stand a claim my space, making a new culture—*una cultura mestiza*” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 44).

Moraga also argues for a rebellion in the flesh in much the same way. She notes that “Chicanos are an occupied nation within a nation, and women and women’s sexuality are occupied within Chicano nation,” yet the conquering of the female body is a territory to also be redeemed: “If women’s bodies and those of men and women who transgress their gender roles have been historically regarded as

territories to be conquered, they are also territories to be liberated” (Moraga, *Generation* 150). This liberation comes through acceptance and the move towards self-love, a re-visioning of how each Chicana sees and psychologically perceives her body and her sexuality. Castillo writes, “Acceptance of our bodies is an important first step toward self-love . . . Regardless of what society tells us about our bodies, we must remember that how we personally feel about ourselves and how we take care of ourselves is the ultimate determinant as to who we are” (Castillo, *Dreamers* 194).

But as Moraga notes, “it is historically evident that the female body, like the Chicano people, has been colonized. And any movement to decolonize them must be culturally and sexually specific” (*Generation* 149). This, of course, requires a re-visioning of Malinche. Emma Pérez maintains that Chicanas can claim their agency through Malinche by reinscribing her as a feminist icon; to do so, as many Chicana feminists have, “is to identify her as an agent of her own desires” (Pérez 103). Therefore, “Malinche is not the phallic, devouring mother, but a woman who was in charge of her own destiny as much as she could be, given her historical circumstances” (Pérez 103).

This reinscription is apparent in Chicana literature because of its insistence in bringing out the following sexual political themes:

- 1) To choose among extant patriarchies is not a choice at all; 2) woman’s abandonment and orphanhood and psychic/emotional starvation occur even in the midst of a tangible family; 3) woman is

slave, emotionally as well as economically; 4) women are seen as not just by one patriarchy but by all as rapeable and sexually exploitable; 5) blind devotion is not a feasible human choice . . . ; 6) when there is love/devotion it is at best deeply ambivalent. (Alarcón, “Re-Vision through Malintzín” 187)

Any writing that seeks to expose the realities of the themes presented above is a decolonizing act because it results in agency:

We rip out the stitches, expose the multi-layered “inner faces,” attempting to confront and oust the internalized oppression embedded in them, and remake anew both inner and outer faces. We begin to displace the white and colored male typographer and become ourselves, typographers, printing our own words on the surfaces, the plates, of our bodies. We begin to acquire the agency of making out our own *caras* . . . You are the shaper of your flesh as well as of your soul. (Anzaldúa, *Making Face* xvi).

In writing to “rip out the stitches,” Chicana authors create their own reality in exposing the demands of the dominant culture.

This reinscription of Malinche is evident in the revised and reclaimed sexuality that I explore in Villanueva’s and Martínez’s texts—it is a sexuality full of agency and desire that is not negated by an internalized oppression. However, before I can explore the agency expressed in these literary texts, I must assert that it is not just the reinscribing of Malinche, but of Guadalupe, too, that creates agency for

the Chicana/Mexicana. Malinche has been constructed as Guadalupe's "monstrous double," but it is not only what Malinche signifies that has had resulted in a repressed Chicana sexuality. In the next chapter, I explore the influence of Colonialism on Chicana sexuality through the reconfiguration of Coatlicue into Guadalupe, which split the spirit from the body, and in conjunction with Malinche, created the virgin/whore dichotomy to which all Chicana women are relegated.

Chapter Three

Guadalupe, The Erotic As Power, and Reinscribing Spirit

In the mid 1960s, Guadalupe's image was appropriated by the Chicano/a civil rights movement as a powerful political and cultural emblem of resistance to assimilation and injustice (Blake 105). This aimed at challenging the multi-faceted forms of discrimination affecting the lives of Mexican-Americans in the United States by celebrating the mythical pre-Columbian Aztec heritage as well as the non-Anglo-American aspects of their identity. Religion, in particular the Mexican version of Roman Catholicism, became an important cultural marker that allowed a distancing between these two identities, contrasting the values of Mexican-American and community values with the "barbaric" ways of Anglo-Americans (Messmer 260). However, these reappropriated versions of Guadalupe and other popular versions of Chicana Catholicism "only contributed to Mexican Americans' ethno cultural emancipation for Anglo-American social norms while still reinscribing the inferior status accorded to women within Mexico's traditionally patriarchal society," which reinforced machismo and failed to empower women (Messmer 260). It is on this that I focus on in this chapter, because Guadalupe is still idealized as a role model for women. But she has multiple significations: Guadalupe exists as both a source of identity and inspiration as she did in the Chicano civil rights movement, while the Church, and the culture, still use her image to reinforce the traditional roles of dutiful and subservient wife, mother, daughter, and sister. "Representing a gendered

position, La Virgen de Guadalupe is indeed complex and contradictory. Her symbolic meaning oscillates among characteristics of strength, liberation, collective identity, and passivity, idealized purity, and confinement” (Blake 114).

I. THE CHRISTIAN CONVERSION

In *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery*, Steven T. Newcomb argues that the fifteenth and sixteenth-century popes and monarchies of Christendom appropriated “the Old Testament narrative of the chosen people and the promised land from the geographical context of the Middle East and began carrying it over to the rest of the world” (43). Essentially, they claimed for themselves the divine right to apprehend all “heathen and pagan lands,” those not occupied by peoples recognized as part of Christendom, assuming the same role as the Lord had in relation to the Hebrews—giving them the right to “discover, acquire, conquer, subdue, and possess” (Newcomb 46). These Christian colonizers saw this as a “sacred enterprise” (Newcomb 52) to which conversion to Christianity became central. The Spaniards, then, came to Mexico “with a grant in their hands given by the supreme disposer of earthly possessions [the Pope], by which the whole continent of America was made subject to their domain” demanding that the indigenous peoples they found there “renounce their errors and the religion of their ancestors, and to embrace the only one true faith, or to yield up themselves and their country to the government of the newcomers” (*Cornet v. Winton*, qtd. in Newcomb 78). This was not, of course, achieved peaceably, but

through force, and the end result was disastrous to the indigenous peoples already inhabiting the Americas:

The “Spanish-American” Conquest was secured through rape, intermarriage, the African slave trade, and the spread of Catholicism and disease. It gave birth to a third “mestizo” race that included Indian, African, and European blood. During colonial times, “Spanish-America” marinated a rigid and elaborate caste system that privileged the pure-blood Spaniard and his children over the mestizo. The pure blood indio and africano remained on the bottom rungs of society. The remnants of such class/race stratification are still evident throughout Latin America. (Moraga, *Generation* 153)

Ultimately, then, within the context of the divine right to discovery, “the Spaniards, in Mexico, did not commit genocide; they committed culturecide” (Fehrenbach qtd. in Castillo, *Dreamers* 29).

While the overall effects of Christian colonization were dramatic and far-reaching, it was through the forced conversion, which required a complete refutation of previously established belief systems and the appropriation of native deities, in particular through the establishment of the supremacy of La Virgen de Guadalupe as the “good mother,” that colonization was secured. This notion predates Conquest. Manipulated and tamed over the centuries not only by the Spanish conquerors but also by the Aztec patriarchy, “La Virgen de Guadalupe” is in fact the direct descendent of a lineage of powerful Aztec female deities who

possessed, what Anzaldúa calls the “Shadow-beast”—what “emerges as the part of women that frightens men and causes them to try to control and devalue female culture” (*Borderlands* 54). The “Shadow-beast” in these female deities led patriarchal Aztec-Mexica culture to disempower them and confine them to a passive role by confining them to their “monstrous” characteristics and replaced them with male deities. Thus,

They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects. Coatlicue, the Serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, Tlazolteotl and Cihuacoatl, were “darkened” and disempowered . . . Tonantsi—split from her dark guises, Coatlicue, Tlazolteotl, and Cihuacoatl—became the good mother. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 49)

Anzaldúa makes a distinct connection between La Virgin de Guadalupe’s Indian name, Coatlalopeuh, who was descended from Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses—the earliest of which is Coatlicue, or “the one with the skirt of serpents” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 49). Coatlicue, creator goddess, was driven underground with other powerful female deities by the Azteca-Mexica culture. This male-dominated culture did so by giving these female deities monstrous attributes and replacing them with male deities. The Serpent goddess became linked only to her more sinister aspects.

After the Conquest, the Spaniards and their Church continued to split Tonantsi/Guadalupe. In 1531, *Guadalupe* appeared to the poor Indian, Juan Diego, in

the same spot where the Nahuas temple to *Tonantsi* had stood, where they had worshipped her, and told him that her name was *María Coatlalopeuh* (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 50-51). Anzaldúa states that *Coatl* is the Nahuatl word for serpent and that *Lopeuh* means “the one who has dominion over serpents” (*Borderlands* 51). While she interprets this as “the one who is at one with the beasts” (*Borderlands* 51), she notes the different interpretations of *Coatlalopeuh*; since some spell her name *Coatlaxopeuh* (*xopeuh* meaning “crushed or stepped on with disdain”), it has also been said to mean “she who crushed the serpent” (*Borderlands* 51). The significance of this interpretation is that if the serpent is the symbol of indigenous religion, it is the indigenous religions that are “crushed”; therefore, *Guadalupe*’s religion is to take the place of the Aztec religion. Because the names of “Coatlalopeuh,” the fertility and Earth goddess, and “Guadalupe,” the Spanish virgin, are homophones, the figures of these two virgins merged. The Roman Catholic Church, then, turned the Indian deity *Coatlalopeuh*, infused with spirit and sexuality, into the desexed, chaste la Virgen Guadalupe, taking the serpent/sexuality, out of *Coatlalopeuh*, forcing her to lose her underworld characteristics (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 51). And because the Church “darkened and disempowered” those parts of *Coatllicue* they deemed threatening, *Tlazolteotl/Coatllicue/la Chingada* became *putas*, beasts, and all Indian deities and religious practices became “the work of the devil” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 50).

According to legend, Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, a Christianized Catholic Indian, near Tepeyac (an area just outside of present-day Mexico City).

Because she appeared in an area that was assumed to have been sacred to the Nahuatl goddess Tonantzín, this has been regarded as a symbolic merger between Spanish Catholicism and the pre-Columbian indigenous religious cult. Based on this legend, the Virgin was initially conceived of as an essentially indigenous phenomenon that was then gradually appropriated by the Spanish. In this way, Guadalupe became a Mexican version of the so-called Dark Mother or Black Madonna (La Morenita), a dark-skinned mestiza Mary, a syncretic blend between the Catholic Virgin Mary and Tonantzín who empowered the mestizo people of Mexico and Latin America because in the figures of La morenita and Juan Diego, God becomes identified with those peoples, cultures, and races who have been marginalized and rejected (Messmer 264-65). The power of the indigenous deities that was once revered was now dismissed by a religion that wanted to possess its former believers; in appearing to Juan Diego, *Guadalupe* was made more appealing to other Indians, and the Roman Catholic Church used this fact to placate them and make Catholicism more attractive. In addition, she is cast as La Virgen morena, the brown virgin, likening her to and appealing to indigenous and mestizo/a peoples (Blake 102).

By 1660, the Roman Catholic Church named Guadalupe Mother of God, synonymous with la Virgen María; today, “in Texas and Mexico she is more venerated than Jesus or God the Father” (*Borderlands* 51). As Ana Castillo notes, due to the “severe attack on the sophisticated indigenous cultures of México and the annihilation of their beliefs, pre-Conquest history is probably deemed irrelevant to

our daily lives by most of us. Save for scholars, most of our people can recite the Apostles' Creed but would be hard pressed to identify the Mexica (Aztec) sun god, Huitzilopochtli, or the earth goddess and mother of Huitzilopochtli, Coatlicue" (*Dreamers* 63). Castillo's observation reinforces the proliferation of Catholicism in Mexico and the Borderlands, as well as the dismissal of pre-Conquest belief systems. Orthodox Mexican-American Catholicism thus reduced Guadalupe to a dark-skinned, culturally hybrid yet disempowered and desexualized Virgin-Mary figure with an emphasis on her faith, self-abnegation, obedience passivity, purity, and dignity.

II. GUADALUPE AND REPRESSED SEXUALITY

Because of the narrative of the Immaculate Conception, which emphasizes purity, women's lives are largely regulated by Church teachings that advocate for sex solely for reproduction and cast all other versions of sex and sexuality as sinful:

More profanely, that means conception without copulation, implying that sex is a debased mortal activity with its attendant bodily expulsions—heat, sweat, blood, vaginal fluid, semen—that entail from physical contact between man and woman. Removed from the corporeal, the unruly, the irrational, La Virgen exists as a phantasm, without substance or materiality. Disembodied. She is denied sexuality, physicality, and therefore is disassociated from the material consequences of being virgin or not-virgin. (Blake 116)

In her study “Cultural and Historical Influences on Sexuality in Hispanic/Latin Women: Implications for Psychotherapy,” Oliva Espín found that “the honor of Latin families is strongly tied to the sexual purity of women. And the concept of honor and dignity is one of the essential distinctive marks of Hispanic culture” (qtd. in Blake 115). This notion is related to social class: the upper classes tend to be more rigid about sexuality because of patrimony and rights to property inheritance, but non-property families are left with nothing more than the “honor of its women”; therefore, this honor is guarded closely by both males and females (Espín qtd. in Blake 115). Espín also found that when families immigrate to the United States, attitudes toward female sexuality become more rigid because of the myth that “all American women are very free with sex” and the fear that daughters will adopt these liberal habits and become too “Americanized” (qtd. in Blake 115).

Because the Catholic Church emphasized the desexualization of Coatlicueh in making Guadalupe synonymous with the Virgen Mary, it was indigenous female sexuality that came under attack. And in order to enforce control over the “barbarians” in the “heathen land,” “The Catholic Church has enforced female sexual repression within our culture with a vengeance” (Castillo, *Dreamers* 128). This embodied colonization is most strongly attached to the female sex because:

The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature’s cycles is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal,

and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 39)

Therefore, sexuality is viewed as an animal impulse that must be curbed. Castillo furthers this notion when she writes, “We as Mexic-Amerindians/mestizas are the dark. We are the evil...or at least, the questionable” (*Massacre* 24). In addition, “the subordination of woman’s sexuality was crucial for the survival of patriarchal religious practices,” and, therefore, female sexuality was seen as nothing more than perverse (Castillo, *Dreamers* 107). And because Christianity is based on the division between good and evil, it depends on the Chicana woman’s desire to disobey. According to Castillo, this manifests itself in the desire to rebel against the “repression of the human spirit and the desire to create a balance out of the celebration of flesh and spirit—to experience a life of ecstasy” (*Dreamers* 102). However, “the word ecstasy itself, if not related to the passion and suffering of Christ, implies sin” (*Dreamers* 102). Furthermore, as the patriarchal influences of the church made woman more and more “undivine” in a place where she had once been revered as creator/goddess, the more the spirit and the body became disengaged, furthering still the notion of woman as perverse:

Throughout history, the further man moved away from his connection with woman as creatrix, the more spirituality was also disconnected from the human body . . . As male dominated societies moved further away from woman as creatrix, the human body and all that pertained to it came to be thought of as profane. (Castillo, *Dreamers* 13)

Much like Anzaldúa analysis of the way in which the suppression of the Chicana is directly tied to the suppression of her sexuality, Audre Lorde, in a paper entitled “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” claims that the erotic has also been suppressed because of the power it can yield:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives . . . On the one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence. (Lorde 53).

Lorde notes that it is only a “short step” from this to the false notion that women gain strength from this suppression in both their “lives and consciousness”—false because it is formed from male models of power (53) and used to keep women in the service of men (54). This creates a “nonrational knowledge” in women, and results in a fear of examining “the possibilities of it within themselves” (Lorde 54):

The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal

and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women. (Lorde 58)

III. THE SEPARATION FROM SPIRIT

In “In the Beginning There Was Eva” from *Massacre of the Dreamers*, Castillo contrasts the cult of Dionysus with Christianity. She states that with the cult of Dionysus, there is a celebration of physical life, whereas in Christianity, there is a deliberate move to separate physicality and spirituality; this results in the immobilization of the human spirit because expressions of ecstasy are made taboo, and because it is counter to the spiritual self (*Dreamers* 115). Christianity sanctions copulation for its perpetuation only. But, as Castillo notes, women do have sexual desires outside of the need to copulate: “[A] woman’s orgasmic ability is not confined to any estrus (the female woman’s ‘heat’ cycle). The human female is receptive to sexual overtures at any time and for reasons other than the purpose or reproduction” (*Dreamers* 115). She concludes, therefore:

To insist that sex only exists for the purpose of reproduction is to go against human evolution. To enforce this regulation through religious doctrine goes against our sensual and psychic affinities with our bodies and life energy; it goes against our spirituality. (Castillo, *Dreamers* 115)

But this doctrine is very much enforced, and as a result of this, woman must choose between saintly mother (as epitomized by the Virgin Mary), and the whore/traitor

represented by Eve, as well as by La Virgen de Guadalupe and Malintzín in Mexicana/Chicana culture. If a woman admitted her sexuality, she was no longer considered “decent” or a “good girl,” simply a “bitch in heat” (Castillo, *Dreamers* 123). Sexuality, along with spiritual beliefs, is “impolite and inappropriate subject[s]” in the public sphere, and reflects what she calls the “hierarchical fragmentation of the self in society” (Castillo, *Dreamers* 136):

All of our conflicts with dominant society, all of the backlashes we suffer when attempting to seek some kind of justice from society, are ultimately traceable to the repression of our sexuality and our spiritual energies as human beings—which are at no time during our breathing existence on Earth apart from the rest of who we are. These are, in fact, who we are: spiritual and sexual beings. (Castillo, *Dreamers* 136)

But, additionally, recognition of the spirit in oneself is also dangerous. Anzaldúa, who was taught in an Anglo school to see the spirit and psychic experience as a Mexican superstition, notes that the influence of the Catholic Church required a complete dismissal of her spirit self:

We’re supposed to ignore, forget, kill those fleeting images of the soul’s presence and of the spirit’s presence. We’ve been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We’re supposed to forget that every cell in our

bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it. (*Borderlands* 58)

The existence of an “other world” is dismissed by as pagan superstition by “white rationality,” not to be seen as reasonable or rational:

Institutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world and stigmatizes it as witchcraft. It has strict taboos against this kind of inner knowledge. It fears what Jung calls the Shadow, the unsavory aspects of ourselves. But even more it fears the supra-human, the god in ourselves. (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 59)

As a result, “native religions are called cults and their beliefs are called mythologies” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 59), further dismissing and delegitimizing indigenous belief systems.

Moreover, because of “white rationalization,” the Chicana is taught “fear and distrust of life and of the body” (only the mind is legitimized), and because a split between the body and the spirit developed, the Chicana is forced to kill off a part of herself: “We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 59). This split contributes to the separation from identity and becomes embodied in the flesh because the denial of the spirit self demands a denial of the sexualized body. Women, then, are at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy, just one rung above the deviants (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 40), and as a result, she feels unsafe: “Woman does not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey”

(Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 42). Only conformity to the traditional roles imposed by the dominant culture offer any safety. The damaged “rebel” woman—the lesbian, the whore—however, is further ostracized because she not only defies her mother culture, but the dominant culture, and, according to Anzaldúa, “the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self” (*Borderlands* 42), petrified and paralyzed. But, as Anzaldúa notes, “the body is smart” and the spirit world does exist (*Borderlands* 60).

Castillo also notes that spirituality is a large part of the mestiza’s identity—most often in the form of Catholicism because it is what she has been taught and what has also been sanctioned by society. However, “this undercurrent of spirituality—which has been with woman since pre-Conquest times and which precedes Christianity in Europe—is the unspoken key to her strength and endurance as a female throughout all the ages” (Castillo, *Dreamers* 95). She continues by stating that instead of giving up her Christian faith, giving the Virgen de Guadalupe more importance than God the Father is the source to a “woman’s liberation theology”:

The Virgen de Guadalupe, again, while being relegated by the Church to a secondary roles as the mother of Christ, is regarded by Xicanistas as spiritual mother and the successor of the Nahua goddess, Tonantzín. Therefore, the Xicanista combines the traditional view of the Christian god with goddess worship to give her a source of inner strength. (*Dreamers* 101)

IV. INDIGENOUS CATHOLOICISM AND THE RECLAMATION OF SPIRIT

Yolanda Broyels-González, in “Indianizing Catholicism: Chicana/India/Mexicana Indigenous Spiritual Practices in Our Image,” examines the ways in which indigenous Mexicana religious practices have been used as a means to transform and invert the colonial Catholicism that was imposed into a source of self-empowerment:

Through the agency and subjectivity of our elders, indigenous Mexican American communities have forged and transmitted the tools and strategies of a faithful resistance to a systematic and widespread colonial and “post”-colonial dehumanization. In the give and take of struggle, *Mexicanas* and Chicanas have learned to fashion faith and religion in our own image: the image of our gender, our “race”/ethnicity, our class affiliations, and the particulars of the local habitat and regional history. (118)

Prior to this practice (and, she argues, up until the Freedom of Religion Act in 1978), indigenous religions were “outlawed” (Broyels-González 121). As a result, “to be indigenous is to be displaced, hunted, sold, relocated, fleeing, or hiding behind ‘Mexicanness’ or, nowadays, ‘Hispanic’” (Broyels-González 121). Sometimes different alternative practices were fully integrated with those of the church, and sometimes they evolved into a syncretic blend, which make it easy for Chicanas to specifically emphasize or create non-orthodox practices and reinterpret mainstream

Catholic doctrines and symbols in innovative ways. One of the central results of such reinterpretations was the deconstruction of established hierarchies and binaries, including those of male versus female, body versus soul, sexuality versus spirituality, and even Anglo-American versus Latina (Messmer 261).

Broyels-González argues that the survival of the Mexicana indigenismo required the adoption of either the Mexican or U.S. Christian denominations. However, “figures such as Jesus, Mary, and Joseph experienced a radical transformation, marginalization, and inversion/subversion incompatible with Roman Catholic orthodoxy” (121). She then notes that the pervasive reverence of Guadalupe became the foundation for the “Indianization of Roman Catholicism” because this brought together Catholic dogma and Guadalupe’s various manifestations: as earth mother, Coatlicue, Tonantzín, Quilaxtli, and what she calls “feminine energy” (123). Castillo furthers this notion when she writes:

But only by calling forth the Virgen de Guadalupe/Tonantzín – the feminine principle within ourselves – do we truly receive courage. It comes from her unconditional compassion and acceptance, not from our fear of inadequacy. And as we receive from, so denigrated and rendered powerless by the Church, state, and men’s movements—except to serve their cause—we first give to ourselves, those around us, and to the world. It is a natural law and knows no doctrine.

(Castillo, *Dreamers* 88)

In the same way that European goddesses were resurrected as an affirmation of womanhood, the mestiza calls upon her own indigenous goddesses:

Guadalupe/Tonantzín, and Coatlicue; not only does this allow for self-empowerment, but it is also a necessary step towards self-healing (Castillo, *Dreamers* 152).

In Anzaldúa's feminist project, spirituality is the cornerstone of self-transformation and gives rise to the shaping of a "feminine" mythology based on the reappropriation of Aztec female icons. These female deities guide the mestiza in her journey of self-transformation. "La Virgen de Guadalupe" is central to Chicana mythology. In *"Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan,"* Anzaldúa notes the fact that she had to leave home so that she "could find herself" under the "personality that had been imposed on [her]" (*Borderlands* 38). She left knowing that she was different, that her culture disapproved her because something was "wrong" with her because she refused to conform to traditional gender roles; her own testimonio reinforces the idea that power stems from a rejection of traditional roles, as well as the idea that something is intrinsically "wrong" because she does not do so. Complicating this is the fact that these roles are defined by men and the patriarchal system that dominates her culture, and the compliance of the women who are forced into these roles: "Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 38). And if a woman rebels from the

Church's and the culture's insistence that women be subservient to males, the consequences are immediate and detrimental; a woman who defies these demands is a "*mujer mala*," selfish. Only the woman who remains a virgin until marriage is considered a "good" woman (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 39). Without a husband and children, a Chicana woman is considered a failure.

V. THE EROTIC AS POWER

Anzaldúa asserts the need to resist these male models of power and the suppression of the erotic to create a new way for the Chicana to perceive reality, a new way to see herself; in order to do this, she must "break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (*Borderlands* 102) in order to achieve healing. She asserts the need to create a new way for the Chicana to perceive reality, a new way to see herself, along with a change in behavior: "*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness" whose work "is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (*Borderlands* 102) and attain healing. This becomes a bodily action: "In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures" (*Borderlands* 103). In order to do this, she must make:

a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the dark-

skinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familial. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transfer the small “I” into the total Self. *Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tiene de sí misma, así sera.* [She becomes the molder of her soul. According to the conception she has of herself, so she will be.] (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 105; translation mine)

Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic as power contributes to this revolution. In 1978, Audre Lorde delivered a paper entitled “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women. Much like Anzaldúa’s analysis of the way in which the suppression of the Chicana is directly tied to the suppression of her sexuality, Lorde claims that the erotic has also been suppressed because of the power it can yield:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information in our lives [...] We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society. On the

one hand, the superficially erotic has been encouraged as a sign of female inferiority; on the other hand, women have been made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence. (Lorde 53).

Lorde notes that it is only a “short step” from this to the false notion that women gain strength from this suppression in both their “lives and consciousness”—false because it is formed from male models of power (53) and used to keep women in the service of men (54). This creates a “nonrational knowledge” in women, and results in a fear of examining “the possibilities of it within themselves” (Lorde 54):

The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women. (Lorde 58)

Because the erotic is “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,” it is a source of power in the face of oppression (Lorde 53). She sees the erotic as “replenishing and provocative force to the woman who doesn’t fear its revelation,” and adds that this is only possible when women do not surrender to the belief that the erotic is limited to sensation (Lorde 54), thus warning against the conflation of the erotic and the pornographic; the result of this conflation is the

separation of the spiritual (emotional and psychic) from the political. For Lorde, because the erotic has been misnamed by men and used against women, it is confused with the pornographic – what she states is the “opposite” of the erotic, and which is a purposeful denial of the power that can be gained from it. It is denied and relegated to the pornographic because the potential of its power is feared:

For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. (Lorde 57)

Importantly, Lorde sees the spiritual and political as inherently linked: “For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—the sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in it’s deepest meanings” (56). Anzaldúa also discussed this connection in an interview with Linda Smuckler entitled “Spirituality, Sexuality, and the Body.” She states:

One reason I kept the spirituality down is because it was connected to the sexual, to the physical: I had the body that was a freak; I went into

puberty and started bleeding when I was three months old; I had tremendous hot flashes; my breasts started growing when I was six. I was totally alien . . . I started shutting down where the pain was, in my body, and became nothing but reason, head, mind. When I started opening up to the body, the spiritual thing came out too because it was really connected with the body and sexuality. (Keating, *Reader* 84)

She goes on to say that one of the experiences that helped her become more open to accepting her body was “fucking for the first time” (Keating, *Reader* 84). But just as Lorde asserts, it is more than just the pornographic, more than simply “fucking” that allows for this acceptance:

I feel I’m connected to something greater than myself like during orgasm . . . In this union with the other person I lose my boundaries, my sense of self. Even if it’s just for a second, there’s a connection between my body and this other’s body, to her soul or spirit. At the moment of connection there is no differentiation. And I feel that with spirituality. (Keating, *Reader* 85)

VI. RECLAIMING GUADALUPE

Sandra Cisneros’ essay, “Guadalupe the Sex Goddess,” reclaims Guadalupe by seeing her as giving access to the erotic as power. It reflects the original shame she internalized, but ends with a revisionist reading of Guadalupe and what she stands

for now. Cisneros begins the essay with a description of how shocked she was upon seeing how shameless the white girls were in her high school locker room, “nude as pearls, as unashamed of their brilliant bodies as the Nike of Samothrace” and quite obviously “comfortable in their skin” (“Guadalupe” 46). This is in stark contrast to her own experience, of course: “You could always tell us Latinas. We hid when we undressed, modestly facing a wall, or, in my case, dressing in a bathroom stall” (Cisneros, “Guadalupe” 46). She describes herself as being ignorant about her body because of her culture’s relationship with religion. She writes, “Religion and our culture, our culture and religion, helped to create that blur, a vagueness about what went on ‘down there’”—a part of her body that caused her so much shame that she didn’t know that her “down there” was called the vagina until adulthood (Cisneros, “Guadalupe” 46). The ignorance and profaneness of her body contributed to her shame and her denial of her sexuality: “How could I acknowledge my sexuality, let alone enjoy sex, with so much guilt? In the guise of modesty my culture locked me in a double chastity belt of ignorance and *vergüenza*, shame” (Cisneros, “Guadalupe” 46). Because of this, she never explored her body as a child, and was even too embarrassed and afraid to seek out a gynecologist even though she was more afraid of becoming pregnant. This fear and shame entered into her relationships with men, as well – unable to admit that she wasn’t on anything with a new lover, afraid that he would laugh at her, that she would sound stupid, and afraid to ask him to take responsibility. After realizing her need to shout, “*Stop, this is dangerous to my*

brilliant career!" she finally made an appointment with the family-planning center (Cisneros, "Guadalupe" 47).

In the essay, Cisneros claims that she is telling her story of shame because she is "overwhelmed by the silence regarding Latinas and our bodies" ("Guadalupe" 48). She could not help but think of the number of young Chicanas who had become pregnant as teens, or who were having sex while still children, without sexual protection, and who were "too ashamed to confide their feeling and fears to anyone" ("Guadalupe" 48). Eventually, her silence turned to anger, and her anger was directed at the Virgen de Guadalupe and the double-standard for men in her culture:

What a culture of denial. Don't get pregnant! But no one tells you how not to. This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, my culture's role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable. Did boys have to aspire to be Jesus? I never saw any evidence of it. They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us women toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood. The other alternative was *putahood*. (Cisneros, "Guadalupe" 48)

She concluded that *la Lupe* was "nothing but a goody two shoes meant to doom me to a life of unhappiness" (Cisneros, "Guadalupe" 48).

When she discovered the power of sex—a power that she likens to discovering writing—her attitude changed. In this context, sex was powerful. She states:

Like writing, you had to go beyond the guilt and shame to get to anything good. Like writing, it could take you to deep and mysterious subterranean levels. With each new depth I found out things about myself I didn't know I knew. And like writing, for a slip of a moment it could be spiritual, the cosmos pivoting on a pin, could empty and fill you all at once like a Ganges, a Piazzolla tango, a tulip bending in the wind. I was no one, I was nothing, and I was everything in the universe little and large—twig, cloud, sky. How had this incredible energy been denied me! (Cisneros, "Guadalupe" 49)

Having had such a powerfully liberating discovery, she saw Guadalupe anew – no longer the “the Lupe” of her childhood or of the Roman Catholic Church but in relation to the pre-Columbian foremothers who had not been desexed. She discovered Tonantzín, mother goddess, Tlazolteotl, goddess of fertility and sex, Tzintéotl, goddess of the “rump” as well as a “pantheon of other mother goddesses” (Cisneros, “Guadalupe” 49). Cisneros also concludes that Guadalupe is also Coatlicue, the goddess who is both creative and destructive (“Guadalupe” 49). Here, she foregrounds Tonantzín’s dual nature in more general terms; as Marietta Messmer points out, “she is not only conceived of as culturally ambivalent but also

unites within herself seemingly contradictory, mutually exclusive but potentially empowering principals" (Messmer 267).

This is further illustrated in Cisneros's short story "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," which includes a collection of letters/prayers to different santos/dieties. The protagonist, Chayo, writes the Virgencita when she believes that she is pregnant. She had previously refused to believe in Guadalupe's power, instead blaming her for the pain of her mother "and her mother and all our mothers' mothers have put up with in the name of God" (Cisneros, "Little Miracles" 127). However, when Chayo learns that she is not "Mary the mild, but our mother Tonantzín" ("Little Miracles" 128), that her "real name is Coatlxopeuh," she could see her finally as a source of empowerment. Chayo reconciles her relationship with Guadalupe when she sees her not as representation of her mother and grandmother's passivity in the face of violence from their husbands, but as a source of strength. "For Chayo then, her reconciliation with the Virgin comes about because she recognizes that beneath the patriarchalization of the Virgen, just softly below the surface, lie Tonantzín and all the powerful Aztec/Nahuatl goddesses that give her life" (Rebolledo 56). "In this way, [...] Guadalupe can be conceived of as both caring and destructive; spiritual and physical; motherly and independent" (Messmer 268). And collectively, for Cisneros, "they are each telescoped one into the other, into who I am" ("Guadalupe" 50). In returning to the past, Castillo found her own Guadalupe, no longer the version that appeared to Juan Diego, but re-visioned:

My *Virgen de Guadalupe* is not the mother of God. She is God. She is a face for a god without a face, an *indígena* for a god without ethnicity, a female deity for a god who is genderless, but I also understand that for her to approach me, for me to finally open the door and accept her, she had to be a woman like me. (“Guadalupe” 50)

She is also “Guadalupe the sex goddess, a goddess who makes me feel good about my sexual power, my sexual energy,” and who makes her comfortable in her skin (“Guadalupe” 49, 50).

In “Entering Into the Serpent,” Anzaldúa combines reclamation of indigenismo with a revision/reclamation of Guadalupe. In it, she recounts a childhood experience in which she is bit by a snake, an experience that initially stirred much fear in her, but ultimately the snake becomes her “animal counterpart” and a source of great strength:

That night I watched the windowsill, watched the moon dry the blood on the tail, dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, *mi tono*, my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune.

(*Borderlands* 48)

She, in dreaming, becomes the snake and assumes its power. The power of the snake, the serpent, is tied to the predecessor of La Virgen de Guadalupe, Coatlicue. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa strives at restoring to “la Virgen de Guadalupe” the

wholeness destroyed by the dualities ingrained in patriarchal culture. Like “la Virgen de Guadalupe,” Coatlicue, Cihuacoatl and Tonantsi were Aztec goddesses and, as such, they were considered manifestations of mother Earth. These serpent-women were goddesses of war and birth; they embodied both divine and underworld powers as well as incarnated the qualities of loving and nurturing motherhood—and also the sexuality and underworld slyness of the serpent and the courage of warriors. Thus, the completeness of these female deities lay in the fact that they synthesized both male and female principles in addition to those of good and evil. Guided by these female deities, the Chicana who seeks transformation through a reclamation of Coatlicue commences her journey of spiritual discovery. In order to be successful, she must confront her fears, demons and nightmares. The serpent goddess protects her and encourages her to confront her “shadow- beast,” and, in this way, strip herself of her old self and identity, which can be compared to a serpent’s skin. In addition, the snake “is a symbol of awakening consciousness—the potential of knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift,” 540).

In her journey, the mestiza must go through “the Coatlicue state” that precedes “Nepantla,” which is the stage previous to the actual birth of a new sense of self and implies a major “spiritual and political crossing through which one arrives at a higher spiritual and political consciousness” (Keating, “Nepantlas and Nepantleras” 7). In *La Herencia de Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State*, Anzaldúa acknowledges the need to gain a “conscious awareness” in order to obtain

knowledge of the self and the ability to move forward (*Borderlands* 70). She describes the process required to gain such knowledge as entering the Coatlicue state; it is a way of making meaning, of “becoming more of who we are” (*Borderlands* 68). A resistance to or refusal of truth results in physical pain (*Borderlands* 70). Knowledge and knowing, making “sense,” however, requires challenging the “old boundaries of the self” while “dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it” to achieve a new level of consciousness and a new life (*Borderlands* 71). She repeats the same mantra-like phrase: “Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent.” The return and reclamation of Coatlicue lends to an acceptance of dualism, of “wrongness,” but on her own terms – not those of the white man:

I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing *la Coatlicue*. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Note the heterosexual white man’s or the colored man’s or the state’s or the culture’s or the religion’s or the parents’—just ours, mine. (*Borderlands* 73)

To truly achieve a new consciousness, Chicanas will have to “leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 101). Anzaldúa calls this process “Entering into the Serpent” and it is a process that took many years because of the pervasiveness of patriarchal Christian

culture that taught her to deny both her spirit and her sexuality. She writes, “Forty years it’s taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul” (*Borderlands* 48). The process of “entering into the Serpent,” then, becomes an acknowledgment of the female body, and the process of assimilating the animal body/soul becomes a means of empowerment. Since the Serpent is “the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life” (*Borderlands* 57), reclaiming the Serpent/symbol leads to sexuality as a source of creativity and erotic power and female empowerment. Confronting the shadow-beast, challenges the “old boundaries of the self” while “dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it” to achieve a new level of consciousness and a new life (*Borderlands* 71). Anzaldúa describes this as an act of putting Coatlicue into the Mother, Guadalupe: “The struggle of the *mestiza* is above all a feminist one . . . The first step is to unlearn the *puta/virgen* dichotomy and to see *Coatlalopeuh-Coatlicue* in the Mother, *Guadalupe*” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 106). This in and of itself is a decolonizing act:

By seeing the serpent as a symbol of the complementary duality of the spirit and flesh, the divine sexual aspect of the desexed mother Tonantzín-Guadalupe, one is potentially liberated from judging women and oneself based on a spirit versus flesh oppositional binary (Lara, “Goddess” 110).

Through the erotic, then, change is possible, and accessing the erotic is an act of sexual decolonization for the Chicana who rebels through the flesh. Through the erotic, she effectively “unlearns” the *puta/virgen* dichotomy and puts the sexuality of *Coatlalopeuh-Coatlicue* back in the Mother, Guadalupe, because it is both a spiritual and political action. Chicana sexuality, according to Cherrie Moraga, is then “both a source of oppression and a means of liberation,” because, as Lorde states, “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (Lorde 58). Therefore, through the erotic as power, Chicanas “do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (Lorde 58). This reclamation is also a tool that can be successfully used against the models of male power which demanded its suppression: “For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society” (Lorde 58). Recognition of the power of the erotic in women’s lives “can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (Lorde 58). Therefore, in reclaiming the sexual/spiritual through the erotic as power, the Chicana creates a new reality where she is no longer powerless, but powerful.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how contemporary Chicana novelists express a reconfigured Chicana identity that embraces an overt, empowered sexuality that resists dominant cultural paradigms. These are texts where the erotic

functions as a decolonizing force, where the sexual is spiritual, and where the convergence of these leads to spiritual activism, “a visionary, experientially-based epistemology and ethics, a way of life, and a call to action” (Keating, “Shifting Perspectives” 242). While this spiritual activism begins at the level of the individual, reflected in the protagonists of each novel, it does not result in self-glorification or egocentrism. Rather, it combines “self-reflection and self-growth with outward-directed, compassionate acts designed to bring about material change” (Keating, “Nepantlas and Nepantleras” 12).

PART TWO: EXPLICATION

CHAPTER FOUR

“HER OWN ENDLESS LONGING”: VILLANUEVA’S *NAKED LADIES*, CONOCIMIENTO,
AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Within the celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors, my work becomes a conscious decision—a longed-for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise empowered.
~Audre Lorde

Leaving the body reinforces the mind/body, matter/spirit dichotomy you’re trying to show does not exist in reality. The last thing you want to uphold is the Cartesian split, but thus far you haven’t a clue how to unknot el nudo de cuerpo/mente/alma despite just having an experience that intellectually unknots it. If el conocimiento that body is both spirit and matter intertwined is the solution, it’s one difficult to live out, requiring that this knowledge be lived daily in embodied ways. Only then may the spirit be healed.

~ Gloria Anzaldúa

In “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of L’écriture Feminine,” Ann Rosalind Jones asserts that French feminists, in particular Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, and Hélène Cixous, agree that women have been “prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves,” and that if they can do this, “they will establish a point of view (a site of *différence*) from which male concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice” (87). This requires writing the truth about women’s bodies and sexual pleasures in order to break taboos, which succeeds in “opening the wound”

that Anzaldúa describes at the opening of *Borderlands*, and breaking through the silences imposed on Chicanas through their bodies and sexuality in order to heal the wound. But because a woman's body has been objectified and romanticized in a way that is acceptable to society, the reality of the female body often is not. Tey Diana Rebolledo points out that Chicanas are taught to be "prudish about their bodies" because of their largely Catholic education, and that sexual repression is so predominant that it was taboo to even talk about underwear, let alone anything remotely related to the body itself (196). Therefore, writing the truth of the body is a liberating act. As Alicia Ostriker has pointed out, "one of the ways we recognize that a woman writer has taken something of a liberating jump is that her muted parts begin to explain themselves" (qtd. in Rebolledo 196). For Chicana writers, then, speaking through the body and the silences associated with it is a liberating act:

For Chicana writers, it has been extraordinarily liberating to write about the body, and many of them are engaged in a battle of sexual politics of naming and representing that female power and that female space of the body. It is a sexual naming that comes from female experience itself, not from an outside objectified experience, and of course, in Chicana writing, it comes from the specificity of Chicana sexual politics, however that may manifest itself. (Rebolledo 196-97)

Alma Luz Villanueva's 1994 novel, *Naked Ladies*, can ultimately be viewed as a novel that breaks through the silences imposed upon the Chicana body through the truths

it exposes. It also reinforces and sees Lorde's definition of the erotic as a source of power put into good use by the women around whom the novel centers. In addition, however, it also builds on the act of writing the body and the erotic as power in order to articulate a spiritual activism that comes as a result of great transformation. I use Anzaldúa's theory of *conocimiento* to explore this, but will return to this later in the chapter.

Villanueva is self-described mestiza of Yacqui, Spanish, and German descent and was raised in San Francisco's Mission District by her curandera grandmother until the age of 11. She has stated that without her grandmother's guidance in her life, there would be "no MEMORY. No poetry. No stories" (Home page). She has an MFA from Vermont College of Norwich University, has published several volumes of poetry as well as many novels, and has taught fiction and poetry at various colleges and universities throughout the United States. She currently teaches in the MFA in Creative Writing program at Antioch University in Los Angeles. Her volume *Poems* won the University of California at Irvine's Third Chicano Literary Prize in 1977; her novel *The Ultraviolet Sky* (1988) won the American Book Award of the Before Columbus Foundation; and her poetry collection *Planet* (1993) was awarded the 1994 Latino Literature Prize. *Naked Ladies*, on which I focus in the following, won the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award. Villanueva's writing explores themes of violence, poverty, imperialism, sexual abuse, racism, gender and sexuality, and the search for wholeness, and is often anthologized. In her writing, she strategizes ways to "counter . . . destructive energies through feminine strength and spirituality"

(Madsen 168). In addition, “her ‘I’ is almost always a ‘we’ as she speaks of women’s common experience, and contributes significantly to the enrichment of a common female literary culture, as well as to the creation of a renewed and transformed society” (Elizabeth Ordóñez qtd. in Madsen 166).

Naked Ladies, Alma Luz Villanueva’s second novel, explores four women’s struggle for identity and survival within the confines of their racially biased and male dominated culture. Alta, the novel’s protagonist, and her friends, Katie, Rita, and Jackie, live in the San Francisco Bay Area. Despite differences in ethnic and class backgrounds, their lives have in common the struggles of child-rearing, homemaking, working, and obtaining an education, aggravated by an array of problems: alcoholism, abuse, infidelity, rape, incest, and cancer. While these women are crucial to Alta’s life, it is ultimately her story and her transformation that is revealed throughout the course of the novel. Alta is a Chicana who has suffered an abusive relationship with her husband, and who seeks her own transformation through self-connection and the discovery of joy in her life. At the beginning of the novel, she is the obedient daughter of the patriarchal system, marrying the father of her children, and serving him as a “good” Chicana wife and mother should. She is pursuing a degree, but she has no autonomy. Her husband, Hugh, is in charge, and she submits to his commands, resulting in her own self-hatred. Alta’s self-loathing serves the interests of patriarchy, but with the strength of her female friends she enters the process of *conocimiento*, which brings her to the erotic as power and a

nurturing a self-love and self-esteem that not only empowers her, but also allows her to empower others through her spiritual activism.

Alta's cultural background plays a significant role in her relationship with Hugh. Her Chicana identity contributes to her oppression as she is hesitant to violate the rigid structures of the family that she learned growing up in a Chicano family; this structure, of course, traditionally places value on the patriarch of the family at the expense of the women in the household, to whom the women are expected to submit and serve, even if it means physical and sexual abuse. Not only was Alta sexually molested as child, the abusive relationship Alta's mother had with her father sets the standard for the lack of choice she feels she has. At the beginning of the novel, Alta feels that she has no choice but to be with Hugh. When she realizes she is pregnant with Hugh's child at just fifteen she knows she is trapped: "*Alta felt caught in something as final, and as real, as death; but this reality she carried, alone, in her body*" (Villanueva 8). Not only is her internalization of her culture's expectation apparent here, the fact that this pain is embodied is also visible.

Her internalized need to submit and serve is reinforced physically by Hugh, who is an ever-present threat to Alta. Villanueva describes his voice as "low but menacing" and his body as "large and muscled," constantly "threatening [Alta] with it sheer masculine presence" (6). After Alta confronts him for disappearing for four days and spending four hundred dollars, Hugh "stood leaning against the stove, but his hands looked poised to fly and connect to her face, her breasts, her belly. He never said, 'Shut up or I'll kick your ass.' He didn't have to – his body, his eyes, the

tone to his words, his refusal to apologize told her, 'Submit or die.' Simple as that" (Villanueva 6). Alta is forced into a submissive role by his white machismo, knowing that to avoid any physical abuse she must "become silent – angry, but silent" (Villanueva 58). Her financial dependence on Hugh works to maintain her oppression as she is literally forced to remain submissive to him in order to obtain a semblance of financial security. This is tied to her sexual submission, as well, evidenced in Hugh's demand that she sleep with him because he pays her every Friday (Villanueva 98). Daniel Enrique Pérez likens her position to what Kathleen Barry terms "female sexual slavery":

Female sexual slavery is present in ALL situations where women or girls cannot change the conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got into those conditions, e.g., social pressure, economic hardship, misplaced trust or the longing for affection, they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation. (qtd. in D. Pérez 104)

Because Alta is trapped in this cycle of submission and sexual slavery, she likens sex to death. But regardless of how degraded she feels, she submits to Hugh because of the cultural imperative that demands her to do so, and because it's easier than putting up a fight: when Hugh wants to "make love," Alta feels "a dull pain where her IUD was, in the bloody softness of her womb," but she gives in to him "to stop the fighting" (Villanueva 11). Alta is pained even further when Hugh suggests they "try it in the bung," and his comment that she has "an ass like a little boy"

makes her feel “slapped and degraded” (Villanueva 11). Not only does she feel humiliated during her sexual encounters with Hugh, her agency is further denied when she realizes that her orgasms are “despicable, boring, stupid” to him, which results in feelings of despair, worthlessness, and depression. Sex becomes equated to death:

The room closed in on her, and she felt like killing herself more than ever. She was good for nothing. A little boy would be better, Alta heard inside her head. I have small, droopy breasts, ugly with stretch marks, and a skinny, little boy’s ass. He’s right, even my orgasms are ugly. It’s true, the do make me feel like dying. That’s why I love them—then why don’t I just die—why don’t I just die? (Villanueva 12)

What is significant here is that instead of hating Hugh for his abuse and mistreatment, she hates herself, and consoles herself with thoughts of suicide: “Hugh burped loudly and for a moment she hated him. No, no, she hated herself. Yes, she would kill herself if it got too bad. Yes, that’s what she’d do” (Villanueva 13).

I. EL ARREBATO

Alta begins on the path to *conocimiento* when she befriends Katie, whom she meets at the outset of the novel. Anzaldúa describes it thusly:

Conocimiento es otro modo de conectar across colors and other differences to allies also trying to negotiate racial contradictions, survive the stresses and traumas of daily life, and develop a spiritual-

imaginal-political vision together. Conocimiento shares a sense of affinity with all things and advocates mobilizing, organizing, sharing information, knowledge, insights, and resources with other groups. (“now let us shift” 571)

The first stage of conocimiento is “el arrebató,” which occurs when something “jerks you out of your normal, everyday activity self” (Anzaldúa qtd. in Lara 44). It is through Katie that Alta begins to see herself as oppressed and unhappy. In speaking with Katie for the first time about her life with Hugh, she admits for the first time that “things aren’t very good” between the two of them (Villanueva 29). Villanueva describes Alta as hesitating to say this because she was trying to “choose the right words,” but notes that “in reality, she was trying to find them,” revealing the importance of her admittance. Empowered by her ability to speak frankly with Katie, Alta tells Katie that she doesn’t want to please Hugh anymore, but, in an attempt to secure a stronger sense of self, she asks, “I mean, what pleases me?” It is obvious here that Alta has never taken her own desires into consideration, a realization that nearly brings her to tears. But Katie encourages her to focus on herself, noting that it’s too general to ask “What do women want?” Instead, she tells Alta “I think you’re right to ask, ‘What do *I* want?’” (Villanueva 29), and tells her, empathetically, that she understands just what she means. Alta is so empowered by their exchange, in fact, that after repeated requests from Katie’s husband, Doug, to bring him more beer, Alta asks, “Can’t he get his own?” She begins to realize the unjustness of her and Katie’s role as subservient wife and takes the beer to Doug

only to pour it over his head (Villanueva 32). This is reflective of the part of *el arrebato* that leads to questioning, to the ability to “see through” culture for the first time (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 547).

II. NEPANTLA

The second phase, *nepantla*, however, is a transitional space where the person in transformation flounders between the life that is known, and the possibilities of what might come to be. In an attempt to grasp at this possibility, Alta applies for a job at a day-care center, an assertion of her desire to obtain financial autonomy. And even though she gets the job and the change that is desired, fear forces oscillation between the old and new selves, common in this stage. This is again apparent during an exchange between Alta and Katie. Katie comes to Alta, distraught because of Doug’s abusiveness, his threats to hit her while holding her face like she’s a “retard.” Alta tells her that the next time he does this, Katie should grab his hand and bite it. Katie looks at her in amazement, asking her if she thinks she really should, to which Alta replies, “Yes, I think you should. Bite him good if he does that again” (Villanueva 43). Even though Alta at this point still feels “like [she’s] dead,” in comforting and advising Katie, Alta begins to realize her own strength, the version of herself that could be. This is apparent when later in the same day, as Hugh attempts to seduce her, she finally stands up for herself, refusing to “make love” to him just so that he would bring his paycheck home instead of drinking it away. This is inspired by her own words to Katie: “Her advice to Katie burned on

her tongue: Bite him. Just bite him. How many times can I back down and just let him fuck me to get it over with, she thought, keeping her breath even and shallow. Or the orgasms he *gives* me. Shit.” In this particular instance, she remembers how much she once enjoyed having sex with Hugh, when he used to let her “sit up on him” and let her fuck him (Villanueva 44). She attempts to regain the sexual agency she once had, saving, “Let me make love to you, Hugh,” but he cuts her short, begging her to let him “fuck [her] from behind” (Villanueva 45). Hugh’s dismissal of her desire leaves her empty, forces a return to her old self: “Dawn was five hours away, and when the sun came up she’d be expected to rise, be a mother, know her name, know her children’s names, when, in fact, she’d ceased to exist. What remained could cook, speak when spoken to, pay the bills on time, and endure this terrible humiliation called *love*” (46).

III. THE COATLICUE STATE

Soon after this exchange, Hugh leaves again, with the paycheck, and Alta is left feeling trapped once again. “I’ve been sitting here contemplating suicide,” she tells Katie; “Hugh’s disappeared again with the fucking paycheck” (Villanueva 55). This is part of the Coatlicue state, the third phase of *conocimiento*. It is the depression and misery that results from too little change. When Katie asks her if she’s serious about killing herself, she replies, “Sometimes I feel like it. I guess I really do” (Villanueva 55). The two discuss their unhappiness but both reveal that they feel they have no choice, that leaving is not an option: Alta says, “I don’t know

how I'd do it," while Katie implores, [W]hat choice do I have with the kids and all?" (Villanueva 56-57).

During this stage, the unconscious is processing the trauma that causes transition, but it leaves Alta (and Katie) dysfunctional and paralyzed for a time. Anzaldúa refers to this as being in "this dark night of the soul" where "you get these intuitions, these *conocimientos*—whatever your being works out unconsciously, it comes to some realizations." This process she calls "*Coyolxauhquí* consciousness," a consciousness that comes from "the darkness, the underworld, the depression" (qtd. in Lara 45). Finally comes the realization that you must face your situation: "you can't change your reality, but you can change your attitude toward it, your interpretation of it" (Anzaldúa, "now let us shift" 552), but you must delve into the pain, anger, despair, and depression in order to move through to the other side. "In the deep fecund cave of gestation lies not only the source of your woundedness and your passion, but also the promise of inner knowledge, healing, and spiritual rebirth (the hidden treasures), waiting for you to bear them to the surface" ("now let us shift" 554). In addition, "You realize you've severed mind from body and reversed the dichotomy—in the beginning you blamed the body for betraying you, now your blame your mind. Affirming they're not separate, you begin to own the bits of yourself you've disowned, take back the projections you've cast onto others, and relinquish your victim identity ("now let us shift" 554). In this stage, however, there is still resistance to change, even though the knowledge that change will occur/is occurring is ever present ("now let us shift" 554). In response to Katie's assertion

that she has no choice, Alta tells her, “We have a choice; we just don’t fucking know it yet” (Villanueva 57). Alta here begins to see that she must get past her depression, her hopelessness, or suicide will be her only option.

IV. THE CALL FOR TRANSFORMATION

The need to move out of the realm of darkness moves one to the fourth stage of *conocimiento* because, “you have to change, you have to take care of your health, you have to find a new lover, you have to find a new job, lo que sea. You have to act, you have to move, and it moves you out of there” [the place of depression]; Anzaldúa calls this fourth stage the call for transformation, the call to “cross over to another space, to convert” (qtd. in Lara 47). With the ability to see herself and her world through “multiple” eyes, Alta must begin to define herself in terms of what she is becoming, not who she has been. This part of the process includes finding community with people on a similar path, and seeking the help of those who have already crossed.

Alta, in recognition that she must move away from her depression and revise her reality, begins to seek out empowering female friendships while also asserting her agency with Hugh. After Hugh returns from his latest escapade, she informs him that she’d be “picking up the check from now on,” refusing to argue with him, and then informs him that she is going camping with her friends Katie, Jackie, and Rita for the weekend. The women share several empowering moments: Jackie challenges Alta for staying “with that bastard” (Villanueva 64), and boldly says, “Fuck love. It’s

sex I crave" (Villanueva 64). When Jackie admits, however, that it's either "love or rape," Alta sees Hugh's face staring at her, and comes to the conclusion that he really is a bastard (Villanueva 65). In addition, Jackie brings up the fact that all of their husbands have affairs, to which Rita responds in anger, wondering how this knowledge helps her. Jack replies, "Because maybe then you wouldn't feel so fucking alone, Rita. Because maybe then you'd know it's not your fucking fault" (Villanueva 70). It is also during this trip that Katie urges Alta to value her body. While lamenting the fact that men get to "walk around half naked with no hassles," Alta says that if she did have that option, no one would jump her because she's built like a boy (Villanueva 71). Katie immediately expresses her disagreement: "I think you have a nice body. You don't look like a boy to me, lady, and you'd definitely get arrested for walking down the street with your breasts exposed. And jumped, too, probably" (Villanueva 71). In another instance, while talking to her Jackie, Alta again reveals the beginnings of the realization of her own agency; Jackie talks about the fact that Katie has "guts" because of the way she's dealing with her cancer diagnosis, to which Alta replies, "You know, Jackie, I think most of the women I know have that kind of guts only we don't know it [...] yet" (Villanueva 92).

Anzaldúa notes that the stages of *conocimiento* are recursive and non-linear, and that it is often necessary to return to one stage or another during the process. "Together, the seven stages open the senses and enlarge the breadth and depth of consciousness, causing internal shifts and external changes," but "all seven are present within each stage, and they occur concurrently, chronologically or not"

("now let us shift" 545). While Alta has gained a great deal of strength and agency, her senses opening and her consciousness enlarged, she returns to the first stage, *arrebato*, "rupture, fragmentation," when she finally refuses to submit to Hugh sexually and he does attempt to rape her. After she refuses his request to suck him off, he forces her onto her back, spreading her legs and holding them apart with his knees. When she tells him that he's hurting her he ignores her. He doesn't believe that he is doing anything wrong, simply taking what's his. When she screams for him to get off of her because he's "trying to fucking rape [her]," he tells her to stop being hysterical, that as the mother to his children, it's not rape: "How the hell can I rape you after two kids? Give it up, Alta" (Villanueva 97). When he pushes her back down, laughing while attempting to pin her down, Alta finally revolts, bringing her "knee up into his testicle" (Villanueva 98). He responds by violently pinning her to the bedroom wall, punching her in the face, only stopping when their daughter, April, tells him to let go of her mother. Hugh then turns his anger on April; seeing the possibility of the abuse she has suffered turned on her daughter triggers change in Alta. Protecting April, she screams "Well, go on and hit me again. Go on! But I'll tell you this – you'll have to sleep, and if you stay here I'll stab you, I swear it, I'll kill you while you sleep, you motherfucking bastard!" Villanueva describes Hugh as feeling shame, but unexpectedly, believing Alta's threat. He leaves, and Alta tells April that she must leave her father (Villanueva 98-99).

While Alta's life begins to change with Hugh out of the house, she is still very much learning about herself and discovering for the first time that she has her own

needs. She has never taken care of herself and at this point, doesn't know how. She has returned to *nepantla*, the oscillation between her old and new self. After attending her morning classes, she goes to work at the preschool. It is here that her own fears come upon her:

She loved the little kids, but she had to admit it: she was tired, deep down, of the tediousness of caring for small children. Caring for their needs, their endless needs, since she herself had been fifteen, while a great, sucking need of her own ached through the center of her being. It threatened to devour her, especially in the predawn hours when the silence of the world spoke to the void, the need, of the clamoring hunger that terrified her beyond belief. It left her sweating and trembling alone in the huge bed. (Villanueva 104-05)

The realization that she has spent no time catering to her own needs is significant. It reflects *nepantla*, the aspect of transformation “where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, your different cultures” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 548). While questioning these things is important to her transformation, she returns to the *Coatlicue* state.

On the same day that her fear overwhelms her, she sees a therapist for the first time. Feeling attacked by the white therapist, she leaves angrily, and after narrowly avoiding a car accident, she feels utterly alone, a feeling she has never experienced because of her commitment and constant submission to Hugh. She is

besotted with self-pity, self-contempt, and, as Anzaldúa describes, she “burst[s] into the melodramatic histrionics of the victim, . . . wallow[ing] in the ruins of [her] life” (“now let us shift” 551): “Why?’ Alta asked herself. ‘Why am I so alone?’” (Villanueva 106). In the Coatlicue state, it is also common to try to escape emotional pain through “addictions” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 550). Alta is not an addict, but the fear she now faces, combined with her sense of loneliness, become too much for her, and she begins to numb herself by eating a chunk of hash, taking tranquilizers, and drinking Chablis. She does not know how to smoke the hash, however, and only takes a few of the 10 tranquilizers she found while “sipping” on the wine. It is perhaps foreshadowing her emergent sense of self when she almost immediately calls her friend Rita: “Rita? It’s me, Alta. Look, I think I’m trying to kill myself” (Villanueva 107). Rita and Carl arrive, and she sobs. However, she emerges from the situation stronger. Villanueva references her coming transformation when she writes that when Alta looked at herself in the mirror, “The little girl was gone, entirely” (107), signaling Alta’s new maturity and the recognition that she will, in fact, finally be able to take care of herself. She begins again with her therapist the next day.

At this point in the novel, Alta’s progression begins more rapidly. She begins to acknowledge, finally, that she has her own desires, far removed from her life with Hugh. She moves again into the fourth stage of *conocimiento*, “the call . . . el compromiso . . . the crossing and conversion.” Anzaldúa argues that during this stage:

Your passion motivates you to discover resources within yourself and in the world. It prompts you to take responsibility for consciously creating your life and becoming a fully functioning human being, a contributing member of all your communities, one worthy of self-respect and love. ("now let us shift" 557)

Alta's burgeoning recognition of her own desire comes as Katie lies dying of cancer. She and Alta share a profound exchange: Katie reveals that her first lover was a woman. Alta remembers Katie's former, voluptuous, cancer-free self, and understands an attraction to her. Curious about her experience, Alta asks Katie what it was like. Katie tells her:

It's like making love to your mother, finally . . . And it's like making love to yourself, in a way, discovering the taste and feel of yourself in another woman . . . And the feel of a woman's orgasm on my tongue was like a miracle, but, then, so was mine. It was like fusing bodies. Souls. It kind of helped me become a woman. In my soul (Villanueva 128).

Alta found this revelation "amazing" (Villanueva 129). Katie inspires Alta; what she heard in Katie's voice is "a kind of transcendence. A fearlessness. Peace" (Villanueva 133). She realizes that she has a desire to consciously create this transcendence, fearlessness, and peace in her own life, prompting her to begin seeing the therapist, Cheryl, once again.

Alta begins to see her own strength through her meetings with Cheryl, her therapist, but it is Cheryl who points it out to her: “You know, Alta, you’ve been through a lot of shit, but you’ve handled it. I mean, you’ve prevailed” (Villanueva 144). Alta doesn’t see it at first. She asks Cheryl, “But why don’t I feel like I’ve prevailed? I feel like I’ve had my ass kicked, and I’m laying on the street and fucking bleeding to death” (Villanueva 44). Cheryl helps Alta see her own fearlessness. After Alta tells her that she stood up to the hospital staff so that a helpless new mother could see her newborn, and that she also once stood up to her violent neighbor while living alone in the projects in order to help his child, Cheryl pushes her: “So you survived again by the strength of your courage. Your caring, really” (Villanueva 146). Cheryl notes the fact that there were babies involved in both incidents. When pressed, Alta says, “I guess I can’t stand to see something or someone helpless, something small, suffer,” and realizes that she sees herself as helpless, and hates herself for this.

The process of actualization continues when Cheryl asks Alta to picture herself as a little girl. She describes her young self in dirty jeans with ragged tennis shoes; she has “short, boyish hair, and a boyish face, but her mouth is – well, it’s soft, though it’s angry,” and her eyes show fear. She goes on to explain that she is scared “because no one loves her. No one loves this little girl who’s trying to look like a boy, who’s trying to be brave and fake everyone out . . . Her grandmother’s dead and no one loves her anymore. She’s alone now” (Villanueva 147). This acknowledgement

fills Alta with sorrow, but ultimately she realized that “it was the child’s pain” that she saw:

She saw hunger, the shame of her poverty, the color of her skin, the sound of her Spanish being ridiculed publicly in a five-year-old’s memory, and an Indian language her grandmother spoke sometimes flickered like a vague, comforting dream that left her desolate because she could never remember, never remember, never remember. Then Alta remembered the cries of her mother, the defense of her mother, the betrayal of her mother, the longing for her mother. Her mother. Her longing for a father had stopped at eight, and now she craved only a mother. (Villanueva 147-48)

Importantly, she also realizes that she loves this young version of herself. She tells her, “I love you. You’re hard to love, but I love you, I do. I’m a grown woman now, and I’m going to take care of you from now on like April . . . You’re my little girl and you’ll never be alone again because we’re together, now, forever and ever. I promise . . . You are my child” (Villanueva 148). Her words “started from the soles of [her] feet” and her response to her own words is visceral; they cours[ed] through her body with a power of their own. They issued from her mouth like a command” (Villanueva 148). Then the child disappeared. Finally her transcendence can truly take place, as she’s let go of the hurt and pain of the past and is ready to “take care” of herself and move forward. Anzaldúa asks, “Are you sure you’re ready to face the shadow-beast guarding the threshold—that part of you holding your failures and

inadequacies, the negativities you've internalized, and those aspects of gender and class you want to disown?" ("now let us shift" 557). Alta is ready.

Alta's first transcendent sexual and spiritual experience is with Jackie, with whom she's been a friend since childhood. As Jackie tentatively traces the soft bulge of her breast, "Alta felt like the middle, the very middle, of a dark, dark circle where the fire was kept. The secret fire. The healing fire that smoldered even in the presence of death. In that dark circle" (155). And so it is here that her healing begins; in their lovemaking there is an acknowledgement and a release of loneliness: "A daughter's loneliness for her mother. For the mother who could not love herself, much less a strange and needy child" (Villanueva 156). As Alta and Jackie respond physically to one another "each one gasped and moaned like a long forgotten prayer," until, finally:

They came in circles of sorrow, in circles of joy—crying, then laughing together. Circles of ecstasy electrified their bodies from head to foot, and they came again: mouth to cunt, tongue to clitoris, soul to soul, woman to woman. Without man. They died, slowly, into swirling pools of utter pleasure. They remembered a woman's selfish, hungry, howling, singing please to be food, to be fed. Without man. They searched for the hot, life-giving, creative, and golden sun. Without man. (Villanueva 157)

The fact that they moan together like a "long forgotten prayer" reveals the spiritual aspect of this erotic encounter, and the fact that it is an event that occurs "soul to soul"

moves it beyond a simple sexual encounter. In addition, the fact that Villanueva reinforces that their pleasure is achieved “without man” reveals the fact that Alta is finally able to remove herself from the oppressive sexuality that she shared with Hugh, and resist the demands of her culture.

Afterwards, both Jackie and Alta feel ashamed; they have both internalized female-to-female love and sex as taboo. Alta tells Cheryl that she made love to her best friend, and that she had never had an orgasm like that before; “It was as though,” she says, “my whole body caught fire, over and over” (Villanueva 165). She also tells her that Jackie is “avoiding [her] like [they] committed the original sin or something” (Villanueva 165), revealing the depth of this internalization. But this moment is still an important part of Alta’s transformation. When Cheryl tells her the idea of she and Jackie committing any sin is “bullshit,” Alta knows that she is right. The experience she had with Jackie is, in fact, empowering. She also knows that Cheryl is right when she says, “Remember that orgasm, Alta. That’s what your body wants. Don’t forget” (Villanueva 166). Because Alta has finally come to recognize what her body wants via the erotic as power, she begins to recognize her healing.

Alta also begins to recognize her stronger sense of spirit. She tells Cheryl:

The other day in pottery I cut two broad strips of clay of equal length and placed them on a coil pot, like a cross. I don’t know why, but as I did it, it felt almost taboo. Like I shouldn’t be doing it or something. It was so strange. And then I looked it at, completed, and I felt wonderful. Like I’d done something wonderful. You know, I’ve dreamt

making a cross before in clay or something soft. I can't explain it

Cheryl, but it still makes me feel wonderful. (Villanueva 165)

Cheryl tells her “before the Christians messed it up,” the cross “was an ancient symbol of healing” (Villanueva 165). It is a significant symbol for Alta because it represents her own healing through her burgeoning spirituality/sexuality, and, as Cheryl tells her, “And of course, you are healing, you really are” (165). The linking of the cross with the taboo reflects that part of Alta that sees sexual agency as inherently wrong—it, too, is taboo. But realizing that the “taboo” can feel wonderful is important to her construction of a new sexuality.

After her experience with Jackie, Alta “begins to demolish the compulsory heterosexual, as well as homosexual models of sexuality that have been instilled in her by both a patriarchal society and her husband’s queerness, and begins to construct her own normative sexuality. This new normative sexuality for Alta is one that no longer maintains Alta as a female sexual slave” (D. Pérez 107). It is a sexuality that allows her agency; no longer forced to submit sexually to Hugh, and having begun to explore and alternative sexuality with Jackie, Alta chooses to explore further, and finds herself now able to take charge of her own sexual life. Soon after Katie’s death, Alta feels immense desire to comfort Doug—“to feel his body completely naked next to hers” (Villanueva 161). When she finds Doug trembling, “tears starting to tremble and fall,” she kisses first his eyelids, then his cheeks, then his mouth; she then opens herself up to him, “extending herself fully, lay[ing] back on the couch inviting him” (Villanueva 171). Alta then stops him from

entering her “blindly,” telling him to lie on the rug. She puts his erect penis between her soft breasts and sucks him gently, then mounts him, “putting his penis at the opening of her cunt and teasing him by holding it there,” and finally asking him to “come in” (Villanueva 171-72). Not only does she express sexual agency in making love to Doug, but also the rigid traditional roles of male/female are surpassed:

Ripples and ripples of unending pleasure flowed between them as she raised and lowered herself, watching his cock disappear; and he, for a moment, becoming a woman like herself; and she, with his hardness, for a moment, becoming a man; and then she utterly feminine, being penetrated; and then he utterly masculine, penetrating; and then peace. (Villanueva 172).

Like her lovemaking with Jackie, her lovemaking with Doug had been “intense and immediate,” and Alta felt that a “deep, hungry part of herself was filling up” (176). It is representative of the idea of the self-connection to joy that Lorde discusses in “The Erotic as Power,” an idea that the erotic reveals. According to Lorde, the self-connection to joy once shared:

is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling, a reminder of my capacity for feeling. And that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage*, nor *god*, nor *an afterlife*” (Lorde 57).

Alta has now completely rewritten her story, finding joy in a sexuality and spirituality that have no boundaries. It is not male, nor female, simply joy. Alta has now entered the fifth stage of *conocimiento*: “After dismantling the body/self you re-compose it—the fifth stage of the journey” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 560).

V. THE MOVE TO SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

Part Two of *Naked Ladies* sees Alta move into spiritual activism, crucial to the final stages of *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa states that in these stages:

With awe and wonder you look around, recognizing the preciousness of the earth, the sanctity of every human being on the plant, the ultimate unity and interdependence of all beings—some todos un paíz. Love swells in your chest and shoots out of your heart chakra, linking you to everyone/everything. [...] You share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label. This *conocimiento* motivates you to work actively to see that no harm comes to people, animals, ocean—to take up spiritual activism and the work of healing. (“now let us shift” 560)

The section of the novel opens with Alta sitting outside, “*bleeding her warm womb’s blood into the soft, fertile Earth, in the warm spring rain, in the blossoming apple orchard, naked*” (Villanueva 183), reflecting on the current story she has created to herself, and on her past. She and Doug have ended their relationship, and Hugh is dead from AIDS. Rita is dead from cancer. Her mother is dead. Ian and April, her

children, are grown and living their own lives away from her. She is thirty-eight and she lives alone. She has completed her degree in counseling and is practicing full-time, working to help others transform as she did. She has a lover, Michael, who is ten years younger, and she is no longer lonely. As she sits, reflecting on her life, she notes, *"We're all troubled people"* (Villanueva 185). Then, remembering the wounds inflicted in her previous life, she chooses to let them go:

"Hugh," she whispered to the wind, remembering her would, and his.

"Goodbye, Hugh. Forever." And the wind carried her words to the waning crescent moon. It hung delicately as it prepared to set at the edge of the world, where she had arrived, and she wasn't lonely.

She was the child of her own endless longing. The time is now, the scattered blossoms seemed to say to the wonder in Alta's eyes. "The time is now," she whispered, alive, and bleeding her womb's fierce blood in the warm chaos of spring, in the warm womb of spring. Naked.

(Villanueva 186).

In Part Two, Alta is transformed into a whole, actualized self, content with her surroundings, having let go of the past. And she begins the part of the journey of those who have crossed before, able to mentor those in need of transformation. Where before she needed to care for herself, attend to the needs that had been oppressed and neglected her entire life, she is now able to care for others in a way that does not require her own self-neglect. AnaLouise Keating defines spiritual activism as "spirituality for social change, spirituality that recognizes the many

differences among us yet insists on our commonalities and uses these commonalities as catalysts for transformation" ("Nepantlas and Nepantleras" 11). This is reflected in the power of "new tribalism," a *mestizaje* identity that resists both "acculturating and inculturating pressures" (Anzaldúa, "now let us shift" 560-61), and the community Alta creates for herself through her relationships between Michael, and Jade, both of whom are healing old wounds inflicted by the dominant culture. This is the commonality that brings them together. Like Alta, Jade, who is Japanese, Navajo, and Spanish, was sexually abused as a child, raped by her father, and more recently, was kidnapped and raped by two white men. Michael, who is African American, watched his brother being beaten to death at the hands of white men, not because of some personal vendetta, but solely because of the color of his skin: "[I]t wasn't even *personal*," he tells Alta. "He just happened to be black and they just happened to be white" (Villanueva 200). In addition, both Michael and Jade have already moved beyond the repressive structures of the dominant culture that initially oppressed Alta: Michael is a man with true reverence for women, and who Villanueva describes as being in touch with his feminine side; Jade has rebuked heteronormativity and is comfortable with her lesbian sexuality. Together, they are bound by *la facultad*.

Having survived and recognized her own abuses, Alta is now able to see the inherent link between all abuse and violence, moving outward from the individual's pain, to an outward awareness of social injustice that is central to Anzaldúa's spiritual activism. She notes the violence to Michael's brother, as well as the

collective violence to women “and the violence around the Earth and to the Earth” and felt that “Violence, random violence, was escalating, coming to some terrible peak as they approached the new century. She often couldn’t help thinking of it as a sort of collective cleansing, a meaning in the madness. A cleansing for the next, for the phase of human consciousness” (Villanueva 200-01). Here, Villanueva reflects the reciprocal process Anzaldúa describes: “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 society” (*This Bridge* 208).

I return once again to Lorde here, because of the way in which her theory of the erotic overlaps with Anzaldúa’s notion of spiritual activism. Lorde writes:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference (Lorde 56).

Alta, Michael, and Jade share a spiritualized sexuality that works to heal them all, and based on Lorde’s and Anzaldúa’s theories, heal the world. For Alta, what is most healing about her sexual experiences with Michael is that she has never hurt her while making love, which means that she “can open [her] body to [him], entirely, without waiting for that jabbing pain,” giving herself up to him in trust. She notes,

too, that “the soul goes where the body goes” (Villanueva 251). In addition, Alta explains that while lovemaking with Jade:

There’s something terribly exquisite . . . like a part of myself I can’t see, but I can see in Jade. It’s like I know she’s feeling what I feel, sometimes, so strongly, and I know she feels me feeling her. I think with a mother and daughter that’s often terribly threatening until they’re able to meet on par. And in our culture, patriarchal culture, as you know, that meeting’s discouraged, mainly because the feminine tends to be crippled. They cripple her and women, many women, continue to go along with the crippling. Well, we’ve talked about all this, but women help cripple other women, their own daughters, so that if they have to be threatened, it’s only the men threatening them. A woman getting her own power breaks that agreement between women. (Villanueva 222).

This intimacy reveals sexuality as empowering and healing of the wounds of women. Together, they move beyond the abuses of patriarchy, and beyond the ways in which women perpetuate these abuses with one another.

It is during a sexual encounter that the three share together, however, that the healing they share is most apparent. On the Summer Solstice, Alta, Jade and Michael go out in to the orchard, where the three, together, engage in intimate, empowering lovemaking, each taking turns pleasuring the others, seeing nothing but beauty. “Isn’t she beautiful?” Alta asks Michael of Jade as she kisses her. He

replies that “Yes, she is. And so are you” (Villanueva 258). And as Jade watched Michael strip off his clothes, she thought he was beautiful. “Even his penis is beautiful, she thought” (Villanueva 259). While both Jade and Michael focus on pleasuring Alta, she “simply stopped listening to that small fraction of herself that always said No. That said, No one loves you and you love no one” (259); Michael felt “expanded by a strange tenderness, as though he could make love to every woman on Earth: the old, the young, the beautiful, the plain” (260). And Jade “for the first time, during her orgasm, she didn’t think of her father” (261). Afterwards they “lay silently for a long, long while, staring up at the thick star clusters with Venus in the ascendant and the full, white, transparent moon. Full, and fully risen, the moon shone its truth for those with the eyes to see. But there was no warmth to its light, just wisdom, and what wisdom brings: truth without clothes, truth without skin, and truth without even a body. The most naked truth” (Villanueva 261). Each is at peace, able to leave their past pains behind in order to be present in this moment, and what the moment reveals is the truth of the body: sexuality has been the last frontier to liberation (Castillo, *Dreamers* 171).

Just after they share this experience, the two men who had previously raped Jade, Ray and Jim, find them in the orchard, hoping to punish Jade for going to the police about her attack. Alta returns from a quick errand to the house, ironically, to retrieve the cartridges to the rifle they had meant to bring with them because of the threats made to Jade, only to find one man attempting to castrate Michael and the other assaulting Jade. Alta knows that they will kill them all if given the chance, and

once she finds the right moment, she shoots them both. Jim dies from his wounds, and Ray survives, but is imprisoned. I include this part of the story not to indicate that this is in fact an example of social justice, but because of what follows. In the epilogue, several months have passed; Alta has been acquitted for her “crime” and has had Michael’s son, named Horus after his brother. Even after the pain of that night, Alta refuses to leave the orchard. Instead, at the Winter Solstice, they hold a peace vigil, and return to the spot of the attack. Alta is able to feel Jim’s soul, but instead of harboring anger towards him, she asks his soul for forgiveness. As a spiritual activist, she cannot dwell on the pain Jim has caused, but forgive him and forgive herself. This comes as a result of shifting attention away from the ego to an awareness that “beneath individual separateness lies a deeper interrelatedness” (Anzaldúa, “now let us shift” 569). Alta moves away from her anger when she recognizes that Jim also felt pain, and that he may, too, have been abused; she considers the possibility of connection between them. Anzaldúa writes that “when you relate to others . . . from a connectionist view compassion triggers transformation” (“now let us shift” 569). Therefore, Alta’s connection to Jim furthers her own transformation into spiritual activist.

The novel closes with Alta’s daughter, April, telling her of an awful dream she recently had, where she saw herself as an old woman in a crowded city after a nuclear exchange. She describes feelings of devastation, chaos and turmoil as she told the people running past her, “The radios no longer work, not even the clocks, the children are dying, the birds do not sing,” but no one listened to her. April tells

her mother that she felt like a ghost. At this, Alta realizes that they would eventually all be ghosts, spirits. "Spirits trying to warn the future . . . *We are the ancestors*, she realized" (Villanueva 279). She reassures April, saying, "No, I don't think it has to happen. No, I think as long as we dream dreams like that, the future's listening" (Villanueva 280). And through her son, and the generations that follow, the spiritual activism she has developed will continue. She will make sure that the future is listening.

Chapter Five

Spiritual Excavation: Becoming Chicana and Writing the Body as Social Justice and
 Spiritual Activism in Demetria Martínez's *Mother Tongue*

Inherent in the creative act is a spiritual, psychic component—one of spiritual excavation, of (ad)venturing in the inner void, extrapolating meaning from it and sending it out into the world. To do this kind of work requires the total person—body, soul, mind and spirit

~Gloria Anzaldúa

My writing is the gift I give to people who have committed their lives to the cause of social justice, who have charged my own life with meaning. I would like them to see themselves reflected in my stories, and in my novel, *Mother Tongue*, and to laugh, or weep as needed, be energized and dream ever greater dreams of a world transformed, to see my work as another place where their voices can be heard. In this sense, yes, my creative work is a form of activism.

~Demetria Martínez

As noted previously, Roman Catholicism has established a dichotomy between the spirit and the body that privileges saving the sacred spirit while declaring the material body profane; in making Guadalupe the divine mother, and establishing this as the only revered model for Chicanas, anything else is deemed blasphemous and wicked. As Channette Romero notes, *Mother Tongue* “disrupts these two dichotomies by making the material body central to its theology of salvation. In doing so, it reinvigorates Catholicism with a focus on social justice” (183). While this is certainly true, I add to this that the erotic as power allows the

protagonist, María, to “become” Chicana through her relationship with José Luis, a refugee from El Salvador, and that ultimately, this relationship develops into a spiritual activism that she articulates through writing the body.

Demetria Martínez is a poet, novelist, activist, journalist, and lecturer. She currently blogs for the National Catholic Reporter in Kansas City, writing about controversial issues such as abortion and immigration, and teaches at the annual summer writing workshop at the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. She also serves on the board of Enlace Comunitario, an immigrants' rights group that works with Spanish-speaking survivors of domestic violence, and is the co-founder of the Albuquerque Chapter of Poets Against War. In the introduction to *Confessions of a Berlitz-Tape Chicana*, Martínez describes herself as “a Chicana, a Catholic, the spiritual descendant of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and César Chávez, Santa Teresa de Ávila and Archbishop Oscar Romero, Delores Huera and Juan Diego, to whom Guadalupe appeared speaking Nahuatl” (3).

Martínez is the recipient of UC Santa Barbara's 2011 Luis Leal Award for Distinction in Chicano/Latino Literature. Her collection of short stories, *The Block Captain's Daughter*, is forthcoming from the University of Oklahoma Press; her autobiographical essays, *Confessions of a Berlitz-Tape Chicana* received the 2006 International Latino Book Award. Martínez is also the author of two books of poetry, “Breathing Between the Lines” and “The Devil's Workshop.” Martínez is most known, however, for her novel *Mother Tongue*, which is the text under analysis here.

It is based in part upon her 1988 conspiracy trial for allegedly transporting two pregnant Salvadoran women refugees into the United States. She was, at the time, a reporter covering the faith-based Sanctuary Movement, and was acquitted on First Amendment grounds.

Mother Tongue is the story of María, a 19 year old Chicana from New Mexico, who aids and eventually falls in love with José Luis, a refugee from the civil war in El Salvador who has come to the United States to expose the plight of the thousands of Salvadorans being harassed, tortured, and murdered. Through their love affair, both characters confront the violence of their pasts—his at the hands of the Salvadoran torturers who abducted him and killed his fiancé, Ana, and hers at the hands of an abusive neighbor. I argue that it is through the power of the erotic, made available to María through her intense relationship with José Luis that María comes to fully identify as Chicana, becomes “whole,” and create a spiritual space that allows for activism, and that writing the body accomplishes this need.

I use Jacqueline M. Martinez’s “modes of ethnic consciousness” to describe the ways in which María “becomes” Chicana, or as Martinez describes it, “coming to speak as a Chicana” through shifts in thinking, feeling, and acting (36); the three modes of consciousness that she describes are not separate, but have overlapping boundaries (37). The first mode of consciousness is what she refers to as “unknowing-knowing,” which includes the unconscious loss of one’s knowledge of cultural heritage and the assimilation to social and cultural normalization. The second mode is “preknowing-knowing.” For Martinez this process occurred when

she began to seek connections with her peers: Chicano/as, Mexican Americans, and Spanish-speaking people (36). The third is “knowing-unknown,” where “one knows precisely that there is a field of unknowingness that is directly relevant to oneself” (37). This third mode involves asking explicit examples regarding family history and, in Martinez’s case, the history of the Chicano people, particularly those of the Southwestern United States (37). Martinez says that what she found “was a language about and disposition toward life as a fleshy, messy, bodied experience” (37). Ultimately, what these modes reveal the importance of the recognitions of one’s ethnic, racial, and cultural heritage to one’s identity; it is the ability to perceive a different future.

I. KNOWIN-UNKOWING

At the beginning of the novel, María is in the “knowing-unknowing” phase. Identifying herself as Mary, she doesn’t identify as Chicana. She “perceives herself as an inauthentic Latina subject,” expressing “insecurity about her acculturated double identity as Latina and gringa” (Kandiyoti and Castillo qtd. in Vigil 60-61). While she knows of her Mexican heritage, she participates fully in North American culture, having largely forgotten her roots. For example, she hardly speaks Spanish: “My Spanish was like an old car, parts missing or held together with clothes hanger wire,” sufficient only to get her where she wanted to go (Martínez 11). Because she is so removed from her Mexicanness, she has no need to use her native language. In addition, she has little connection to larger family or community, and unlike most

Chicana characters in literature, she is almost completely without friends or family (Vigil 61). Soledad, her one Chicana-identified friend is, in fact, the only person with whom she has contact outside of her relationship with José Luis. Soledad encourages her to work on her Spanish, to write to her in Spanish, but recognizes that she might have to make up the words she doesn't know (Martínez 43).

María is so immersed in her Anglo-American identity that she doesn't initially even recognize this about herself—she has assimilated to the dominant culture so much so that not even José Luis is able to identify her as Chicana, noting that her “belief that people can be made from scratch in the promised land, leaving the old self behind” as “so American” (Martínez 84). In another instance, her Americanness is revealed after she translates a newspaper report on the rape and murder of several U.S. nuns in El Salvador for José Luis. He verbally attacks her, pointing out the lack of suffering she has experienced as an American. “You don't know what it's like to suffer,” he tells her; “You don't know what it's like to flee” (Martínez 123). María recognizes the Americanness he sees in her:

He saw in me an image of a gringa whose pale skin and tax dollars are putting his compatriots to death. (Martínez 123-24)

In this instance, José Luis sees her as complicit in his own struggle because she fails to acknowledge her assimilation to the dominant culture, seeing her as participating in his oppression and suffering.

While she is unhappy with her life, and while she wants change, she focuses not on becoming a Chicana, but being saved by José Luis and love:

Love at first sight, this is how I explained the urgency that would later *shed its skin* and reveal pure desperation. Some women fall in love in advance of knowing a man because it is much easier to love a mystery. And I needed a mystery—someone outside of ordinary time who could rescue me from an ordinary life, from my name, Mary, a blessing name that had become my curse. At age nineteen, I was looking for a man to tear apart the dry rind of that name so I could see what fruit fermented inside. (Martínez 16)

But before meeting José Luis, María describes herself as being asleep: “They had words for women like me. Insane fell out of favor as did nervous breakdown. Clinically depressed was, I believe, in vogue. But ask any woman who has had times in her life when she was not all there. She will say she was asleep” (Martínez 26). She does nothing but hold down “boring jobs,” feeling depressed and wondering if there was more to life (Martínez 21). It is because she is depressed that she pursues a relationship with José Luis, believing that “women who fall asleep and don’t know why they lack a plot line,” which causes them to feel shame. She decides to concoct a plot of her own, a love story, to wake herself up:

To prove the gods at least were interested in me I courted disaster, set out to love a man I knew full well would go away. Falling in love was a way of pinching myself. It proved I was alive if only on that thin line between drama and trauma. I handed my body over to José Luis like a torch to help him out of his dark places. I felt no shame. I was

utterly unoriginal. To love a man more than one's self was a socially acceptable way for a woman to be insane. (Martínez 26-27)

She immediately sets sight on José Luis and what she sees as the ability he will have to save her, to be her new plotline. Initially, this is expressed in her physical desire for him: "His nation chewed him up and spat him out like a piñon shell, and when he emerged from an airplane one late afternoon, I knew I would one day make love with him" (3). She works too hard to attach herself to José Luis, attempting to seduce her savior:

From day one I looked for ways to graft a piece of myself onto him, to become indispensable. My gestures were perfectly timed, touching his hand, twisting my hair, excusing myself to touch up my lipstick—ordinary actions that would reverse the tides of my life as in the theories of physicists who can say the dance of a butterfly can cause volcanoes to erupt. (Martínez 15)

But "Desire was not good enough. Love would ripen in the light of time we spent together, like an arranged marriage. Except that I was doing the arranging. And calling it fate" (Martínez 19).

Mary's Americanness is also rooted in her lack of true faith. She has mostly abandoned the Catholicism in which she was raised, believing she had "outgrown" it, and instead explores several different Eastern religions in an effort to find her spiritual self. She sees herself as "North American to the core" because she is such a consumer of religion: "I saw religion as a bazaar from which I could pick and

choose” (Martínez 25). She reads the Upanishads or the Tao Te Ching at a cantina, stating, “In a gesture of rebellion I mistook for dissent, I declared to myself that God could be found not just in a church but in a bar” (Martínez 25). But she also recognizes her own lack of faith, and her desire to have it, as she watches the women who leave morning and evening Mass, noting that she “wanted their faith, a massive doorway to stand under during life’s earthquakes” (Martínez 25). But instead of looking for true faith, she simply finds whatever New Age belief system works in any given moment: “While José Luis was copying the words of revolutionaries, I was poring over Eastern mystical texts, discovering the meaning of life, for the moment at least, in gods incarnated as elephants and monkeys and many-breasted goddesses” (Martínez 47). Soledad believes that her interest in New Age spirituality is little more than an addiction, a temporary fix that does not provide the answers to “the meaning of life” but works to simply numb the seeker. Soledad also urges María to rethink her interest in that “new Age Santa Fe stuff” because it can be “as bad as drugs”; instead she tells her that “it’s best to look for cures a little closer to home” (110-11). She tells her, “All this depression going around—it’s because we’ve gotten too far away from the foods of our ancestors. And our cells never forget” (110). Eventually, María sees that her interest in Eastern mysticism simply isn’t enough. After she finds work covering for the owner of a bead shop, she sat behind a counter that held Tibetan prayer beads and jade Buddhas. She writes that she would focus her breathing while looking at these objects: “My chest rose, froze, and fell in a triangle of attention that I undoubtedly

learned about in books on Eastern mysticism. But whatever in me that may have actually aspired to enlightenment, to being in the present, did not bear up for long” (52). The fact the it “did not bear up for long” shows its inadequacies. María describes herself at nineteen as unable to see color in her life, despite the emphasis on mindful observation in the Eastern texts she was reading; she notes that “the draining away of color” is what happens when a woman “can’t name her own reality” (55). This mindful observation does not help her.

Eventually, through her relationship with José Luis, her attitudes about herself, her Americanness, and even her spirituality begin to change. Initially, however, and regardless of how much she wants the plot she has invented for herself, she is immersed in fear. As he leans in to kiss her for the first time, her heart is galloping and she is all “stutters and sweat”: “I am about to get what I want and a rope of panic is stretched out before me as I run toward desire” (61). I believe that she panics because she is afraid of what their relationship will reveal about herself, and so she focuses only on relieving her depression, and not on what she might become. Once he admits his love for her, she tells Soledad that his presence is helping her forget all of her sadness. Remembering their kiss the previous day, she writes, “I felt a grin spread through my whole body, pure bliss” (64).

It is when they begin to pursue a sexual relationship that María begins to acknowledge those things about herself that do make her Mexican American, that she does begin to transform. For example, even though María and José Luis fall in love, she is hesitant to make love: “Something perversely Catholic kept our

explorations above the waist,” she writes, revealing the fact that the religion of her youth still has a hold on her, that she hasn’t abandoned it entirely, and that she does remember what role the church has defined for her. This, however, becomes part of what spurns her on sexually, “the old religion erotically charging the most humble expanses of skin” (65). She eventually embraces her sexuality specifically because it is “sinful”: “Yet surely wrongdoing was at the root of the thrill for a Catholic girl who had indulged in sex for the first time the year before, who had learned that breaking the law is a pleasure more poignant than sex itself” (Martínez 19).

It is not the pleasure of sin, however, that remains at the core of her attraction to José Luis. The first time they have intercourse, it is erotically powerful and spiritual at once:

We opened each other up like sacred books, Spanish on one side, English on the other, truths simultaneously translated. I remember the scent of our sweat, sweet as basil as we pressed against one another on the basement bed. Lindita, mamacita, negrita: love words, the kind that defy translation. With his hands he searched my depths. When he found what he was looking for I moaned, felt a chill and then warmth as the seasons moved through me. Minutes later, he came inside me, stiffened, sighted. Afterwards, he lit his cigarette on the flame of the Sacred Heart candle on the night table. (67)

Their connection is sacred, the spiritual and the sexual combined with love; it is not just a physical connection that they share. “By likening the body to the sacred text

and corporeal sensations to 'truths,' *Mother Tongue* reconnects the multilingual Latino/a body to the spiritual, the sacred" (Romero 185). It is the spirit sexuality that Anzaldúa argues is transformative.

At nineteen, however, María does not yet see the power of her sexuality not its link to her transformation, and making love with José Luis creates panic, chaos, and fear. The chaos, however, is significant to her transformation, as is her need to "kill off" the "white God": *"Nothing replaced Him for a long time. But looking back now I can see that the growing chaos inside blazed away dead growth, clearing a space, however violently, for God to be reborn"* (95). It is not the Catholic God that she must kill off, though. What she kills is her connection to a Catholicism that does not allow for liberation theology, and theology that becomes crucial to her through what she learns from José Luis. For a time, he stands in as the God she needs, and José Luis is in many ways the God she worships, the God who replaces the white God she had to kill: *"With his Tibetan eyelids and Mayan cheekbones, José Luis looks like a god, and obsidian idol native people buried beneath Catholic shrines and revered under the noses of priests"* (102). They make love in front of María's Santos, her alter: Santa Niño de Atocha, a Taos Pueblo incense burner, a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe from Nogales, and African fertility doll, a film canister of the healing earth from Chimayó (95). She believes that they blessed her love for him, and, *"They were not like the white God I'd had to kill, that women like me must kill if we are to have any hope of every finding God"* (95).

Slipping on a simple silver band that she found in the keepsake shoe box, María again remembers José Luis, and in remembering exposes the link between her sexuality and her spirituality:

I slipped the ring on, inhaled, and counted to seven. And I arrived at that stillness so absolute the chaotic fragments of one's life arrange themselves, if only for a moment, into a mandala of meaning. On the exhale I remembered that José Luis was the first man to touch me in a way that I could feel real pleasure, could feel my flesh yield up its own indivisible truth. (57)

The truth that is revealed to her through her erotic encounters with José Luis, which are many.

II. PRE-KNOWING-KNOWING

Their relationship becomes the basis for her transformation, allows her to enter into the "pre-knowing-knowing phase." It is he who "opened the door" this part of the process to occur (58). It is José Luis that begins to call Mary "María." While she says "of course, it's just Spanish for Mary," he insists, "Mary is English for María" (73). While José Luis notes that María "wants a whole new self," it is "too much of a burden" for him. Importantly, he suggests that it isn't love that they share, but a mutual using of one another: "The warmth of her flesh is all I have to make me forget. But alcohol does the same thing. Am I using her? Or is she using me each time she looks at me and loves what is not there?" (86).

It is Soledad that suggest Mary take advantage of her situation with José Luis and begin her transformation of sorts: *"Mijita, if you must lose your head over that boy, at least apply yourself and use the experience to shore up your Spanish"* (Martínez 40). After he tells her that he loves her, María writes Soledad, saying, "Now I have a reason to improve my Spanish. I have a word and a way of life to conjugate: Quiero, quieres, quiere, quieremos..." Their relationship pushes her to make stronger connections to her roots. It is for this reason that she practices her Spanish with him daily, and her connection to her Chicana identity is born.

Significantly, María's emergence as a Chicana does not truly occur until after the climactic part of the novel where José Luis unburdens himself physically on her after she asks him about Ana, a woman from his past. His reaction is physical and horrible:

Ribs heaving, he came at me like a jaguar. And he let loose a terrible cry of *no*. Words surfaced on the dark waters of that *no*: *I've been looking for you. We found Ana's body in the ravine near the airport. I saw what you did to her hands and her tongue You hunted me down like an animal. We were going to get married. All we wanted was an ordinary life.* I sat, paralyzed on the dark bed. For a terrible, eternal instant clouds extinguished the moonlight and my face had disappeared and become the face of the soldier who killed Ana, the soldier with no heart, dismembered and dismembering. (Martínez 159-60).

He beats her in a rage, unable to see her for who she is, unleashing his pent up pain and anger, eventually stopping after she says, repeatedly, “It’s me, María” (Martínez 64). In revealing the truth about his knowledge of war, of pain, of loss and suffering, he triggers memory in María. She writes that after he stops, and realizes what he has done, they held one another and wept. But then, “the room began to spin, sickness washed over [her] abdomen. Then, [she] remembered” (Martínez 164). What María remembers is the painful moment of molestation she suffered at just seven years of age. Her mother has gone to see her father at the hospital, and María finds herself alone with the neighbor:

He says, your dress is crooked. What a pretty red dress. Let me straighten it out. But I hear, I’m going to straighten you out.

Something about the hem of my pretty dress being too short.
Something about hands crawling up my thighs, thumbs under panties.

A finger in a place you hardly know exists is a knife. A knife in a place for which you have no word is the most lethal of weapons. It carves words on your inner walls to fill the void. Words like *chaos*, *slut*, *don’t tell*, *your fault*.

José Luis allows her to come to the truth of her own abuse, her own war: “I was hurt badly once upon a time. And now I know how I was hurt. There’s not much I can do with the information per say. But maybe that ‘s the point. What I know is more than information. It’s truth. I might never completely ‘recover.’ But I feel I have a chance to be free” (171). Significantly, however, this is the final transition for her. In telling

her son her story, this story, she writes: "Twenty years later I still go by the name María. When I said to José Luis, it's me, María, I remembered. And the ghost of the man with the minus sign smile fled. The demon could not bear it. He could not bear the sound of my true name" (Martínez 168).

III. KNOWING-UNKNOWN

Eventually, upon reflection, María realizes that her "heart needed to be broken and reset properly so it could carry [her] through life" (155), as "it is with bones" (155). It is when she realizes this that she moves into the knowing-unknown phase that Martinez describes, seeking her own connection to her family history and the history of her people in the United States. After José Luis leaves her, after he breaks her heart, María begins to make a true connection to her Chicana self, seeking out her own history and a stronger connection to her indigenous roots. She reminds herself, for example, that an ancestor helped make a "soup of straw and mud" to coat the outer walls of the San Rafael Catholic Church when she begins to fall in love: "When the spinning began and desperation set in, I reminded myself that I am the descendant of women who did something useful with their hands, who knew what really mattered was to help shape something that would outlast their lives and their loves" (24). Here, by looking back to her ancestry, she finds a source of strength.

It is also while she is attempting to cope with José Luis's absence that she asks Soledad to teach her about the old remedios. Soledad gives her a list of items to

get to start her medicine cabinet, and thanks God that María is interested in “the old ways” (109). The link between the old remedios and spirituality is important, because “you can’t study herbs without a sense of the ins and outs of the spiritual life” (112). Additionally, Soledad notes, María’s ancestors were “Christians and medicine men,” and she should respect her current “incarnation” (111). Chanette Romero links the novel to liberation theology, a “controversial Latin American theology that demands that the Catholic Church work to liberate the people of the world from poverty and oppression” which is denounced by traditional Roman Catholicism “because of its Marxist leanings” (185). However, Romero argues that Martínez’s move to connect the material body “back to the land and culture of its ancestors” as troublesome and problematic (185-86). She writes, “The novel suggests that in order for violated bodies to be saved and healed, they must return not only to the language, food, and culture of their ancestors, but to a more balanced relationship with the land,” and in an endnote, explains that this disrupts the Catholic notion of free will, negating the possibility of change (186; 189). I argue, instead, that Martínez is suggesting an integration of the language, food, and culture of María’s ancestors in order to heal the way traditional Roman Catholicism has disrupted indigenous belief systems to the detriment of modern culture, a culture that lacks balance. Instead, Martínez blends Catholicism with indigenous spiritualities. As Marietta Messmer notes, Chicana revisions of Catholicism often have their roots and Aztec and Mexican folk culture, sometimes evolving into a syncretic blend, which makes it easy for Chicanas “to specifically emphasize or

create non-orthodox practices and reinterpret mainstream Catholic doctrines and symbols in innovative ways” because of Chicanas’ “very practical concerns for survival in their everyday socio-political reality, sandwiched between Anglo-American cultural norms and Mexican-American cultural traditions” (261).

IV. WRITING THE BODY AS SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

María’s social-justice Catholicism is enacted through her need to write her story, share her pain, and through her activism. Even though the erotic leads María to a greater sense of self, she realizes that she is not yet whole. This only comes through the process of writing down her experiences with José Luis. While she believed that another man could perhaps “make her whole,” and continued to believe this long after José Luis left her, she regrets that she hadn’t been writing then: “All that time I could have been writing, touching the fires of my being and returning to the world, purified and strong” (Martínez 68). However, she realizes that writing is necessary.

Like Anzaldúa, if she does not write her story down, she will become physically afflicted. María tells the reader that she feels resentment about having “opened the wound” when she admits to the reader that José Luis left her, that he disappeared. She can not forgive him for this, and she can’t forgive herself, even twenty years later, for loving him then and loving him still (88). But she had to write these things down, give herself a voice, because “the unspoken words were

turning into hooks, they were caught in [her] throat" (89). Telling her story became physically necessary:

Once a story is begun the whole thing must be told or it kills. If the teller does not let it out, the tale will seize her, and she will live it over and over without end, all the while believing she is doing something new. The Great Circle will come to represent not life but stagnation, repetition; she will die on a Catherine wheel of her own making. (89)

She also notes here the importance of writing: "Thank God I've at least got the notebook. As long as I can keep moving my hand across the page I know I won't die of depression" (102). María admits that in some ways she's envious of José Luis's ability to tell his story, making his wounds "open to everyone" (172). She recognizes that her own pain is "not on the same scale as death squads," but notes that it isn't about "who got hurt more"—her story is important, too, and being able to tell her story is a part of the healing process: "Anyway, it's good that I've got this notebook. I feel better already, just writing things down."

In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa articulates the healing power of writing, that writing is not just about telling "stories," but about confronting one's demons. She asserts that when she writes

I choose words, images, and body sensations and animate them to impress them on my consciousness, thereby making changes in my belief system and reprogramming my consciousness. This involves looking my inner demons in the face, then deciding which I want in

my psyche. Those I don't want, I starve; I feed them no words, no images, no feelings. I spend no time with them, share not my home with them. Neglected, they leave. This is harder to do than to merely generate 'stories'" (*Borderlands* 93).

The process that Anzaldúa describe here represents the way in which confronting her demons become possible through the words she chooses, and those that she does not. In addition, the words become flesh: "Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable" (*Borderlands* 93). The act of writing, then, is a transformative act: "My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body" (*Borderlands* 95). Martínez, similarly, states:

A long time ago I learned that if I were to stay sane, I had to jot down notes in the margins of the official story, the story as handed down in everything from church catechisms that are less than kind to women to proclamations of war that are making Earth a very unwelcoming place for all life forms. The margins are a great place to debunk. To tell your own version of the story. To imagine what a better world might look like. To rest up. Soon enough you'll feel a tickle in your gut. That's not fear. It's desire to act, go forth and bless this mess, create a world worthy of being inherited by the poor, in which the rich are sent away empty. (*Confessions* 3)

Through the act of writing things down, like Anzaldúa, María is able to understand her own pain. She says, “I know of no joy as great, while waiting for the caffeine to strike, as moving pen across a page. It’s like watching a pointer skirting across a Ouija board; letter by letter, answers come” (173). Ironically, the man with the minus sign smile brought her mother a box of pens and notebooks before he moved:

The man who tried to gut me like a fish had no idea what he had done by giving away those things. I swam and then I soared as I made up stories in notebooks that were blank except for a few pages of mathematical formulas. I like to think I am above revenge, but just imagine how sweet it feels; I got in the last word. Is this revenge? Or is it, as Soledad would surely say, the spirit working in mysterious ways?” (173-74).

But it is telling not only her story, but also José Luis’s story, that María’s social-justice inspired sensibilities are exposed:

The text suggests that by acknowledging the pain experienced by material bodies, readers are discouraged from identifying with unjust peoples and governments that privilege power over human life. The text encourages its readers instead to privilege the corporeal along with the spiritual, life along with the afterlife (Romero 185).

Martínez has noted that “When we can understand the roots of our own pain, first, we realize that we’re not alone, and the healing begins... And second, we can build

coalitions with other people we thought were really different, whose pain we previously could not understand" (qtd. in Manolis 45). *Mother Tongue*, then, encourages its readers to identify, and build "coalitions," with traumatized others, to work towards social justice. "Although the novel narrates how violence directed at communities touches the bodies and lives of individual, [...] *Mother Tongue* also offers its own hopeful distortion of this process in which individuals become involved in community movements against violence" (Vigil 65). This is tied to spiritual activism because through the act of writing, "you call, like the ancient chamana, the scattered pieces of your soul back to you body" (Anzaldúa, "now let us shift" 574). This internal work, along with her commitment to social change, works to "change the world" (Anzaldúa, "now let us shift" 574).

Therefore, the final part of María's transformation comes through her activism. Where she once hated Soledad's "God-willings," her fatalism and realism, she came to understand "that by accepting things as they were, Soledad found energy to try and change the world, or at least her portion of it" (Martínez 147). After the birth of her son, who was three months premature, María fought despair while her child fought for his life. Soledad, sensing her pain and fearing that it would become too much for her, told her to "offer up [her] pain for the mothers whose children are disappeared" (Martínez 147):

I offered up my helplessness, all that was small and weak and frightened inside me, on behalf of those who were worse off. And somehow, Soledad's mandate became an umbilical cord through

which I received nutrients of meaning. [...] Since that time I have tried to interpret “offering it up” for my friends. “Empathy does not quite embody its spirit. No, the word I think comes closest is “solidarity,” and it is that word that resonates the most with my friends and my son, the nonbelievers. (Martínez 147-48)

She eventually joins the PTA, a “Parents for Peace” project that educated other parents about nuclear war and nuclear waste, wanting a better world for her son (Martínez 148-49). She writes: “With each vote I cast or letter to the editor that I ghosted for friends, another part of me woke up” (Martínez 149).

Yxta Maya Murray states that for her, the erotic “encompasses a wide spectrum of human emotion—sexual pleasure, vibrancy, life-force, laughter, and antic energy”; after suffering a depression, Murray decided to “*get up* and couple [her] desire for the erotic with [her] desire for social justice” (22). Remembering a meeting with the Women’s Action Coalition in San Francisco, where feminist activists gathered to protest war, anti-abortion measures and sexism in the art world was one of the most erotic events she ever encountered:

In that downtown art gallery where it took place, an all-female congregation swirled around me, and I saw women laughing, dancing, kissing, swaying, touching, yelling, chanting, and speechifying. Happiness, energy, sex, and political protest were in no way divided. These activists, in fact, were *harnessing* their erotic energy to protest state and art-world malfeasance. (Murray 22)

By writing María as a character whose recognition of her own experiences of domestic violence enable her to hear the voices of Salvadoran survivors, and by emphasizing the transformative effects María's trip to El Salvador has on her growth as a woman and an activist, Martínez offers an example of how confronting gendered violence within the nation-state (The U.S. and El Salvador), may play an important role in mounting anti-imperial resistance to many kinds of violence" (Vigil 70-71). This is illustrated in the version of the alter she has in her adult home. No longer filled with the Santos of her previous life, her reincarnated alter now includes a poster of the *Madre de los desaparecidos*, alongside a picture of José Luis, and a picture of María as a seven year old girl. This alter reflects her transformation, her healing, and her social activism.

CONCLUSION

Éste quehacer—internal work coupled with commitment to struggle for social transformation—changes your relationship to your body, and, in turn, to other bodies and to the world. And when that happens, you change the world.

~Gloria Anzaldúa

As I have shown here, there is a “fiction of cultural resistance” that explicates a rhetoric of resistance through the use of erotics as decolonization and the inherent link to spiritual activism and social justice in the novels *Naked Ladies* by Alma Luz Villanueva, and *Mother Tongue* by Demetria Martínez. These texts reveal the reinscription of the spiritual into the sexual through the sexual agency of their protagonists. In addition, I have argued that the authors’ reconfiguration of female sexuality lends to a spiritual activism that works as a decolonizing force. The protagonists’ *weapon* “is not merely the written word, or spoken one, or fantasy...[but] her body itself, and what she does with that body” (D. Castillo qtd. in E. Martínez, 133).

Villanueva’s *Naked Ladies* not only illustrates the socially and culturally enforced suppression of the female sexual body, it links this oppression to the abuse of the men who serve patriarchy. Villanueva succeeds in writing the truth about women’s bodies and sexual pleasures in order to break taboos, which succeeds in “opening the wound” that Anzaldúa describes at the opening of *Borderlands*, and breaking through the silences imposed on Chicanas through their bodies and sexuality in order to heal this wound. Alta, the protagonist, exemplifies this as she

moves through the stages “conocimiento” through her development of an erotic sensibility that not only serves as a sexually decolonizing force in the way that it challenges and subverts the dominant culture’s demands on her Chicana and sexual self, but also leads to the development of a spiritual activism that allows her to take her newly formed sexual knowledge to the healing of a larger community. She is transformed into a whole, actualized self, content with her surroundings, able to let go of the past. Where before she needed to care for herself, attend to the needs that had been oppressed and neglected her entire life, she is now able to care for others in a way that does not require her own self-neglect. In her ability to focus on others and the commitment to the struggle for social transformation, her spiritual activism helps heal and change the world.

In *Mother Tongue*, by Demetria Martínez, this process of spiritual actualization and activism is also gained through the protagonist, María’s development into an actualized Chicana identity, based in her development of an erotic sensibility, but also the expression of spiritual activism that is gained in writing the body. Through the love affair between María and José Luis, both characters confront the violence of their pasts, and through the power of the erotic, María comes to fully identify as Chicana, becomes “whole,” and create a spiritual space that allows for activism, and writing the body accomplishes this need. The act of writing is transformative: “My soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remaking and giving birth to itself through my body” (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* 95). Through the character of María, and the act of writing, then, *Mother*

Tongue encourages its readers to identify, and build “coalitions,” with traumatized others, to work towards social justice, reflecting the self-reflection and self-growth that is attached to the outward-directed, compassionate acts that are central to spiritual activism and the desire to bring about material change.

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