

POETRY IS NOT MADE OF WORDS:  
A STUDY OF AESTHETICS OF THE BORDERLANDS IN  
GLORIA ANZALDÚA AND MARLENE NOURBESE PHILIP

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Ph.D.  
Graduate Department of Comparative Literature  
University of Toronto

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Carmen Cáliz-Montoro, Ph.D. University of Toronto, 1996.  
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores an alternative critical approach as a way to overcome the limitations of North American cultural criticism in dealing with literature from the borderlands. Literatures that are in between two or more cultures are not well served by one established cultural context. Therefore, the parameters drawn from geopolitics, history, ethnicity, and gender of one culture are insufficient. The aesthetics of the borderlands creates a metaphorical space in which to explore the writings that emerge from the experiences of women who embody multiple cultural backgrounds. The poetry written by Marlene Nourbese Philip and Gloria Anzaldúa finds alternative forms to writing for reaching out to difference. Difference and writing are here recontextualized through the concept of the borderlands, which involves the language of myth and mythic consciousness once it transcends its territorial limitations.

Anzaldúa and Philip's work is circumscribed by the sociopolitical realities being women, and a lesbian in the case of Anzaldúa, being mestiza or Black, and being writers. These three paradigms are juxtaposed in the borderlands of a collective historico-poetic consciousness. Within the framework of "exile," from a mainstream audience, language proceeds by consciously remembering and defying a white culture and history that attempt to

forget by violent erasure. The rearticulation of poetry, then, even transcends the displaced borderlands created between the lines, in the gaps, in the clusters of words that obstruct like rocks, and in the silences of awe and recognition that written forms conceal.

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July 25th 1996

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## INTRODUCTION

If no one listens and cries  
is it still poetry  
if no one sings the note  
    between the silence  
if the voice doesn't founder  
    on the edge of the air  
is it still music  
if there is no one to hear  
is it love  
or does the sea always roar  
in the shell at the ear?<sup>1</sup>

The continuing cultural survival of marginalized ethnic groups has shed new light on our understanding of the history of peoples whose testimonies have been ignored or silenced in the past.

Poetry is the medium through which poets, such as Marlene Nourbese Philip and Gloria Anzaldúa, direct a critical rethinking of the role of contemporary women writers who do not fit into a mainstream frameworks of history and literature. Through their poetry, these writers create new perspectives that examine issues of difference and writing from a marginalized position, which I contextualize and read through the concept of the borderlands and the borderlands aesthetics. The experience of these poets as women of color<sup>2</sup> is built

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<sup>1</sup> Philip, M. Nourbese, "Anonymous," Salmon Courage (Stratford, Ontario: Williams Wallace, 1984)p.2.

<sup>2</sup>I am keeping the term women of color to refer to women from different ethnic minority backgrounds as it is used by these women to define themselves.

upon a recognition of racial and ethnic roots, the values of which are not shared by a large part of the community in which they write. These values take us back to such different parts of the world as the South West of the U.S., the Caribbean,<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the roots of these poets reach as far back as a mythic collective unconscious, which help to recontextualize texts that do not fall on either side of literary and historical borders.

This thesis explores an alternative critical approach as a way to overcome the limitations of North American cultural criticism in dealing with literature from the borderlands. Literatures that are in between two or more cultures are not well served by one established

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<sup>3</sup>There has been a vast amount of post-colonial feminist critical writing in the last few decades. For instance, Displacements, Angelika Bammer, ed. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), explores the meanings of "home," "community," and cultural exile; Decolonizing Feminism, Laura E. Donaldson (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), deals more with a rereading of traditional white feminists and confronts the opposition "first" and "third" into a more constructive relationship. Other works, such as Thresholds of Difference. Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory, Julia V. Emberley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); Oppositional Aesthetics, Arun Mukherjee (Toronto: TSAR, 1994); Woman, Native, Other, Trinh T. Minh-ha (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), deeply engage in a discourse that contests and juxtaposes issues regarding race, class and gender and the reality of women from different multicultural backgrounds. These critics have contributed immensely to the raising of awareness about the oppression and repression of women and women's discourses of identity. This dissertation moves one step further in the direction of the borderlands and myth. in order to find new parameters in which to discuss issues of identity through the languages of poetry which is not only comprised of words.



cultural context. Therefore, the parameters drawn from geopolitics, history, ethnicity, and gender of one culture are insufficient. The aesthetics of the borderlands also create a metaphorical space in which to explore the poetry and critical writings that emerge from the experiences of women who embody multiple cultural backgrounds. The poetry written by Marlene Nourbese Philip and Gloria Anzaldúa finds alternative forms to mainstream writing and moves one step further in the direction of the borderlands and myth. This move establishes new parameters to discuss issues of identity through the language of poetry. Poetry and myth are here conducive to a level of discourse in which geopolitical borderlands are transcended, for this discourse is placed or rather displaced outside the rigid structures of manmade linear historical time and geographical space.

To identify the voice of difference is to identify not only the voice expressed in words but most importantly the voices erased by the silences and absences that have shaped unacknowledged literary landscapes. Anzaldúa's "mujer cacto" tells us that "La mujer del desierto/ tiene espinas/ las espinas son sus ojos/ si tú te le arrimas te araña./ La mujer del desierto/ tiene largas y afiladas garras".<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa

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<sup>4</sup>"The woman of the desert has thorns/ the thorns are her eyes/ if you get close she will scratch you." Gloria Anzaldúa. Borderlands/La frontera (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), p.180 (my

also unearths the silenced female voice of Coatlicue to bring back the long lost gender balance that this Aztec mother of gods embodies.

In the case of Nourbese Philip's Looking for Livingstone. An Odyssey of Silence (1991), a heroine without a name becomes the timeless landscape in which the object and the subject of search overlap. Firstly, she flounders in the unrecognized silence of oppression inherited from her ancestors. Secondly, she struggles against the repressed silence that dwells in the midst of a patriarchal world cursed by words.

Gloria Anzaldúa and Marlene Nourbese Philip's work is circumscribed by three political realities: being women and a lesbian in the case of Anzaldúa, being mestiza or Black, and being writers. These paradigms are juxtaposed in the borderlands created by a writing of difference in which new linguistic values are proposed. Writing and its creative process involve here words, sound of the written expression, and the backgrounds connected to them through myth. The latter look at a language that proceeds by consciously re-remembering and defying a culture and history that attempt to forget by violent erasure.

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translation).

I have divided this thesis into two parts. In part one, I present several theories on borderlands' aesthetics from different disciplines. I proceed with the aesthetics of borderlands proposed in the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and problematize what happens when literary texts are read within a context in which the basic values that they express are not shared by the community at large. Lastly, I look at how she strives to create an aesthetic of the borderlands as a space that challenges the notion of "Otherness."<sup>5</sup>

Gloria Anzaldúa's writing gives priority to her

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<sup>5</sup>The issue of "Otherness" has been amply explored by numerous disciplines as a means to signal opposition and to understand the voicing of difference. This difference has been usually identified with inferiority and silence with regards to the "One" speaking. In "Voicing difference: the literary production of native women," Barbara Godard spells out the interface between the oral and the written in Canadian literature. In her analysis, "To enter into that silence in order to voice difference is to leave behind the fixed text that is isolated and frozen in a written transcription and to become involved in the dynamic interaction of teller and audience." A Mazing Space (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1986), p. 91. The silence that I will be focusing on in this thesis takes into account the interface between the oral and the written but moves its focus into the borderlands in which sound, voice and silence interact and create a different moment of silence. It is the silence of understanding and awe, which I fully elaborate in chapter five and the conclusion.

For a philosophical elaboration of the self, others and the Other, see also Joel Kovel's History and Spirit, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); and for a psychological approach see Carl G. Jung's exposition on the "other being" within ourselves as the inner friend of the soul in The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Bollingen Series XX. Trans. by R.F.C. Hull. (New York: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.131.

Chicano identity. As a Chicana, her body becomes the border space that defies fixity. Through a direct and physical identification with the geography of the South West of the United States, she becomes the site in which the constant criss-crossing of ethnic and gender categories occurs. This is explored at the end of chapter one.

Anzaldúa's aesthetics of the borderlands invites us to question and reinterpret Western world values as presented by earlier multidisciplinary theoretical approaches using binary oppositions. In chapters two and three, the move from the physical geographical landscape to a mythic mind space facilitates the exploration of an aesthetics of borderlands which overcomes its initial spatial and temporal limitations, that is its contemporary connection to a specific geographical space and moment in time. My reading of Mircea Eliade's concept of hierophanies, mythic cyclic structures, in relation to the Aztec deity Coatlicue demonstrates the illusory nature of boundaries which bind us to "the real world," as opposed to the realm of myth, dreams, and "fiction."

Anzaldúa's contribution contests earlier attempts to theorize women's position as "Other," a position which has perpetuated misunderstanding and promoted competition among women. Maria Lugones suggests that the root to this problem lies in the failure of love:

I think part of the failure of love includes the failure to identify with another woman, the failure to see oneself in other women who are quite different from ourselves.

("Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception". María Lugones).

One could further argue that the failure to identify with another woman, and other human beings, is not the failure of love but our failure to love difference, and our fear to look at such fear differently. This is crucial to the discourse on borderlands and difference, especially if it is not to rely on a logic of appropriation, incorporation and labelling.

Anzaldúa's project is synthesized in one of the opening paragraphs to her book Borderlands/La Frontera:

There, at the junction of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born. Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture--to translate to Anglos, Mexican, and Latinos, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you--from the new mestizas.<sup>6</sup>

Gloria Anzaldúa's invitation to meet halfway is the foundation of her aesthetics of the borderlands and the

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<sup>6</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa. "Preface", Borderlands/La Frontera, (San Francisco: spinster/aunt lute, 1987).

U.S./Mexican geopolitical and historical experience of Chicanos. The literal and metaphorical spaces of Anzaldúa's discourse come together at the crossroads where different disciplines and genres meet. More specifically, Anzaldúa's poetry sets up a literary framework for a new aesthetics of borderlands. According to some critics<sup>7</sup> this is poetry as "theory" or critique, and people such as Anzaldúa are poet-critics. In the Latin American literary context to use the hyphenated<sup>8</sup> term is like an extension of the identity that goes with the hyphenated surname of the Latin American immigrant. It signals double identity, for it comprises both the patrilineal and matrilineal origins. The use of language in Anzaldúa falls within this line since it includes both poetry and criticism. Moreover, it raises awareness about issues that affect not only Chicanos but us all.

The discourse on borderlands articulates Chicanas' presence within American history and the history and geography of the South West. The borderlands, then, become a dynamic scenario that signals work in progress, and sets up contrasts that shake the foundations of

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<sup>7</sup>Diane P. Freedman. "Living on the Borderland: The poetic Prose of Gloria Anzaldúa and Susan Griffin," from Women and Language, Vol. 12, No.1 (1989).

<sup>8</sup>For further elaboration on living and writing in a hyphen, see Carmen Rodríguez's "I Live in a Language That's Not Mine." The Other Woman. Women of Color in Contemporary Canadian Literature. Makeda Silvera, ed. (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1995), 208.

stereotypes.

Within this work, the borderlands become further conceptualized as an interface, a metaphorical artifice to articulate "the masks we've internalized."<sup>9</sup> The discourse of the borderlands is born precisely within this literary interface, which according to Anzaldúa's definition of interface is "[t]he act of sewing a piece of material between two pieces of fabric to provide support and stability to collar, cuff, yoke" (1991, xv). The interface rests between the masks that we have internalized. The literary parallel is the textual gap, the blank space or silence, which wields the powerful element of dissonance<sup>10</sup>. This visual metaphor of the interface illustrates the inevitable criss-crossing of levels of expression in Anzaldúa's poetry and prose. "Interfacing" and "criss-crossing" reinforce the unceasing agency and progressive form of her work.

The interfacing of geopolitical, historical, literary, and linguistic discourses is not proposed here as a theoretical model but as a temporary and literary construct to illustrate the textual space that Anzaldúa

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<sup>9</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa. Making Face, Making Soul. Haciendo Caras. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), p. xv.

<sup>10</sup>I use the word dissonance according to the following definition, "a lack of agreement among beliefs, or between beliefs and actions." Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. (Bath, England: Longman Group Ltd., 1978), p. 317.

and Nourbese Philip occupy at this present moment in the U.S.A. and Canada respectively.

The positioning of this topic can be interpreted as yet another artificial interfacing within the textual borderlands, an act of academic writing contrived to compare different theories on borderlands across various disciplines, and to allow these differences to interact and clash. Theory and poetic analysis in this dissertation are intended to treat the differences of person and perspective without homogenizing the individuals that constitute the research corpus. My reading is also committed to a methodological approach that reflects the interconnection of the parts and parties involved. As the following quotation from Winnie Tomm suggests,

Inner space is relational: it exists within the context of interconnecting circles of self, home and community. A theory of ethics must take into account the interconnecting circles of a person's existence. Recognizing self, home, and community as interacting networks means acknowledging the interweaving strands of societal and personal rights and responsibilities.<sup>11</sup>

The integration of dialogue across differences creates a bridge between multiple layers of written words and

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<sup>11</sup>Winnie Tomm, "Ethics of Self-Knowing: The Satisfaction of Desire" in Explorations in Feminist Ethics. Theory and Practice, ed. Eve Browning Cole & Susan Coultrap-McQuin. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1992), p. 105.



silences, as well as between wide cultural gaps. The interconnection among disciplines within borderlands studies is built upon this strategy which has been widely explored in post-colonial theories and literatures. These studies combine history, geography, sociology, anthropology, and ethnology to mention some of the main disciplines involved. The strategies employed by Gloria Anzaldúa follow up on this complementary structure; however, they differ importantly from earlier approaches. For instance, she gathers the disparate elements, as in a geographical and literary exile, where all backgrounds interact like the pieces in a kaleidoscope. Her work, thus, breaks down binary oppositions and hierarchies and accomplishes what earlier debates started to do, that is, to move away from the rigidity of fixed structures and discourses that fed on such extreme positions as black versus white, Native versus Anglo, woman versus man, homosexuality versus heterosexuality.<sup>12</sup> Borderlands aesthetics also transcend the blurring of boundaries which has been thoroughly and extensively addressed by Post-Structuralist discourses. It is in between, that is,

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<sup>12</sup>This is an aspect in Anzaldúa's work that has often been overlooked. It is part of a methodology based on inclusion of all the parts. In the last section of the first part of Borderlands/La frontera, "La consciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness," she specifically includes a subsection called "Que no se nos olviden los hombres ..." Let us not forget our men (translation mine). Although this is not the main focus of her project, it has an acknowledged space within her overall scheme.

at the crossroads that all of the above interact and where the aesthetics of the borderlands come into existence.

There have been important contributions to the understanding of the interaction of different parts of language and linguistic levels, from Ferdinand de Saussure to Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction,<sup>13</sup> Lacanian psycholinguistic discourse and later readjustments of these theories by feminist critics. The poets and critics that become the principal source for this thesis, however, use their sophisticated command of language to take language back to its most original expression, that is, poetry, and the bare poem. In other words, the raw material of poetry is the spirit of myth, as well as its letter. The borderlands then further engage us in a multilayered interactive dialogue with theoretical discourse, myth, and creative writing.

More specifically, women writing from the poetic borderlands designed in this thesis stand on a shifting space in which the Spanish, the Mexican, and the Aboriginal cultural and linguistic origins (the

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<sup>13</sup>It is important to acknowledge here the work by these critics of language. The critics selected for the theoretical framework of the poetic analysis of this thesis, however, has been narrowed down to critics whose work has been conducive to address criticism, poetry and myth. Hence the choice of mythologists in the first part of the thesis, and critics-writers like Maurice Blanchot, L'écriture du désastre (1980) instead of Jacques Derrida, "Living On," Deconstruction and Criticism (1979).

Caribbean, the English and the African in the case of Nourbese Philip), experience multiple clashes and combinations. Anzaldúa's work advises us not to forget any element, any one of the parts, past or present. Thus, in analyzing the works in this study, one is challenged to create new approaches and theories that do not crystalize into the same patterns as those that they criticize.

The positions of most of the critics and scholars included in the first part of this study have been carefully selected; some for their alternative approaches, others for the adherence to mainstream Eurocentric theories that they still project. Among them are Lauren McKinsey, Victor Konrad, Ellwyn R. Stoddard, Oscar J. Martinez, Héctor Calderón, and José David Saldívar. The theories on the aesthetics of the borderlands articulated by these theoreticians are sampled according to Calderón and Saldívar's Chicano proposition "to remap the borderland of theory and theorists"<sup>14</sup>. Performance artists like Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña are mentioned briefly by way of contrast to further illustrate the borderlands as live metaphor, and its criss-crossing as the literal

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<sup>14</sup>Héctor Calderón & José David Saldívar, eds. Criticism in the Borderlands. Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture and Ideology. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 7.

trajectory in which borders are constantly being redrawn and renegotiated.

Integration of the levels mentioned above, as happens within Anzaldúa's work, allows for the generation of critical theories; however, the prime material for this thesis returns to the original genre of poetry. I see the poetry and theoretical discourse of Gloria Anzaldúa and Nourbese Philip as made up of many parts that need to be gathered and reintegrated. They function like the pieces of a kaleidoscope, which suggests a space of changing designs and colors that mirror the ever-changing make up the New Mestiza and Borderlands women. In the interstices created by disintegrating categories, a new aesthetics of the Borderlands comes into existence; one which functions as an epitome for the temporality of human existence.

- II -

Part two of this thesis transcends the initial territorialization of the topic and tackles the problem of displaced frontiers. It comprises chapter IV, chapter V, and an epilogue that reflects the transcendence of sound and silence over a capitalist massification of the word, which I read as cursed by the times and history. Geographically, it involves the Canadian frontier and

borderlands. The latter stand for the whole of Canada, for they cover the area between the northern territories and the border with the United States.

The experience of the Canadian borderlands is constituted in a discourse of displacement and exile. It is developed in chapter four where it also becomes conceptualized in the concepts of "pseudo-wilderness" by Heather Murray ("Women in the Wilderness"); in the act of reading and writing from a "hyphenated space" proposed by South-Asian Arun Mukherjee, Chilean poet Carmen Rodríguez, and in the article by Himani Bannerji "Re: Turning the Gaze"; lastly, in the space of "limbo" by Claire Harris ("Poets in Limbo.")

On a psychological level, the aesthetics of borderlands occupy the threshold from which Canadian women writers from racial minority backgrounds express their voices. This chapter also problematizes the reconstruction of female subject positions as an extension of wilderness, nature, and its untamed territories. The last section contests Sander Gilman's psychological basis and understanding of otherness and difference from his work Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness (1985).

Lastly, chapter V moves from the physical realm of geographical borderlands, as seen in chapters I and IV, to literary borderlands of exile which I refer to as the

"exile of being." In this last chapter, I return to mythic narrative. I look at the ancient Western myths of Narcissus and Echo and at the limitations they convey when we try to understand the complex dynamics that operate around issues of identity. These interrelated myths and Maurice Blanchot's work on history and writing in The Writing of the Disaster (1986) provide a theoretical frame which later interjects with the epic poem by Nourbese Philip Looking for Livingstone. An Odyssey of Silence (1991).<sup>15</sup>

Philip's Odyssey challenges the classical genre of epic narrative in two particular ways. Firstly, the journeyer is a female protagonist with no name. Secondly, contrary to what happens in other modern versions of the classical odyssey, such as James Joyce's Ulysses, the quest is not shaped by the quantity of words and pages but in the power of silence. In both Anzaldúa and Nourbese Philip's work, the quality of experience and its literary value subvert an economy of literary mass production. Blanchot's methodology, as a poet and critic, follows the same approach as he writes in epitaphic formulas. In The Writing of the Disaster, the power of words relies on the aura that words emit rather than on the superfluous misuse of concrete formulae. This thesis

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<sup>15</sup>This work will be referred to as Odyssey in the coming chapters.

adheres also to this principle as much as possible since, as suggested by the title, poetry is not only made of words, but of sounds, words and silences. The latter are usually lost to the modern reader whose interaction with the text remains muted and unarticulated through voice.

Bringing together approaches from highly different perspectives allows for a better appreciation of different points of departure. This in turn helps to elucidate where theories complement each other and where they diverge. In this last chapter and the epilogue, I return to myth in order to bring some cohesion to the study of the borderlands of silence, sound and voices.

The common ground of poetry and poetic language exists regardless of the initial differences involved. Poetry exists ultimately between the lines, in the gaps, in the clusters of words that obstruct like rocks, and in the silences of awe and recognition that its written form conceals. The literary common ground which emerges from this experience restores the identity of women writers as something rich, complex and in constant flux. The elements that form this study of Gloria Anzaldúa and Nourbese Philip are informed by the experience of living within the borderlands of multiple levels of existence, a multiplicity that I, myself, criss-cross in order to reach the following temporary conclusion that the heart of "Poetry Is Not Made of Words."

Poetry and the poem are then reapproached as vehicles that serve to materialize the sources, real or imaginary, from which they derive and, afterwards, are conceived and delivered in written form. The written expression, in turn, reconnects the reader back to the source which necessarily involves voice/sound and silence because they unite us directly with pre-linguistic and consciousness-altering sounds.<sup>16</sup> Another close parallel of poetry not made of words is Toni Morrison's metaphor of language as a bird in the hands of people.

In the speech "The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993," Morrison recounts the story of an old woman blind and wise. The wise woman is asked whether the bird held in the hands of two visitors who want to discredit her is alive or dead. Her response is deep silence; and in that meditative silence her "[c]hoice word or the chosen silence, unmolested language surges toward knowledge, not its destruction."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>The kind of poetry that modern readers have lost touch with is still present in other traditions, such as the Aboriginal and Tibetan. For these cultures, the breath of words transmit sacred energy, therefore, the sounds of prayers found in chants and mantras bear both the knowledge and elemental energies which make up transformative rites. For further details see, Peter Gold, Navajo & Tibetan Sacred Wisdom. The Circle of the Spirit, (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1994), pp.188-89.

<sup>17</sup>Toni Morrison, The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 28.



## CHAPTER I

### CHICANOS GEOPOLITICAL, LITERARY AND HISTORICAL IMPRINTS.

Geographical borders and boundaries throughout the world have changed considerably in the last few decades. The term "borderlands" itself has come to cover the reality of an increasingly large group of human beings who experience exile in their homeland.<sup>18</sup> The U.S. South West and Chicanos provide a vivid example of this reality, which originates in a specific geographic landscape of shifting borders.

This chapter brings together different disciplines and demonstrates the interdependent relationship between geopolitical, historical and literary fields. It also attempts to problematize binary models by raising questions, such as what happens when we hear the voices from the Other side of the U.S. border which exist in constant migration? Firstly, I trace the significance of the borderlands as a cultural symbol based upon a collective historical consciousness; secondly, as a metonymy or extension for other experiences of crossing

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<sup>18</sup> The term "homeland" is usually connected to the place of birth, however, for Chicanos it has a deeper layer that relates them to the mythic land of Aztlán, the origin of Aztec Mesoamérica. When used in the context of people who have been exiled most of their life, the term acquires a psychological dimension; it then becomes a space where the old and the new struggle towards integration.

or remaining; and thirdly, as Gloria Anzaldúa's metaphor for a state of mind which feeds on a mythic consciousness and leads to its recuperation and remaking in the present.

- I -

Mexican performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña associates being on the other side of the border with living in a permanent state of exile. In "Documented/Undocumented," included in his work Warrior For Gringostroika, he elaborates on the complexity of what he sees as the result of the uncontainable migrations of human beings, a majority of whom are being displaced involuntarily. Gómez-Peña, who was born in Mexico, finds at least a temporary solution to this dislocation as he identifies himself as a hunter of myths and cultural topographer:

... I have become a cultural topographer, border-crosser, and hunter of myths. And it doesn't matter where I find myself, in Califas or Mexico City, in Barcelona or West Berlin; I always have the sensation that I belong to the same species: the migrant tribe of fiery pupils... I am a child of crisis and cultural syncretism... creating and de-creating myths.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Guillermo Gómez Peña, Warrior for Gringostroika (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Greywolf Press, 1993), pp. 37-38.

For Anzaldúa to survive the Borderlands, you must live sin fronteras and be a crossroads at the same time. To many people, living without and between borders is a far more common experience than ever before. As borders are seen as increasingly artificial and fragile constructions, more peoples and societies are being driven into a state of abstraction. This state could be conceptualized through the antonym of borders, that is, as borderlessness, "vivir sin fronteras". This phenomenon creates two opposite concepts, border and borderless, from a single point of departure, that is the borderlands, and embraces what may appear to be a contradiction. However, it exposes the deeper interconnections between fragmented pieces, as well as the futile artificiality behind strategies of exclusion. The arena where cultural differences have collided, and have had to be re-negotiated in order to attain a certain degree of coexistence starts, once again, in the geographical space around borders.

Historically, the identity of the Chicanos grew out of mixed myths and two main invasions, the first of which started over five hundred years ago with the arrival of the Spaniards and other European peoples; the second, began with the invasion of Mexican soil by the U.S.A. in

the middle of the nineteenth century (1848).<sup>20</sup> Chicano experience, therefore, becomes articulated in opposition and resistance to an invasive mainstream culture. It is within such a theater, then, that Chicanos have lived in constant struggle to integrate and also to negotiate their several cultural backgrounds. At first, it was the Spanish and the Indigenous; nowadays, it involves the Mexican and the English. Lately, the Aboriginal background of Chicanos is finally beginning to be recognized--and not in the derogatory way that had been the case for centuries.

The identity of Chicanos not only grows out of a geographical space, but it is also affected by mixed myths and kinships. According to José David Saldívar, this experience is connected to the historic Chicano cultural dependence on both the northern and the southern American hemispheres: "[W]e feel that at the present moment any glossy version of a postmodern, postindustrial 'America' must be reinterpreted against the influx of

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<sup>20</sup>For the purpose of historical accuracy, I will be using the following gender specific terms in Spanish: Chicano, Chicana, and Chicanas, Chicanos to refer to women and men related and/or writing after the period known as the Chicano Renaissance (1960). The term Mexican and Mexican American is often used to refer to the period after 1848. Before 1848, when talking about the colonial Southwest experience Spanish/Mexican or "Hispano" are alternatively used. For further detail see Infinite Divisions. An Anthology of Chicana Literature. Tey Diana Rebolledo & Eliana S. Rivero (Tucson & London: The University of Arizona Press, 1993). See also Ramón Saldívar's Chicano Narrative. The Dialectics of Difference (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

Third World immigrants and the rapid re-Hispanization of important regional sectors of our Mexican America and the wider United States."<sup>21</sup>

Disciplines as varied as geography, history, politics, and psychology have played a particularly significant role in shaping the literature of the South West US/ Mexican borderlands. Geographical borders do not necessarily divide peoples; however, they affect the way life is organized in distinct ways. For instance, borderlands often form a territory characterized by a high degree of tension and instability. The history of the U.S. South West once more shows a pattern recurrent in human history, that is to say, that geographical borders are not impenetrable. They do not entirely limit a people's identity nor do they disconnect them from the geographical space that they inhabit, or dissociate them

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<sup>21</sup>Héctor Calderón & José David Saldivar, Criticism in the Borderlands (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1991), p.7. Another critic, Caren Kaplan, associates geographical space and displaced identities in her article "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse." Kaplan's work, which brings gender analysis to the discussion of identity, reconceptualizes nomadism through Linda Alcoff's concept of positionality. The integration of nomadism and positionality are a helpful combination to understand the dynamics at play around issues of Chicano identity: "The value of this conception lies in the paradoxical movement between major and minor - a refusal to admit either position as fixed or static. The issue is positionality." (189) On this note, it becomes pertinent to address the distinct position of the Chicanas and their literary framework vis a vis some of the geopolitical theories out of which it grows.

from earlier psycho-spiritual roots.<sup>22</sup> All these features have played a decisive role in the history of the South West and have shaped its literature.

In the new aesthetics of the borderlands proposed by some of the critics included in this study, all the resident groups, together with the landscape of the region on both sides of Rio Grande, are brought into the discussion. Bringing together all the parts that are integrated in Chicanos, 'one is able to better understand how character and psychology are highly influenced by the geographical space, and these profoundly influence other aspects of culture, such as language and literature. For instance, when the Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa writes about "mujer cacto," "Cactus Woman," her use of language evokes the heat, the hostility and harshness of the landscape. The short verses become like scratches that pierce the eye of the reader with her strong images: "La mujer del desierto/tiene espinas/las espinas son sus ojos/si tú te le arrimas te araña." (the desert woman/has thorns/her thorns are her eyes/if you get close she scratches you.)

Linguistically, Anzaldúa's work is important because

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<sup>22</sup>I am thinking here of the Aztec spiritual homeland of Aztlán the exact location of which has been the subject of much speculation. For further interesting details regarding the latter, see Luis Leal's "In Search of Aztlán" in Aztlán. Essays on the Chicano Homeland. Eds. Rudolfo A. Anaya & Francisco Lomeli. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 6-13.

it disrupts the homogeneity of English by intersecting languages from the various cultural backgrounds of the New Mestiza. From a geopolitical and historical perspective, however, the aesthetics of the borderlands starts on different "back-grounds" and discourses.

Borderlands scholars and theoreticians have had to use different kinds of discourse to explain the changes operating in this growing field of research. Lately, for instance, borderlands studies have had to adopt more inclusive approaches. The introduction of the term "borderlands" in the plural rather than in singular reflects a refinement in terminology, which acknowledges linguistically a pluralistic point of departure regarding disciplines, models, and methodologies around borderlands.

There are several key borderlands specialists who have contributed to this field with their respective interdisciplinary approaches: Lauren McKinsey & Victor Konrad, Carey McWilliams, Ellwyn R. Stoddard, and Oscar J. Martínez. Some of their theories around borderlands signal a point of departure shaped by their own Eurocentric background. Nevertheless, it is important to include them here in order to better comprehend the gradual changes that have occurred within this field.

Lauren MacKinsey and Victor Konrad define the border regions as "a contiguous zone in which exchanges between

two nation-states take place"<sup>23</sup> (italics mine). Terms such as "exchange" and "blending" perpetuate the power imbalance that often permeates the misconstruction of border realities.<sup>24</sup> Their study, however, provides a first borderlands paradigm in which to examine the intersection of political science and geography.

MacKinsey and Konrad's approach engages "the dialectic between 'boundary' as a political demarcation, and the notion of 'region' as a geographic entity which may be resistant to an artificial division by a political border."<sup>25</sup> Their theory pictures the borderlands as a zone where societies can either come together or come apart. As a contrast their work also compares the Canadian/US borderlands, which according to some scholars does not exist, and the American/Mexican borderlands. In their own definition of the borderlands only the latter can be properly considered as such because of the "apparent" social, economic and cultural differences:

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<sup>23</sup>Lauren McKinsey and Victor Konrad, Borderlands Reflections. The United States and Canada, (Borderlands Monograph Series #1. Printed in USA, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>Another classical example of borderlands theories from the North is that of Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1963 collection of essays The Frontier in American History. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson. Turner's frontier thesis is rooted in American history and the expansionism of the white man in relation to wilderness. For an extensive analysis of Turner's theory, see Howard I. Kushner, "The Persistence of the "Frontier Thesis" in America: Gender, Myth, and Self-Destruction." Canadian Review Of American Studies, 1992 Special Issue, Part I.

<sup>25</sup>McKinsey and Konrad, Borderlands Reflections, 2.



Borderlands is a region jointly shared by two nations that houses people with common social characteristics in spite of the political boundary between them. In a more narrow sense, borderlands can be said to exist when shared characteristics within the region set it apart from the country that contains it.<sup>26</sup>

This quotation speaks directly to the Mexican/US border and its political boundary, which first separated Mexico from the Southwest in 1858, making Mexicans homeless in their own territory. Nowadays, these supposedly artificial political boundaries are still marked by the border patrol and fortified with barbed wire fences.

McKinsey and Konrad's understanding of the borderlands is limited at some points, for it draws commonalities between the two unequal sides, and overlooks the overt social, economic, and political disparities affecting the respective parties involved. In a narrow sense, McKinsey and Konrad argue that explicit crossing of the border occurs only at the border itself. In a broader sense, however, some border crossings reach far into the borderlands, that is, into the interior of one country or the other.<sup>27</sup> For these critics, the buffer zone that borderlands create works as a space

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>27</sup> Here, they have in mind the fact that the technological exploitation of airwaves obliterates most attempts to constrain this exchange. Exchanges are likely to increase with proximity to the boundary but there is no fixed distance between the boundary itself and the interior edge of the border region.

guaranteeing the continued separation of two cultures rather than as a stepping stone to political integration. Their understanding of the US/Mexican buffer zone also reflects the continuing tensions over the legitimacy of the border itself. The perceived difference between the two cultures is determined by the historical moment in question. In the South West, Mexicans are seen as the smaller culture which is intruding at the edge of the larger culture, creating tension and resistance.<sup>28</sup>

This conclusion supports the position of some scholars who have decided that an American-Canadian borderlands does not exist- at least not one that compares favorably with the American-Mexican borderlands. The latter exhibits a commonality of objective features and a sense of community that sets the region apart from the main culture in either the US or Mexico; by contrast, "the American-Canadian borderlands is more complex, certainly more diverse, and at first hand less apparent."<sup>29</sup>

Earlier on in their article, McKinsey and Konrad had argued that, in the case of American-Mexican border, two different cultures are involved, that there is resistance to the incursion of the smaller, but more rapidly growing

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 6.

culture and that the border itself is treated as a kind of garrison wall<sup>30</sup>. While McKinsey and Konrad's definition is a useful point of departure, they do not elaborate on the constitutive differences existing among the communities that inhabit the Mexican/U.S. borderlands. The wider frame in which the latter are inscribed remains somehow vague because their theory fails to foreground important historical, social, political, and economic factors operating in the "exchanges" between North-Americans and Mexicans. Another aspect that escapes their attention is the labor situation existing today, for instance, in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana where numerous maquilladoras operate, due to the underpaid labor force of Mexicans who have migrated or daily commute to the north. This massive movement of people is seen as a severe threat to the U.S. economy if they are to live in the north. On the other hand, they remain unrecognized as an important basis for the growth of the U.S. economy.

Overall, the argument elaborated by McKinsey and Konrad fails to address the political and ideological realities of Chicanos at the border, their resistance to homogenization into the U.S.A., and their denunciation of overt exploitative policies of U.S. authorities in the

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<sup>30</sup>This approach brings to mind Northrop Frye's thesis that Canadian culture exhibits a garrison mentality in the face of the geography of the land and the culture surrounding it.

borderlands.<sup>31</sup> Their theories remain limited, for they do not treat or elaborate on the situation at the southern side of the border. Without integration of the interdependence between both sides of the border these theories create a biased articulation of reality. This bias perpetuates Mexicans' dream of crossing over the Rio Grande. The pursuit of such a dream, however, does not come true because Mexicans are caught and returned to Mexico even before reaching the U.S. side.

- II -

The next borderlands critic that I will discuss is Carey McWilliams. In North from Mexico. Spanish-Speaking People of the United States (1968), McWilliams asserts that over the last hundred and twenty-five years the relations between the Anglos and Hispanos have been affected by the state of relations between the United States and Mexico. McWilliams' analysis of the borderlands in New Mexico is considerably different from that drawn by McKinsey &

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<sup>31</sup> When it comes to the American/Canadian borderlands, MacKinsey and Konrad argue that the border is sparsely populated and that a few mixing zones or twin cities in the Canadian/American border remain distinct. They go on to argue that aside from the presence of culturally distinct Québec, which "...interrupts whatever uniform interaction might be postulated... [It] could be argued that all of populated Canada is a borderland; hence it is not possible to demarcate the borderlands from the hinterland." The aboriginal population does not figure as an important part of the study.

Konrad in Borderlands Reflections, and Frederick C. Turner in The Dynamic of Mexican Nationalism (1969). The former, for instance, acknowledges the differences inherent in each of the parties involved in the borderlands, that is, those on both sides of the actual geographical border. While McKinsey and Konrad narrow down their study to the border space as a geographical demarcation, McWilliams starts his analysis by first acknowledging the disparities existing between the United States and Mexico in social, political, and economic terms.

The section "After A Hundred Years: A Beginning Is Made" uncovers what has been behind the U.S.A.'s "reconciliatory" attitude towards its southern neighbors:

To many people living in the Southwest it seemed obvious that there was the logical place to invest the Good Neighbor Policy with real meaning and content.<sup>32</sup>

The "hidden" agenda behind the "reconciliatory" expression, "Good Neighbor Policy," was related to specific vested economic interests in the growing

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<sup>32</sup>Carey McWilliams. North from Mexico. Spanish-Speaking People of the United States. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), pp. 275-276. The policy of the Good Neighbor was first pledged by Franklin D. Roosevelt in his first inaugural address in March, 1933. In 1941 Carey McWilliam, then commissioner of immigration and housing in California, submitted to Mr. Rockefeller a plan for the improvement of Anglo-Hispano relations.

population of Hispanics in North America. According to figures provided by McWilliams, there may have been between nine and ten million Spanish-speaking people in the U.S.A., which would include 1.5 million Puerto Ricans in New York, a large number of Cubans in Florida, and other Latin Americans. The borderlands of New Mexico already had over six million people by the end of the '60s.

Carey McWilliams' analysis includes a historical background. His approach to the borderlands integrates Aboriginal peoples from the outset. This essential incorporation exposes some contradictory dynamics in the way earlier and later theories were conceived and developed. McWilliams' methodology shows that, while it is highly important to include certain points of view in order to have a broader perspective of historical development, it is equally necessary to have a sense of the biases involved when a particular perspective is presented.

In the past, borderlands in North America have been either reduced to a buffer zone between two different societies, such as the US/Mexico border, or portrayed as almost unnecessary as in the case of two societies as supposedly alike as the US and Canada.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>On this point McWilliams restricts his analysis to U.S. citizens; however, beyond this it is important to stress that the US/Canadian border has also been extremely prohibitive in relation

The essence of the American-Mexican borderlands lies in the dynamic nature of cultural interaction. Scholars have stressed the sense of "ambiente" that comes from the daily, personal interaction across the border. John Price and Ivo Duchacek (qtd. by McKinsey and Konrad) conceptualize the area as an interface, "... a zone of contact, where the 'first world'--the industrialist-capitalist nations--is in contiguous and extensive contact with the 'third world'--poorer countries--struggling to industrialize."<sup>34</sup> In this approach, however, the term "poorer" needs to be questioned, for it supports the biases and ideological perspective of industrialized countries from the north. These same countries that appropriated the land and have built their economies at the expense of the cheap labor forces from the south. Perhaps materially "impoverished" countries would be a better choice for a term and closer to the way many Chicanos have experienced this situation.

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to the movement of certain groups of people, such as immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

<sup>34</sup>McKinsey and Konrad, Borderlands Reflections, 27.

The third perspective on borderlands analyzed in this project involves the more encompassing overviews of the borderlands. Ellwyn R. Stoddard, professor of anthropology and sociology and a borderlands scholar for more than thirty years, speaks from the political-legal perspective of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Stoddard presents an up-to-date assessment in the following terms:

[t]he U.S.-Mexico border is an arbitrary construct separating the sovereign territories of the Republic of Mexico and the United States. This imaginary line delineates a territorial zone of influence which touches at the common border but does not extend beyond it... . Hence, the term Borderlands (rather than the unidisciplinary Borderland) more precisely illustrates the wide variations in how the current U.S.-Mexico border is conceptualized within the various academic disciplines, by the local and national governments, and within the ethnic groups concentrated along it.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>In the same article, "Problem Solving Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: A United States View", Stoddard admits that many other national borders have these same conflicting structures and missions to open and close the border to free movement of peoples and things. In relation to the Canadian-U.S. border, he notes some relevant differences: "Whereas the Canadian-U.S. border is twice as long in miles as the border between Mexico and the United States, along its western expanses, English-speaking Canadians have much less difficulty passing through the border screen than do darker-skinned Mexican Americans through our southern border. Moreover, along the Canadian border more pronounced variations occur in border regulations concerning the French-speaking people of Québec than among the English-speaking people from Alberta." "Problem Solving Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: A United States View" in Across Boundaries. Transborder Interaction in Comparative Perspective ed. by Oscar J. Martínez (El Paso, Texas: Texas Western Press & The Center for Inter-American and Border Studies, The University of Texas at El Paso. 1986), pp. 58-59. For the Canadian-



In Stoddard's theory, the "border buffer zone" works as a functional border model "which claims to be more accurate as an empirical representation of existing informal and traditional relations."<sup>36</sup> In the case of the American-Mexican border, this zone would have been set up to diminish the chances of international strife. The perception of this region as only being protective of national boundaries ignores, according to Stoddard, "the existing intense economic and cultural interpenetration as well as the overlapping of myriad problems across the border."<sup>37</sup> The wider socio-political context is far more complex and needs to be linked to historical changes.

Historically, the cultural and political boundaries which have circumscribed Chicano culture date back to the Texas-Mexican War (1836) and the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48). One of the most striking aspects of Anglo-Hispanic relations comes out of the forceful annexation of Mexican territory by the USA. After that, interaction between the Spanish and Mexican-Indian heritage of Mexicans became more intricate, for Anglo imperialism was added to the initial bilateral conflict.

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U.S. border see also Ivo D. Duchacek's "International Competence of Subnational Governments: Borderlands and Beyond" in the same collection.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 4.

The attention given to Chicano culture and traditions in the last few decades needs to be seen, first, within the framework of economic interest in Chicano human resources indicated above; and, second, in relation to Chicanos' social rights movements and consciousness. This consciousness has come to the forefront of U.S. attention because of Chicanos' strong ties with, and participation in, the wider historical framework of the '50s, that is, when the Black civil rights movement began to emerge, as well as the actual Chicano Renaissance<sup>38</sup> of the 1960s. These events seem to have signalled a moment in history for Chicanos, or mestizos, a moment when they began to project for themselves "a positive, yet also critical, rendering of their bilingual and cultural experience as a resistive measure against Anglo-American economic domination and ideological hegemony" (Calderón and Saldivar, 1991:4). At that point, the borderlands became more than ever before a geopolitical zone of military, linguistic and cultural

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<sup>38</sup>The Chicano Renaissance comprises the flowering of artistic and literary creativity in the late 1960s and the 1970s. It arose from the questioning and energy of political and social movements. Some of its first offspring were the United Farmworkers Movement (1965), the National Chicano Moratorium, and the Raza Unida Party (1970). These movements signal a moment in history in which there was "[a] strong demand by the Chicano community for works by Chicano authors that reflect Chicano experiences from a Chicano perspective" (Romano-V., Ríos, xiv) in (Infinite Divisions, p. 21).

conflict<sup>39</sup>. Regarding this same point, Stoddard confirms a change in perspective and attitudes, which he reconceptualizes as the "Doctrine of Mutual Necessity":

Unless the Doctrine of Mutual Necessity can bridge the gap historically created by the U.S.-Mexico misunderstandings and misinterpretations, by scapegoating, and by insensitivity, no bilateral border mechanism can be developed to allow local border jurisdictions to become intimately involved in coordinating border problems with their local neighbors.<sup>40</sup>

Chicano perceptions of the border and of the borderlands clash considerably with some of the theories provided by their neighbors from the north. Some of the critics, like José David Saldivar and Héctor Calderón, brought into this discussion feel that the affinities of language, culture, religion, or ethnicity may pay little or no respect to political boundaries. On the one hand, Chicanos are a political community with natural psychological and cultural boundaries; on the other hand, however, they are considered and perceived as the residue of former conquests, first by the Spaniards and more recently by the Anglo-Americans. This residue involves a

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<sup>39</sup>For further details on the political paradigm and philosophical theory around questions of the Chicano Renaissance, see Richard A. García's "Prophets of Theory: The Search, Dilemmas, and Disillusionment of Mario Barrera and Carlos Muñoz."; also Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 73.

strong emotional component for both those who crossed back and those who "decided" to stay on the U.S. side of Mexican America. According to Anzaldúa, the latter became the inhabitants of a country in which "the lifeblood of two worlds" was made to merge.

In contrast to the perspectives sketched earlier, we find, on the one hand, Calderón & Saldivar's views which invite the reader "to remap the borderland of theory and theorists"<sup>41</sup>; and, on the other hand, Anzaldúa's approach which, as will be seen later, proposes to meet "half way." The challenge still lies in discussing the borderlands and raising awareness about the interdependent relationships of all the parties involved. In Saldivar's own words, there must be a recognition of the historical and cultural interdependence of both northern and southern American hemispheres:

[W]e feel that at the present moment any glossy version of a postmodern, postindustrial "America" must be reinterpreted against the influx of Third World immigrants and the rapid re-Hispanization of important regional sectors of [our] Mexican America and the wider United States."<sup>42</sup>

Calderón and Saldivar's reconstruction of American literary history takes into account four hundred years of

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<sup>41</sup>Calderón and Saldivar, Criticism in the Borderlands, 7.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

Mexican presence in the borderlands. The dynamic mix of two or more cultures produces a hybrid that these Chicanos have articulated out of a geopolitical and historical understanding of the borderlands space. This analysis is complemented by the work of another critic, Oscar J. Martinez.

Martinez' article "Border Indians," included in the work Troublesome Border(1988), draws attention to border Indians and to the deep dislocation suffered by those who have found themselves at the bottom of the social ladder. This panorama comes as a result of Spanish, Mexican, and American external dominance:

What distinguishes the indigenous peoples of the borderlands from other, non border Indians, is their misfortune of having been conquered in cycles and their having to abide by restrictions imposed by the creation of an international boundary meant to separate two nation-states.<sup>43</sup>

Martinez establishes an important parallel between the Indians of the U.S. Southwest and Chicanos in that both groups were discriminated against by Anglo Americans with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,

It mattered little that the rights of Chicanos were explicitly and those of Indians implicitly protected by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; both

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<sup>43</sup>Oscar J. Martinez Troublesome Border, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), p.78.

groups became second-class citizens in American society, with Indians occupying an even lower position than Chicanos."<sup>44</sup>

This study, which presents extensive data on the history of the Mexican/U.S. border, also includes details and dates of historical conflicts. His comprehensive analysis of those events incorporates awareness of the true heritage of "Mexican Americans," which since the 1950s and 1960s, have come from Mexico rather than from Spain. The damage that Chicanos have suffered points towards even more exacerbated repercussions regarding Native American Indians. The latter were first practically exterminated by the white man and more recently procrastinated by other ethnic groups whose main target was to follow the white man's example and power structures. Martinez' analysis evidences that the problem keeps perpetuating itself because of the repetition of certain patterns. The model for discriminatory patterns originates in the education of the children who were, and are still, raised within this context: "children grew up confused about and ashamed of their heritage, causing serious damage to their self-esteem and personal pride."<sup>45</sup> The current opposition to bilingual education further emphasizes the initial confusion regarding

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid. 79.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 97.

identity,

For border Chicanos, the "English-only" controversy is particularly unsettling because Spanish (excluding Indian languages) is the native language in the region. It has been spoken for centuries, and because of the continuing symbiosis with the Mexican side of the border, it will remain very functional and even necessary for many years to come.<sup>46</sup>

The issues just described would affect any social group. Language is crucial for the survival of a people since the cultural and literary identity is preserved in the tongue, be its form oral or written. The relationship between the loss of identity of a people and deprivation of accessibility to the mother tongue is even more acute in the case of Aboriginal peoples on either side of the border. The work of Catherine Lejeune, and her recent research on identity problems in the context of the borderlands, speak to this issue and support it with some empirical data.

Lejeune's article "Identity and Place: Impact of the Mexican-American Border on the Self/Collective Identity of the Chicano Community" documents the complexity of Chicano identity through in-depth interviews with a cross-section of Americans of Mexican descent. The focus of the work is how and to what extent Chicanos relate to

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid. 98.

the border context as individuals and as part of the Chicano community, and how the border "[a]s a particular hybrid setting, shapes their sense of who they are."<sup>47</sup>

Lejeune's work puts no emphasis on the gender question; however, her contribution lays out some of the major differences that emerge from both sides of the border. One of the most striking findings relevant to this study is that the US-Mexican border is contingent on many different interpretations, people, and emotions. In Lejeune's study, Chicanos' representation of place and identity is marked by an initial confusion as to the voice of the speaker. For Lejeune, the significance of the "[s]emantic shift from "I" to "we" when answering the questions about the Border and about Chicanos"<sup>48</sup> is another example of the artificiality of syntactic borders and of how geographical reality influences the psychological level and its linguistic representation in speech.

A common finding across the different categories of people in Lejeune's study involves the bilingual and bicultural aspect of the border, which is seen by the

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<sup>47</sup>Catherine Lejeune. "Identity and Place: Impact of the Mexican-American Border on the Self/Collective Identity of the Chicano Community". Gender, Self, and Society, Proceedings of the IV International Conference on the Hispanic Cultures of the United States. Ed. Renate von Bardeleben. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 248.



interviewees in a very positive light. Some of them go even further and speak of a multicultural society with a multiplicity of viewpoints resulting from the many influences that had impacted on each nation. As for art at the border, Lejeune concludes:

Artists from the workshop (whether Chicanos, Mexicans or Anglos) produce works of art that address social realities along the Border--part of their work dramatizes the plight of the undocumented Mexican worker, his actual crossing the Border as much as his condition of being a worker in the United States.<sup>49</sup>

Lejeune's conclusion regarding the conceptualization of the borderlands, is that "the Chicano culture exists outside of the physical Border insofar as Chicanos are to be found all over the country" (254). This last remark reinforces the opinion expressed by Chicanos who view themselves as no longer having to live at the border in order to preserve their ethnic identity. Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Gloria Anzaldúa are three examples, mentioned earlier, for whom distance reinforces, and even helps preserve Chicano ethnic identity. An example of this affective dimension of the borderlands lies in cultural traits and language that permeate the work of writers living away from the border. Lately, as new studies are developed, it is becoming more

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 252.

evident that the geographic distance is not widened within the psychological connection that many Chicanos carry inside.

The work of Gloria Anzaldúa evokes a new dimension of the borderlands reality which first involves and then transcends the geography and culture of the borderlands. Her work suggests a point of departure in which the aesthetics of the borderlands largely refer to a new state of mind similar to a crossroads where different ways converge.

The crossroads metaphor places Anzaldúa's discourse in the interstices of the geopolitical, the literary and the historical. The following quotation captures the spirit of these inter-relational borderlands:

I am possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and self-respect... . We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses and fences sprout around us. We can no longer withdraw. To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves. We can no longer blame you, nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the pathological parts, the queer parts, the vulnerable parts. Here we are weaponless with open arms, with only our magic. Let's try it our way, the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Gloria Anzaldúa. "El día de la chicana." Infinite Divisions. An Anthology of Chicana Literature, Tey Diana Rebolledo & Eliana S. Rivero eds. (Tucson & London: The University of Arizona Press, 1993), p. 83.

As pointed out earlier, Chicano borderlands ripened out of a complex literary mixture of religious and mythic beliefs, languages, and ethnic values from Native American, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo traditions. The above quotation reframes the agenda of some Chicanas who write with a consciousness of the multiple backgrounds that make up their identity. The body of literature that these women generate, contributes to the formulation and articulation of identity issues that originate in a geographical reality. Their work also adds a gender dimension that can be read beyond its biological import.

Much of the literature pioneered by Chicanas embraces the interconnection between internal and external landscapes. The physical dimension of their work finds its roots in the geographical borderlands; however, it does not rest there but moves back and forth onto a metaphorical level. This level involves a strong psychological component which will in later chapters take the discussion into the realm of creation and the space where creativity is gestated.

According to Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero, the psychological and the physical interconnect in the borderlands landscape. Chicanas literary experience becomes then "[a] perpetual response to the land: its natural features, in terms of mountains, rivers and deserts, as well as its human features--houses,

towns, and cities."<sup>51</sup> Latinas, Chicanas, mestizas like Anzaldúa often deal with these internal and external landscapes by associating the writers' physical experience of place/land with the physical body. The literary production of Chicanas often relates by extension to a psychological frame that bridges the gaps between the poet and the object of discourse. This distinct feature permeates Chicanas' analyses of identity, where ethnicity, class, gender, myth and spirituality are integrated within poetic language. The inter-relational understanding of borderlands serves to introduce a new paradigm which counteracts models of exclusion: the borderlands which functions as flow from and to inner and outer spaces. This metaphor of fluidity finds its literal parallel in the flow of the Rio Grande and Anzaldúa's wetbacks, crisscrossing physical and psychological borders.

Psychological and spiritual borderlands are integral parts of Anzaldúa's creative process, and are also reflected in the titles of many of her poems. For example, in the section "Cihuatlíyol, Woman Alone," we find several poems which involve crossing to other realms, such as in "Letting Go," "I Had to Go Down," "Caqado abismo, quiero saber," "that dark shining thing;" or "Creature of Darkness". This crossing also occurs in

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 157.

the following section, "Animas."

In the poems just mentioned, Anzaldúa raises several questions which become the key to her work. For instance, what happens when a subject occupies multiple identity spaces simultaneously and one does not resort to a hierarchical model to address the parts involved? Or how do Chicanas deal with being in "la encrucijada"?. In "Conjugating Subjects: The Heteroglossia of Essence & Resistance," Norma Alarcón has some suggestions regarding the multiple subject positions of the mestiza. Part of her conclusion becomes articulated as follows: "The critical desire to undercut subject determination through structures and discourses, in my view, presupposes a subject-in-progress who constructs provisional identities."<sup>52</sup>

In the case of Anzaldúa, one can further argue that living at the crossroads reflects the reality of a subject-in-progress, one who moves and evolves regardless of fixed, artificial geopolitical spaces. Alarcón comments on this point but her discursive approach remains mainly within the geographical reality of the border:

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<sup>52</sup>Norma Alarcón, "Conjugating Subjects: The Heteroglossia of Essence & Resistance," in An Other Tongue. Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands. ed. by Alfred Arteaga. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1994), p.135.

The very contingent currents through which the geopolitical subject-in-process is dislocated and forced into (im)migration will retain an irreducible difference that refuses to neatly correspond to the subject's account of herself and the theory we produce to account for her appearance.<sup>53</sup>

Alarcón's argument remains theoretical, while Rebolledo and Rivero's follow the theoretical argumentation is brought back again to its physical dimension conceptualized as the internal and external zones for creativity. In everyday life as well as the literary world, Chicanas' writing fulfills a need that knows no restraints, no boundaries. These women acknowledge, sometimes with resignation, the demanding tasks self-imposed on a writer:

words we picked up, wiped off  
cleaned up, prepared and served  
as canapés to the lordly lords  
that they might digest ...

(Bernice Zamora)

The language of the new mestizas as well as their subject positions are riddled with uncertainties, paradoxes and double or even triple binds. It has tongues which are split<sup>54</sup> with Spanish and English and sprinkled with

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 137.

<sup>54</sup>The metaphor of the split tongue revindicates Chicano linguistic reality, as well as a rich pluricultural identity. Iconographically it is represented by the forked tongue of the serpent, which is revived in its positive aspect as sacred symbol for rebirth.

Nahuatl. These languages and features which are part and parcel of the borderlands originate in three female mythoreligious icons which critics who address only the theory overlook. These icons are la Virgen de Guadalupe who reconnects Chicanas back to Europe through the Spanish Catholic Church; La Malinche, related to Mexico and the Spanish, wrongly denounced and mostly known as traitor of her people; and Coatlicue from the pagan Aztec heritage, whose counterpart, Tonanzín, represents an aspect of the goddess Coatlicue who was retained and blended with la Virgen de Guadalupe. Until fairly recently, due to the strong influence of Spanish religion, the Chicana has been able to identify only with Tonanzín who has represented the motherly aspect of Coatlicue for Mexicans.

At present, the new mestizas are bringing back former aspects of forgotten mytho-religious models. This integrative attitude is reconfigured within Anzaldúa's distinct aesthetics of the Borderlands. Her revindication of identity is one that sets a precedent in the American Continent and one which needs to be carefully reconsidered by European and American feminists who remain anchored within Eurocentric models.

Chicanas' contribution to feminist theory is highly significant. Chela Sandoval has named the theoretical space from which Chicanas and other Latinas in the U.S.A

speak "U.S./Third world Feminism."<sup>55</sup> Other critics, such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, have used the metaphor of a bridge to conceptualize a more comprehensive kind of feminism. Through the visual image of a bridge identified with their backs, the ends of metonymy and metaphor meet in the collection Moraga and Anzaldúa edited, This Bridge Called My Back (1981). Ultimately the work and theories gathered in such a collection involve waging internal battles and having to bridge multiple allegiances. These creative writings and theories are conducive to transformation and change. The change emerges from a comprehensive understanding of the complex parts that make up Chicano ancestral identity.<sup>56</sup>

The identity of the new mestiza and new aesthetics of the borderlands is recuperated by going back to the land and its people, by tracing back the mythic landscape which originates in Aztec tradition. In addition to these revivals, Anzaldúa's *New Mestiza* recuperates myth through artistic self-creation and the reclamation of the Homeland Aztlán, el otro México. This is the Aztlán of ancient myths, and of female deities such as Coatlicue, through whom female principles are brought back to

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<sup>55</sup>Chela Sandoval, "U.S./Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Post Modern World." Genders Number 10, Spring 1991.

<sup>56</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of how some Chicanas like Sandoval and Moraga have articulated the subject position of the Chicana, see Alarcón's "Conjugating Subjects." (footnote 35)



Chicano mythic and spiritual settings. As I illustrate in later chapters, Anzaldúa interweaves these features into both critical discourse and the rich language of poetry.

Poetry is one of Anzaldúa's strongest gifts for articulating her aesthetics of the Borderlands. In the expression of her poetry, the written and the spoken language come to grips with each other in powerful visual forms. Some key examples are "El sonavabitch," "Holy Relics," "Poets Have Strange Eating Habits." These poems, which are extensively analyzed in Chapter two, conjure up issues at the core of the borderlands. For instance, in the first, Chicanos or wetbacks become a landmark of the South West in the shape of "prehistoric boulders," and the extinguished embers of a volcanic eruption; in the second, the tearing apart of the female body/language is enacted in the Christian predatory action exerted against the dead body of the Spanish mystic Teresa de Avila.

Anzaldúa's aesthetic of the Borderlands is one which is in a constant state of transition, a space of betrayal, a battleground of identities, a crossfire between camps, a space "where enemies are kin to each other."<sup>57</sup> Each of the elements involved in this discussion is caught up in this crossfire of conflict. Bringing conflictive differences within this discussion is ultimately the way to bridge gaps and to come to a

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<sup>57</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 3.

partial resolution of tensions of identity within this literary space.

Many Borderlands critics quoted in this chapter have focused largely on the geographical line which divides one political entity, or nation-state, from another. These approaches, however, tend to overlook a wider area subjected to the political authority that is usually identified with territorial jurisdiction. For Anzaldúa, the borderlands run beyond territorial restrictions. They involve the building of new myths through artistic creation, which is here to be taken to its ultimate goal, that is, as transformation and self-creation. The creation of new forms of writing and myths represents the foundation of the movement of the New Mestiza, and of what living in the borderlands means. As illustrated in the first and last stanzas of the following poem,

"To live in the Borderlands means you,"

are neither hispana india negra española  
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed  
caught in the crossfire between camps  
while carrying all five races on your back  
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

....

To survive the Borderlands  
you must live sin fronteras  
be a crossroads.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 195.

The metaphor of the crossroads which opened up this section illustrates and reinforces a sense of inconclusiveness. It is this inconclusiveness that best reflects Chicanos' reality: an ever-changing process that also reflects the reality of an increasing number of human beings. From living in the crossroads, Chicanos have taught many of us that one needs to trace back old realities and experiences in order to recreate the present. For some of them, it has involved going back to old myths of origin, such as Aztlán and Coatlicue which are the focus of the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER II

### REDRAWING CHICANAS LITERARY AND MYTHIC BORDERLANDS

#### MYTHIC BORDERLANDS I

This chapter takes myth as its main focus. Firstly, I address the significance of myth as a cultural symbol of contemporary society; secondly, I explore why myth is such a crucial element for Chicanos and, more specifically, within the work of the Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa; and, thirdly, I ask how myth and mythmaking relate to the act of creation and writing.

This study includes theorists from different disciplines, such as Stephen C. Ausband, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Harvey Birembaum, Marcel Detienne, Roland Barthes, Joseph Henderson, Maud Oaks, and Marie-Louise Von Franz. It follows from chapter one and moves from the geopolitical and the historical to the realm of myth and religious belief. It demonstrates the polysemy of myth and proposes mythic narrative as a specific discursive process which functions as linguistic borderlands.

- I -

The polysemy of myth has been widely acknowledged in contemporary literary criticism. Critics like Roland Barthes amply illustrate an understanding of myth which

moves beyond its traditional usage as legend or tale, to encompass a wider variety of interpretive issues. Barthes takes myth as a specific form of language, which helps him reflect on some events and phenomena pertaining to contemporary French daily life: "[f]ondée sur une idée responsable du langage, elle (mythologie) en postule par là même la liberté. Il est sûr qu'en ce sens la mythologie est un accord au monde, non tel qu'il est, mais tel qu'il veut se faire."<sup>59</sup>

Another critic, Stephen C. Ausband, reconsiders the role of myth in contemporary Western societies and strikes a contrast to Barthes and anthropologists, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, who followed structural analysis in his study of myths. Ausband distinguishes his understanding of myth from that of some Greek Presocratic philosophers who saw it as allegorical tales (Thales, Pythagoras) and from later versions of myth (early eighteenth century) which centered around the value rather than the nature of myth. For someone like Voltaire who advocated reason as the arbiter of truth, the place of the rational mind occupied a space above that of the soul and the spirit. Thinkers like Voltaire contributed powerfully to the loss of a general understanding of myth as part of life. Later, at the end of the eighteenth

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<sup>59</sup>Roland Barthes, Mythologies, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957), p. 244.

century and in the early nineteenth century, Romantic writers, regarded poetic myth as a source of human knowledge as important as reason. More recently, in the twentieth century, mythology has attracted the interest of anthropologists, psychologists, theologians and literary critics. For a critic like Ausband, myth still plays a valid and meaningful role within society. It fulfills the function of responding to the basic questions of identity, the purpose and significance of life: "Mythology, when it works, provides a sense of that validity and that meaning. When it does not work, when it becomes merely a collection of tales without the immediacy of truth, a society then must seek meaning in other ways and in other myths."<sup>60</sup>

Ausband agrees with Carl G. Jung in that the primordial function of myth is to ensure order within our mind. The latter also commented on the spiritual dimension and importance of religion, legend, magic, and myth in Western civilization. While not specifically approaching race, class and gender issues, Jung did refer to and contextualize problems that modern Jungian psychology still faces today when looking for a different dimension in humankind's existence:

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<sup>60</sup>Stephen C. Ausband, Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1983), p.106.

The psychological interest of the present time is an indication that modern man expects something from the psyche which the outer world has not given him: doubtless something which our religion ought to contain, but no longer does contain, at least for modern man. For him the various forms of religion no longer appear to come from within, from the psyche; they seem more like items from the inventory of the outside world. No spirit not of this world vouchsafes him inner revelation; instead, he tries on a variety of religions and beliefs as if they were Sunday attire, only to lay them aside again like worn-out clothes.<sup>61</sup>

Jung's and Ausband's understanding of the place of myth in society are close to those of Chicano writers in general, and to Anzaldúa in particular. They do not consider myth as a mere collection of tales or fantasies but as a basic part of existence. In Anzaldúa's work, myth is taken as truth and as a living entity.<sup>62</sup> She acknowledges Jungian archetypes and distinguishes her writing from writers who vindicated myth as "fable," "invention," or "fiction." Her Native American ancestors are brought back to life when Anzaldúa addresses Aztec

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<sup>61</sup>Carl G. Jung, "The Spiritual Problem of Modern Man" in The Portable Jung, ed. by Joseph Campbell; trans. by R.F.C. Hull (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), p.466.

<sup>62</sup>In Burning Water. Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico, Laurette Sejourne deals extensively with the nuances and differences between Western understanding of religion and the association that Nahuatl makes to two other dimensions: magic and myth (pp.48-79). The latter is the point of departure that Anzaldúa takes and the one followed in this dissertation. For further sources that include the original transcription of the Aztec codices, see the updated edition of The Broken Spears. The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico. Edited and with an introduction by Miguel Leon-Portilla. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

mythic traditions and claims that they live on in her and her writing. Her writing and her aesthetics of the borderlands, on the other hand, reinstate not only aspects that pertain to the Aztecs, but to other, sometimes distant, cultures, traditions, and mythic archetypes.

If the value of myth depends on the function that it can perform in society at large, then, myths have their own time span. For Ausband, they live for as long as the system of beliefs that they define remains part of the social belief system: "When a mythological tradition is no longer vital, when people in a society no longer believe in or take seriously the stories and the heroes that make up the tradition, then the society may be threatened by chaos."<sup>63</sup>

Among the Chicanos, the myth of Aztlán, and its revival in the 1960s' in the US South West has proved that their traditions and myths live on and can save them from the chaos that gradual loss of identity entails. The importance of myth within the Chicano communities has helped them redefine their beliefs and root them in something beyond contemporary social structures. This move comes as a result of Chicanos' long struggle and resistance against U.S. social policies of assimilation and integration.

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<sup>63</sup>Ausband, Myth and Meaning, Myth and Order, 19.



Language is an essential mediator for the ordering of experience of a world that, for Chicanos, speaks in more than one tongue. In this context, myth becomes inextricably linked to the development of a literature from and about Chicanos. The work of Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa illustrates the correlation between myth and language since her work reclaims old myths and makes them into new ones through the language of poetry.

Myth and poetry in the borderlands are deeply rooted in the belief that in language lies the power of transformation. The primary example of this fusion is Anzaldúa's self-reflexive discourse and elaboration on writing presented in Borderlands/La Frontera. In this work, myth and language form a unit that takes us back to stages, previous to the articulation of the word in its printed form, that is, to the collective unconscious where all thoughts are gestated and later enunciated in different forms of expression. For instance, the spirit of the word<sup>64</sup> is to be found in a historical past where the old myths dwell. Some of these myths, like Malinche (a legend that has become a myth) and Coatlicue (Aztec

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<sup>64</sup>By spirit of the word I mean all those layers of perception that readers, according to their levels of sensitivity, can apprehend in the process of reading. Among other things, the spirit of the word can evoke smell, taste, physical sensations, as well as mental states. It can sometimes appear as synesthesia or in what remains unsaid in between the lines, in the blank spaces that signal the silences within the written wo(1)rd. See also page 95 and footnote 108 for further details.

mother of the gods and the earth)<sup>65</sup> have been retrieved and give meaning to the life of contemporary Chicanas. This integration of myth in Anzaldúa's work also follows a long tradition among Chicanos, which takes us back to Aztec civilization and the myth of Aztlán. Aztlán was the lost paradise of the Aztecs and, almost three decades ago, Chicanos recuperated the myth to reclaim their right to nationhood. As Michael Pina points out: "[t]he myth of Aztlán functions to provide identity, location, and meaning for a people who were previously directionless in their collective existential pilgrimage through existence."<sup>66</sup>

Aztlán was a land of plenty, which the war-god Huitzilopochtli instructed the Aztecs to leave under his guidance in order to conquer new lands and rule over new peoples. After the nineteen sixties Aztlán became integrated as part of an important document, El Plan Espiritual de Atzlán. This document was produced at the 1969 Denver "National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference." In it Chicanos demanded the right to self-

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<sup>65</sup>In Diccionario Mitológico Americano, Coatlicue is defined as follows: "En el panteón Azteca, la madre de los dioses y de la tierra, asociada con la primavera. Asimismo la diosa de la muerte. Dábasele también el nombre de Tonantzin, "Nuestra Madre." Asimismo, era venerada como la madre de Huitzilopochtli" (p.39).

<sup>66</sup>Miguel Pina, "The Archaic, Historical and Mythicized Dimensions of Aztlán." Aztlán. Essays on the Chicano Homeland, eds. Rudolfo Anaya & Francisco Lomeli (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), p.37.

determination and self-defense as descendants of the Aztecs.

The connection between Anzaldúa and Aztlán appears in her borderlands writing and brings back parts of her Chicano historical background. The return to Aztlán epitomizes a pattern that moves as a spiral. It involves the retrieval of the past into the present, and signals simultaneously change in progress. This strategy becomes more literal when one first reads the prose poem "The Coatlicue State," from the first part of Borderlands and, later on, sees its formal transformation into the poem "Poets Have Strange Eating Habits" of the second part, which I analyze later in this chapter. Mythmaking becomes, in this context, the natural expression that connects Anzaldúa to an ancestral past. It is a means of counteracting the intellectual one-dimensional legacy of the West<sup>67</sup> that has often seen myth as fictitious.

The myth of Coatlicue in Anzaldúa's work provides a creative perspective from which to reconsider not only the concept of borderlands, but one in which historical events, myths, legend and oral traditions are brought together from a woman's point of view. The focus on

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<sup>67</sup> I would like to draw attention to the incongruence of this term since, according to most geographical divisions, America is the West. In order to not further contribute to this confusion, I will henceforth speak about Eurocentrism. The latter term recognizes the cradle of classic European History and culture in Greece.

Coatlicue as serpent skirt, a deity who embodies female principles of creation and death from Aztec ancestry, is instrumental to illustrate mythic borderlands that cut across different traditions both from the East and the West, the North and the South. For example, the Aztec association of the serpent and bird in the feathered serpent represents Quetzalcoatl, deity of origin<sup>68</sup> and finds an immediate Greek parallel in the Gorgon Medusa. For Anzaldúa, both are "symbol[s] of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror."<sup>69</sup>

- II -

Anzaldúa writing works as a contrast to earlier theories which saw mythology as a Science of Language largely based on explaining esoteric and absurd stories. The nineteenth century was particularly prolific in

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<sup>68</sup> The feathered serpent is the symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the bird-serpent whose domain is the rain, the cloud of water that moves over the firmament. The feathered serpent represents a magic being and terrestrial water spirit, and it is also the deity of rain clouds. This deity played a major role in the creation of the Fifth Sun, which engendered humanity and gave them the maize and agriculture to feed themselves. For further detail, see Román Piña Chan's Quetzalcoatl Serpiente Emplumada (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977), pp.36-39; and Burning Water. Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico. (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1966), pp.24-47.

<sup>69</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 47.

publications along these lines: from Frédéric-Max Muller (1823-1900) to Andrew Lang (1844-1912), and from Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) to Paul Decharme (1839-1905) and Adalbert Kuhn (1812-1882). Their approaches located myth in different relational interactions with regards to legend, religion, and history: these range from reductionist and highly racist interpretations to rather myopic visions which placed myth within an evolutionary framework.

Anzaldúa returns to myth as teller of true stories. Her approach brings to mind the work of Mircea Eliade who understood myth as "a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary, significant."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa's associative images from Aztec myths and Chicano tales and legends are not presented as fictitious. They crystalize in poetry that involves a critical revision of the peoples that constitute what is now the U.S South West. Like Carl Jung, Anzaldúa considers and later incorporates dreams and other manifestations of the collective unconscious as part of her writing which is self-transformational. This process involves a change within and without the poet through the articulation of shamanic experience into written language:

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<sup>70</sup>Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality. World Perspectives, vol. 31, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), p.1.

When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I 'trance.' I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations.<sup>71</sup>

Self-transformation is an aspect of Anzaldúa's writing which results in healing: "[t]hought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts: one person metamorphoses into another in a world where people fly through the air, heal from mortal wounds... . I change myself, I change the world."<sup>72</sup> Self-transformation can involve other levels of cognition found in the unconscious.

Anzaldúa's muses are original yet also present in classic European tradition. Greek mythology, for instance, acknowledged the connections between the "real" world and other worlds from beyond and explored the intricate nature of the imaginary, the unreal and the link between these and the mythmaking impulse. In Myth and Mind (1988), Harvey Birenbaum elaborates on this non-rational dimension to writing in relation to the Greek world of myth. For the Greeks telling and hearing mythic tales --heroes and demons, Hades and Paradise-- was not simply "imaginary," or unreal. It was imagination-- alive

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<sup>71</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 70.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

to the senses and sustained with pleasure.<sup>73</sup>

The pleasure of imagining is essential to the mythmaking impulse. Being imaginative, therefore, myth celebrated certain values which imagination inspired and enhanced. These included personal energy, self-exploration, openness to emotions, willingness to take chances, and the perception of beauty.

There are distinctive aspects differentiating the use of myth that the Greek and Anzaldúa make. For the latter, the mythic impulse does not only involve the sustaining of the imagination with pleasure, but its opposite, that is fear, shadows, creatures that have to do with the dark. As a writer, she intertwines not only all the levels mentioned above but languages and multiple roles,

[t]he ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes were all intertwined.<sup>74</sup>

Anzaldúa is the poet as nahual or shaman, the writer, as shape-changer. This statement emphasizes that certain levels of the collective unconscious, the spiritual, and

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<sup>73</sup>Harvey Birenbaum, Myth and Mind (Boston:University Press of America, 1988), 36.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 66.

dreams, are realities far more permanent and valid as points of reference. This notion, which Anzaldúa expresses, predates the Christian era. It was deeply integral to many civilizations of the past and it still remains in some of them. In Creation Myths (1972) Marie-Louise von Franz makes this reality extensive to myths from Iriquay, Inuit, Navajo, and Egyptian origin. In the case of Egyptian myths, for instance, she unravels how the realms of the conscious and the unconscious, often forgotten to contemporary Eurocentric thinking, played a key role in acts of creation and creativity:

Earthly existence was treated as quite immaterial, something to be ignored almost completely. All the emphasis was put upon things which we would call spiritual reality, or things of the Beyond, or contents of the unconscious. There is therefore, in a way, a strange reversal of feeling towards life: for us this life, our physical temporal existence, is reality, and the other world is something relatively real to some people, but completely unreal to many rationalists.<sup>75</sup>

In Anzaldúa's work the realms of the conscious and the collective unconscious, where myths dwell, are an intrinsic part and parcel of the act of creation and creativity. She looks inwardly into her inner demons, faces them, then decides which she wants to keep and

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<sup>75</sup>Marie-Louise Von Franz, Creation Myths, (Dallas: Spring Publications, Inc., 1972), p. 52.



which to transform. This literary metamorphosis involves not only the transformation of the letter and its spirit, but also Anzaldúa's body and blood. On a linguistic level, she defamiliarizes the figure of speech of the metaphor and goes back to its literal meaning. Words become blades of grass sprouting on the page. Her hands can flap with the feathers that she visualizes in their fingers as if she had become the incarnation of the feathered serpent, Quetzalcoatl:

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre. I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle.<sup>76</sup>

The red ink that Anzaldúa refers to takes us back to part I, chapter six, entitled "The Path of the Red and Black Ink." This title makes a direct reference to the Aztec codices, which were initially mistaken for "books" by the first Spaniards who saw them. The codices were called amoxtli by chronicle writers like Bernal Díaz and

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<sup>76</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 72.

described as pieces of fabric<sup>77</sup> because of the way they unfolded. Their colors were red and black and these stood for writing and wisdom.<sup>78</sup>

The Aztecs, like the Mayas, and the Egyptians, did not communicate using alphabetic forms. Their pictogrammes or painted narratives, which oscillated between material inscription and conceptual symbols, involved more complex dimensions than can be captured in written form. In the Aztec hierarchy, there were two social roles associated with discourse, "the first derived from skill in speaking, the second from possession of the wisdom of the word."<sup>79</sup> Those who could read the red and black ink of the paintings were endowed with a special status: "[T]hose who had the wisdom of the word were those who could "look" at the sky or at the painted books and interpret them, to tell stories based

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<sup>77</sup>In later work, Anzaldúa talks about the metaphor of the interface as in Making Face, Making Soul. Two books that look like a piece of fabric and the interface of the fabric, create an interesting connection between reading and sewing pieces of cloth together, interfacing. A parallel could also be traced between reading and interpreting the signs, and piecing up material to make clothes or to create crafts.

<sup>78</sup>In another section of Borderlands, Anzaldúa records that the red and black colors appear in relation to Cihuacoatl, Aztec goddess of earth, and serpent woman, who wears a white dress with a decoration half red and half black (35).

<sup>79</sup>Walter Mignolo, "Signs and Their Transmission: The Question of the Book in the New World," in Writing Without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes, eds. Elizabeth Hill Boone & Walter Mignolo (Durham:Duke University Press, 1994), p. 252.

on their discerning of the signs."<sup>80</sup>

Anzaldúa's understanding of writing and creativity follows along the lines described above. She recuperates the sacred role of the artist as shaman. The oral and painted discourses become synthesized as "picture language," a language in which the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness. The process by which the creative experience emerges is "The Shamanic State," which Anzaldúa equates to trance, and which entails invoking images from the unconscious, including residues of trauma. Therefore, the paintings of the red and black ink find a parallel in the images that Anzaldúa retrieves from that semi-unconscious state, where "an image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious."<sup>81</sup> The term that Anzaldúa uses to conceptualize these experiences of creation is la facultad.

Anzaldúa's creative patterns are described in a section of Borderlands called la facultad and are related to the notion of the writer as shaman as alluded to earlier in this chapter. These patterns bring to mind the theory of cyclic patterns called hierophanies. For the

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 69.

historian of religions Mircea Eliade, hierophanies bring together myth and history through cycles which are a constant presence in Anzaldúa's ritualistic act of writing. For Eliade both myth and rites are brought together in the following quotation,

Each must be considered as a hierophany in as much as it expresses in some way some modality of the sacred and some moment in its history... . Each is valuable for two things it tells us: because it is a hierophany, it reveals some modality of the sacred; because it is a historical incident, it reveals some attitude man has had towards the sacred.<sup>82</sup>

Anzaldúa's writing techniques in the borderlands coincide with Eliade's understanding of the multiple dimension of ritual and hierophanic structures. First of all, hierophanies describe a cyclic trajectory similar to that present in Anzaldúa's work on myth and her direct participation in its making. Secondly, hierophanies facilitate the bridging and cutting across of artificially created linear notions of time (past, present, future) and space (inner/outer), which Anzaldúa's poetry constantly subverts. This point becomes evident in the title of the poem "To live in the Borderlands means you" and in the first verse which follows up from the title: "are neither hispana india

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<sup>82</sup>Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion. Trans. Rosemary Sheed. (London & New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958) p.2.

negra española/ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed/."<sup>83</sup>

The two verses just quoted form a synopsis of the aesthetics of the Borderlands that Anzaldúa proposes. On a linguistic level, this new aesthetics plays with the structure of language: the object pronoun of the title becomes the subject of the first verse. The position of the particle "you" determines the role it is going to play within the sentence. The pronoun "you" functions as both object pronoun and subject pronoun at the same time. Here the linguistic level becomes the poetic metaphor for the mestiza, that is, one that carries more than one race/role within herself; and, like the loose personal pronoun at the end of the title verse itself, "not knowing which side to turn to, run from."<sup>84</sup>

Hierophanies, like Anzaldúa's work, unfold onto several levels. These levels reproduce what in mythic terms can be called "the rhythms of the cosmos", which involve repetition as the means to bring about transformation and change. These rhythms are deeply ritualistic as well. The time in which they are inscribed has multiple dimensions; to use again Eliade's words regarding hierophanies and mythic time:

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<sup>83</sup> Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 194.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 194

It may mean the time during which a ritual takes place and therefore a sacred time, a time essentially different from the profane succession which preceded it. It might also mean mythical time, retained by means of a ritual, or by the mere repetition of some action with a mythical archetype. And, finally, it might also indicate the rhythms of the cosmos (like the hierophanies of the moon) in that those rhythms are seen as revelations--that is, manifestations--of fundamental sacred power behind the cosmos.<sup>85</sup>

Eliade's observations about mythic time also apply directly to Anzaldúa's poetry, for they relate to its cyclic repeatability. Hierophanic patterns indicate that although this sacred time is transhistoric, it has "in history, a "beginning"--namely, that moment when the divinity created the world or set it in order, or that moment when the ancestors or civilizing hero made the revelation of any given activity."<sup>86</sup>

As pointed out above, some of the revelations that Eliade conceptualizes through myth find expression in Anzaldúa's concept of La facultad, which is not a quality that only the primitive<sup>87</sup> can attain as Eliade asserts, but one that can be developed. This faculty which is

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<sup>85</sup>Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, 388.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 396.

<sup>87</sup>The primitive should be read here in its original sense, that is as meant to describe those in touch with primal energies and principles that also live in the unconscious of human beings. Unfortunately, this term became distorted, and came to mean "savage" as opposed to what, according to the European colonizers, was civilized.

timeless is explained by Anzaldúa as a form of perception:

It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.<sup>88</sup>

The ones possessing this kind of faculty are those who are able to experience the soul as one and connected with many. La facultad, like myth, is a less rational and more complex mode of consciousness which Anzaldúa connects with. It is a way to tap into the matrix where writing comes into being. It involves and reflects the existence of powerful unconscious levels, the space where creativity is gestated. This shaded space appears in poems like "My Black Angelos" included in the section "Animas," which is found in chapter five of the second part of Borderlands/La Frontera.

It is important to note the association that Anzaldúa still has with Catholicism. This connection becomes particularly evident in the poems "My Black Angelos" and "Holy Relics." The first poem brings in the issue of her ethnic background by interjecting the

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<sup>88</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 38.

adjective black to qualify a devotional exercise that commemorates the mystery of the Incarnation in the Roman Catholic Church. The poem also makes a switch from the latin term Angelus, when used in its archaic Castillian form, to a kind of updated Chicano variation, Angelos. The second poem, "Holy Relics," is devoted to the sixteenth century Spanish mystic Saint Teresa de Avila. The irony involved here is that the body of this extremely loved woman was exhumed numerous times and torn into pieces until only her hands remained. The hands are preserved to this day. They bear witness to the predatory fervor of Catholicism, especially regarding some of the rare and knowledgeable women who professed this faith (Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is the other example that comes to mind). The stanza that is repeated within the poem and closes it, briefly summarizes its message: "We are the holy relics/ the scattered bones of a saint,/ the best loved bones of Spain./ We seek each other."<sup>89</sup>

In the two poems briefly referred to, Anzaldúa sharply subverts the role that Catholic influence and earlier indoctrination have played in Meso-America. She not only points out vast contradictions in its practice, but adds two issues often left out of many historical analyses, that is, the issues of Chicano ethnic background, and gender. The purity and immaculate nature

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<sup>89</sup>Anzaldúa, 159.



of the female body stressed, on the one hand, clashed loudly against the reinforcement of its dismemberment and religious display in its most fragmented version.

"Animas," "My Black Angelos," as well as "Creature of Darkness," have to do with la facultad and primal levels of consciousness. These levels are related to the process of writing. They deal with the world of spirits, which I also interpret as the world where inspiration originates. Myth and writing are inextricably linked in poems like "Animas," in which the first Méti spirit, the myth of Malinche, Hernán Cortés' lover, is recreated as la llorona, the weeping one, who "is crying for the dead child/the lover gone... ." <sup>90</sup> Parallel to this mythic reality, there is the realm of the souls where the poet roams among the spirits of the dead: 'Una mujer vaga en la noche/anda herrante con las almas de los muertos./We sweep through the streets/con el viento corremos/we roam with the souls of the dead.' <sup>91</sup>

In "My Black Angelos" the protagonist is wallowing for three weeks, "in this deep place/this underplace/this grieving place/getting heavier and heavier/sleeping by day creeping out at night. Nothing I can do/nothing I want to do." The singular pronoun turns into a multiple poetic voice "we," which merges with that of other

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 184-85.

spirits or multiple voiced personae for whom home is darkness. It is also the place where Anzaldúa's inspiration finds its home:

...  
This is where we live  
Home, they whisper  
We're a creature of darkness.

A lump of me says  
What are you hiding  
    under that black log  
        that grey fog  
            a pink salamander  
            a mole without eyes  
            things that slide into  
            holes

...  
    a creature afraid of the dark  
    a creature at home in the dark.<sup>92</sup>

The articulation of a creature of multiple voices -- "we're a creature of darkness"-- merges the reality of Chicanos with that of myths of the underworld, such as those of Coatlicue and Malinche.<sup>93</sup> The latter come originally from the legend of La llorona, the one who weeps and howls at the loss of her children whom she drowns in a fit of despair when she learns that their

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 186-87.

<sup>93</sup>In romanticized versions of history, Cortés took La Malinche, an Aztec woman of noble descent, to become his partner and thus began the mixed blood lineage (Spanish and Native American). The different variations of their languages is what is nowadays spoken in Latin America (except Brazil). These variations from Spanish are different languages which have incorporated Native features and linguistic turns that signal separation from the language of the colonizers.

father is taking them away and leaving her behind. On a visual level, the lay-out of this poem on the page criss-crosses other borderlands. It not only takes us across the page, but also to chapter III called "Crossers y otros atravesados" and to the poem "Poets have strange eating habits,"<sup>94</sup> which comes into life at the threshold between dusk and dawn, and within the world of myth. "Poets" also illustrates the make up of the new mestiza. It repeats the thematic content of criss-crossing multiple cultures and mythic figures, such as the feathered serpent, the eagle, and Medusa. Its temporal and formal settings come into being before the jumping into an abyss which anticipates the encounter with the black angelus and the creature of darkness. "Poets," however, takes place at different physical and psychological edges and borders,

...  
In the border between dusk and dawn  
I listen to frozen thumpings, my soul  
Should I jump face tumbling  
down the steps of the temple  
heart offered up to the midnightsun<sup>95</sup>

Hierophanies challenge hierarchical structures by restoring mythical patterns, which allow for a narrative-

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<sup>94</sup>Henceforth, I will refer to this poem as "Poets."

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 140.

time conceived in cycles. In Anzaldúa's work, this pattern is reflected both vertically within a same poem and horizontally across chapters. It becomes first evident in "Poets" where the lyric persona is about to jump into the abyss: "I coax and whip the balking mare/to the edge/ peel the scabs from her wounds...; later, in "Creature," where she is at home and wants to remain in the dark: "I let my friends think/I'm doing a gig/somewhere on the other coast/ They would come around/coax me out of the deep/no one must find me here in the dark.../a creature afraid of the dark/ a creature at home in the dark."<sup>96</sup>

Memory and forgetting, the conscious and the unconscious are recognized within Anzaldúa's hierophanic paradigms, which emphasize multiple levels of perception (the written, the visual, the auditory) and an understanding of what are largely oral traditions. Some of the elements that she uses for the interpretation of myth and writing contrast with many others used in the past, which largely relied on information processed through written structures. Regarding these points, Marcel Detienne argues:

A culture based on speech, undoubtedly left to scholars none of whom have been inclined to suspect that it has to do more with the ear and with memory

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<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 187.

than it does with letters and writing. And if the mythologists of the nineteenth century are, at first, impelled to address readers, their analyses and theories recognize unhesitatingly that the land of myth, if it exists, is located somewhere within the borders of the world of memory and forgetting.<sup>97</sup>

The borders of memory and forgetting are also the borderlands in which Gloria Anzaldúa's creative patterns come into existence. This threshold is where the parts that make up the New Mestiza come to interact and counteract linear and hierarchical models. Inspiration also originates in these borderlands that treat the world of dreams, the imaginary, and the "real" as equally valid sources not only of inspiration, but also of information.

Anzaldúa travels back and forth in time with the mythic figures who haunt her and her poetry. The most relevant of these figures is Coatlicue. In her own words: "Coatlicue is one of the powerful images, or "archetypes," that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche. For me, la Coatlicue is the consuming internal whirlwind, the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Marcel Detienne. Trans. Margaret Cook. "Ambiguous Borderlines." The Creation of Mythology (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 21.

<sup>98</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 46. In current Mexico the predominant aspect of this deity is Tonantzin, the mother aspect, and it is venerated as "la Virgen de Guadalupe."

Anzaldúa's identification with this Aztec deity, symbolized as a serpent, takes us back to mythical time and to herself as woman, mythmaker and myth. The gender aspect emphasized through Coatlicue bridges the gaps often found in the space that women occupy. Coatlicue and Anzaldúa are both subject and object of the discourse in the borderlands where the past and the present coexist and are interchangeable within the metaphorical continuum that they create.

The metaphorical continuum is the protean being from "The Coatlicue State" from the first part of the book, which unfolds later on into the poetic counterpart, "Poets Have Strange Eating Habits." This poem follows "the Serpent's way." In it, the poet is identified with the Serpent deity and her mouth. She becomes both the eater and the eaten. The first stanza of the poem illustrates this point:

Dark windowless    no moon glides  
across the night sky  
    I coax and whip the balking mare  
                    to the edge  
                    peel the scabs from her wounds  
Her body caves into itself  
through the hole  
my mouth

... ."

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<sup>99</sup>Ibid., 140.

The unity and the cyclic return to a same theme and patterns reflect again the structure of hierophanic time mentioned earlier on. According to Eliade, this pattern "[i]s true of time in all religions, in magic, in myth and in legend."<sup>100</sup>

"Poets Have Strange Eating Habits" reveals the interstices of several traditions and it mirrors the metaphor of the borderlands as vehicle across times for the exploration of myth without frontiers. In this context, the mythic role of the poet is that of a shape-changer, which involves the simultaneous use of several languages and techniques. Anzaldúa's borderlands aesthetics is also a reflection on the inevitable gaps that are left when reconstructing the past. Some of these gaps remain largely unbridged and unbridgeable. On the other hand, this pattern mirrors more faithfully the incomplete reconstructions upon which myth, history and memory are founded.

Poets like Anzaldúa, who talk extensively about the creative process, demystify the biased notion of the "civilized" by exposing the authentic wild areas of the unconscious at work for the artist. The section "The Path of the Red and Black Ink" from Borderlands referred to earlier, portrays the role of the borderlands poet as protean being: one who is capable of metamorphosis and

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 391.

mythmaking, of criss-crossing the borderlands of the conscious and the unconscious; someone who can look at the sky and interpret it, sometimes at the risk of bordering on madness.



## MYTH IN THE BORDERLANDS II

The mythology of a tribe is its living religion, whose loss is always and everywhere, even in the case of civilized man, a moral catastrophe.<sup>101</sup>

I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. The word, the image and the feeling have a palatable energy, a kind of power. Con imágenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro. Con palabras me hago piedra, pájaro, puente de serpientes arrastrando a ras del suelo todo lo que soy, todo lo que algún día seré.<sup>102</sup>

Between theories around myth and myths of creation there is a temporal/historical and physical/geographical gap that a writer like Gloria Anzaldúa bridges with the body of her work. With images, she tames her fears and with words she crosses the abysses that she carries within herself. Her work literally becomes a bridge, each word like a brick makes up the structure of her poetry: "with words I make myself into stone," (trans. is mine). This same bridge serves her as a passage to cross to the other side once the work has been accomplished: "puente de serpiente arrastrando a ras del suelo todo lo que soy, todo lo que algún día seré," dragging on the ground

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<sup>101</sup>C. Jung, C & K. Kerényi, Essays on a Science of Mythology (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), p.111.

<sup>102</sup>"I tame my fear with images, I cross the abysses that I carry within me. With words I make myself into stone, bird, bridge of serpents dragging on the ground everything I am, everything, one day, I will become." (Translation mine). Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 71.

everything she is, everything she will be one day.

Literary theorist Harvey Birenbaum proposes myth as a paradigm about how to find ourselves in nature and in ourselves. The interconnection between inner and outer spaces in relation to Anzaldúa is a sine qua non condition to understand her work. Birenbaum's definition of myth from his work Myth and Mind leads to an especially useful view of how we find our way in the world of culture, among symbols, assumptions, conceptions of ourselves. Birenbaum also addresses perspectives, and versions of truth that make up the intangible but intensely vivid kind of reality that we negotiate together and alone every day.<sup>103</sup>

A mythic bridge for Anzaldúa to find her way back to Chicano culture is Coatlicue. This Aztec deity recurs in Anzaldúa's Borderlands and connects the poet with her Aztec past. Myth is the medium that allows for the negotiation of her reality as Chicana, a reality which involves living as an outsider on multiple levels (as Chicana, lesbian, foreigner within a country that was earlier the home of her ancestors). Coatlicue is also an outsider and the symbol through which the poet negotiates several levels of duality, for the deity integrates principles, such as male/female, sacred/profane, the sexual/asexual. Anzaldúa re-replaces Coatlicue side by side

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<sup>103</sup> Birenbaum, 1988: xvii.

with La Malinche, and Virgen de Guadalupe. These three female figures are Chicano icons and the basis for their religious, spiritual, and mythocultural heritage.

Anzaldúa returns to Coatlicue to restore some balance. By returning to her and turning herself into the deity, she merges past and present, the sacred and the profane, and breaks down the power relation between herself as subject (poet writer) and object/subject of her discourse (Coatlicue). This context calls again for a conceptualization of time as mythic, that is, as cyclic and overlapping past and present through ritual. The exercise also works as a reflection of the spontaneous rhythms of nature and the cosmos.<sup>104</sup>

Linguistically, Coatlicue conjures up the split tongue of the serpent, and of Chicanos by extension, since their language merges English and Spanish. In this process, Anzaldúa becomes a living myth, like Coatlicue. As reincarnation of the deity, the poet brings back to life the forgotten by carving out ancient images through the powerful tool of the word: "the myths I am, the myths

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<sup>104</sup>For a comprehensive understanding of Native American cosmologies and myth, see Paula Gunn Allen's "The Ceremonial Motion of Indian Time: Long Ago, So Far." in The Sacred Hoop. Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 145-154. Also, Peter Gold's "Balancing and Unifying Earth With Sky," in Navajo & Tibetan Sacred Wisdom. The Circle of the Spirit, (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1994), pp. 87-130.

I want to become."<sup>105</sup>

As myth of creation, Coatlicue eagle foetus and serpent/ eagle feathers growing out of her skin merge into the living myth of self-creation and transformation that the poet stands for and undergoes. This poetic exercise takes shape as words literally materialize tumbling down the page, like the Phoenix on fire, to ultimately give birth to visual patterns of verses and stanzas criss-crossing the blank page.

As pointed out in the previous section, the incorporation of Coatlicue into this analysis brings back some missing information from and respect for aspects that connect Chicanos to ancient civilizations.<sup>106</sup> The analysis of this deity is also relevant because it addresses gender issues which counteract the effect of prevailing patriarchal structures. As these structures silenced more and more their female population and ways of knowing, the power of deities seriously declined, thus creating an imbalance on all levels of social and spiritual order.

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<sup>105</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 71.

<sup>106</sup>In relation to creation myths, Marie-Louise Von Franz argues that creation by thought "[e]xists predominantly in the realm of introverted civilizations." She refers to the following specific groups: the Gnostics, North American Indians, and East Indians. These groups, according to her, focus on the inner potentialities of people. For further elaboration on this issue, see Marie-Louise Von Franz's "Subjective Moods of the Creator," Creation Myths (Dallas: Spring Publications, Inc., 1972), p. 114.

Anzaldúa's focus on Coatlicue counteracts the partiality found in earlier accounts of deities from different traditions and their powers. Coatlicue is one of the most important aspects of the Great Goddess, the mother of the gods. She is the goddess of the earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars. She represents the birth giver and the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth. Her name means "She who wears the Serpent Skirt." In some accounts, she is depicted as a complete view of the cosmos.<sup>107</sup>

In Harvey Birenbaum's Myth and Mind, which elaborates on Quetzalcoatl, Indian Krishna and the Hindu God Shiva, we can find an example of the kind of approach which Anzaldúa is contesting. Birenbaum presents the deities mentioned as if they were single and whole -- in and of themselves, but without their defining dual or multiple divisions. This type of work remains incomplete, for it tends to obscure the actual duality and female aspects that deities embody. For instance, in the case of Kali, the incarnation of the female force of Shiva, also known as female warrior, is made to retain mostly the negative connotations associated with destruction.

A contrast to Birenbaum's work is Manuela Dunn Mascetti's The Song of Eve in which "The Goddess Kali

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<sup>107</sup>The Flayed God. The Mythology of Mesoamerica. eds. Roberta H. Markman & Peter T. Markman (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), pp. 222-23.

succeeds in defeating the demons with her primary power... . She is thus the representation of the dualism that saves life from becoming a torment inflicted by demons... . Kali wipes everything away restoring existence to its natural way so that the gods may come back bringing an undivided view of life" <sup>108</sup>. As in the case of Coatlicue, destruction and death are integrated as part of the process by which order is restored and rebirth made possible.

Anzaldúa brings back balance by approaching the myth of Coatlicue integrating the opposites that she embodies. For new mestizas, like Anzaldúa, Coatlicue embodies the synthesis of dual principles:

Coatlicue is the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb. Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes.

Simultaneously, depending on the person, she represents duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective--something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality.<sup>109</sup>

Anzaldúa synthesizes duality through her poetry and critical writing, which bridge gaps between the sacred and the profane, past and future, the object of

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<sup>108</sup>Manuela Dunn Mascetti, The Song of Eve. Mythology and Symbols of the Goddess. (New York: A Fireside Book, 1990), p.89.

<sup>109</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, p.46.

discourse, they/you, and the subject, us/I. The figurative space where the New Mestiza deals with the ambiguities of being of mixed blood, having multiple voices/personae, and embodying different ethnic backgrounds and gender paradigms, is male and female like Coatlicue. These are the myths that Anzaldúa is unearthing and remaking, the myths that she incarnates in her profane literary body. As she herself moves across the ultimate borderlands of reality, she also metamorphizes into feathered serpent. This metamorphosis occurs when she enters the Coatlicue State.

The Coatlicue State belongs to chapter four of the first part of Borderlands/La Frontera. The first part of the work is La herencia de Coatlicue, Coatlicue's heritage. This section starts with a broken poem that looks more like prose. It represents, formally, the stage previous to the transformation of the text from prose, as in the section "La herencia de Coatlicue" and "Crossers y otros atravesados," to poetry, as in "Poets Have Strange Eating Habits." The prose version of the text is about a protean being, the poet. Immediately after, Anzaldúa proceeds to describe how this protean being undergoes different stages of transformation. The text and the poet become one during this exercise; the body of the text and that of the poet are literally subjected to an internal metamorphosis which finds its reflection on

a page riddled with broken lines.

As Proteus, the poet here has the power of foretelling the future and of changing her shape --the body of text. Anzaldúa defers the final transformation for the second part of the book and focuses, first, on breaking down this chapter into a section that acts as gradual revelation of how the act of writing occurs and what stages it entails. There are six parts in this chapter, three titles of which appear in Spanish, and three in English: "Enfrentamiento con el alma," "El secreto terrible y la rajadura," "Nopal de Castilla," "The Coatlicue State," "The Coatlicue State Is A Prelude to Crossing," and "That Which Abides." All of these sections involve Spanish, often without any translation, and English.

The preceding chapter, called "Entering into the Serpent," works as a prelude to crossing into the Coatlicue State. Constant crossing, stepping over chapters and poems is the means used to reclaim the presence of this strong deity. In Greek mythology, it would involve reclaiming Medusa's head and challenging proud Perseus to repeat his deed, but this time without the winged hat and sandals, without the cap of darkness that made him invisible after he cut Medusa's head, without Athena's protective shield, ultimately without Hermes' sword.



In these pages, the myth of Coatlicue and the metaphor of the borderlands ultimately come together in the ritual of literary transformation that Anzaldúa's poetry and critical writing perform. On a more specific level, Anzaldúa draws on three distinct heritages: Native Mexican mostly Nahuatl, which includes both Aztec from the North and Maya from the South, Castilian, and American English. From her Native American ancestry, Anzaldúa resuscitates Coatlicue, the mother-goddess of Mexico, identified with the earth, who gave birth to the warrior god, Huitzilopochtli, whom she conceives by swallowing a ball of hummingbird feathers.<sup>110</sup> In other accounts, this deity is portrayed in its full complexity as "she who wears a skirt of snakes":

Aztec goddess of earth and fire; she also appears as mother of the gods. Her statue in Mexico City shows, apart from her skirt of snakes, a head with two snakes and a necklace consisting of human hands and hearts: the latter in evidence of the need for human sacrifice if cosmic order is to be upheld. On her back hang 13 leather cords decorated with snails, symbolizing the mythical heaven. The goddess was made pregnant by a ball of down or an emerald, and gave birth to Quetzalcoatl.<sup>111</sup>

A third account presents Coatlicue as the mother of all

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<sup>110</sup>Michael Senior, The Illustrated Who's Who In Mythology (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), p. 53.

<sup>111</sup>Manfred Lurker, Dictionary of Gods and Goddesses, Devils and Demons, trans. G.L. Campbell (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 84.

Aztec deities as well as of the sun, the moon, and the stars. She produced all earthly life, and received the dead back again into her body. She was also associated with volcanic mountains and had a daughter, Xochiquetzal, the Mexican Aphrodite and Goddess of all women.<sup>112</sup>

The different accounts about Coatlicue seem to be consistent with respect to how she "miraculously" conceives her children and in that she is associated with the principles of life and death. Her offspring are also associated with love (Xochiquetzal), wisdom (Huitzilopochtli), and war (Quetzalcoatl).<sup>113</sup>

Anzaldúa's own perception of the deity and herself as a protean being is not coincidental as the sources quoted above confirm. In the section "The Coatlicue State," she enacts the return to the original motif of self-birth/ self-creation. The repetition of this cyclical pattern is part of a mythical archetype that takes us back to the hierophanies of the moon which act as revelations across mythic systems. This revelation is

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<sup>112</sup>Barbara G. Walker, The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), p. 172.

<sup>113</sup>In Quetzalcóatl Serpiente Emplumada, Román Piña Chan clarifies that the god Quetzalcoatl of the Aztecs, god of the wind (Ehécatl), has been often confused with that of the Toltecs, associated with the cult to water (Topiltzin) and god of good and culture. The confusion seems to stem from the name of a priest of Toltec Tula who introduced the cult of the god in the area and whose name was Ce Acatl Toliptzin. Román Piña Chan Quetzalcóatl Serpiente Emplumada (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977), pp. 7 & 38.

invoked in the following description of the deity in association with Medusa,

In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztec are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.<sup>114</sup>

Anzaldúa reenacts the fusion of opposites in the New Mestiza. Her viewpoint is informed by myths from different traditions and it combines the Native, the Spanish, and the English. Her contribution grows out of the Chicana lesbian community and through the exploration of "dark" female territories, also epitomized by the underworld in numerous mythologic systems. Poems like "Letting Go" and "I Had to Go Down", from Borderlands/La Frontera, work as preambles to a ritualistic descent into those dark territories. They strategically precede chapter five, entitled "Animas," where "Creature of Darkness" and "My Black Angelos" are included.

"I Had to Go Down," for instance, involves the physical going down into a basement after the protagonist hears a noise. Symbolically, however, it reflects the descent into deep layers of the self. Yet another parallel to the skin layers shed by the Serpent Skirt

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<sup>114</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza, 47.

Coatlicue. Skin shedding reveals new layers of awareness to the poet who eventually discovers that the grip of fear she is seized by is provoked by a lack of consciousness about her own movements, the act of creation/writing:

Then I heard the footsteps again  
making scuffing sounds  
on the packed dirt floor.

It was my feet making them.  
It had been my footsteps I'd heard.<sup>115</sup>

Going down as part of the creative process functions as a metaphor for delving deeper and deeper into her Self, as well as for delving deeper into the historical past of Chicanos. The moments when Anzaldúa fully reenacts the myth of creation and self-creation recur within the different pieces of the composition of her work.

As one takes a closer look at Anzaldúa's poetry, one realizes that her words have physical texture and that her poetry is not just made of words. The images that the words, both the sound and their physical imprint, as well as the blank spaces between them create a cutting presence, which her poems also show on a visual level.

Anzaldúa's understanding of the substance that words are made of differs considerably, although not

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 169.

totally, from a long tradition in linguistic and semiotic studies that started even before Saussure's times. It was already in the nineteenth century that Taine speaking on "Les signes" in De l'Intelligence argued that we think by means of signs, which for him were not only words but the mental pictures that go into thinking. Saussure on his part further contributed to linguistics by conceptualizing the linguistic sign as a psychic entity with two surfaces, which he called the signifiant and the signifié.

<sup>116</sup> The literary and linguistic innovation in the case of poet Gloria Anzaldúa lies in her incorporation one more element, the spirit, to the conceptualization of words within the frame of the borderlands. She thus breaks earlier binary understandings of language. The spirit of the word is brought into existence through the incorporation of myth both in Anzaldúa's poetry, critical writing. She is following here the literary tradition of numerous Latin American writers called "magic realism."<sup>117</sup> Thus her verses also have spirit apart from

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<sup>116</sup>For a comparative analysis of the works of Taine and Saussure, see Hans Aarsleff, "Taine and Saussure," From Locke to Saussure. Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp.356-371.

<sup>117</sup>Some key contemporary examples are Gabriel García Márquez' Cien años de soledad (1967), Isabel Allende's La casa de los espíritus (1983), Sandra Cisneros' The House of Mango Street (1988), and Laura Esquivel's Como agua para chocolate(1989). It is important here to mention that "magic realism" does not reflect the reality that these works set out to describe, which is as authentic as matter although of a different density.

sound and written words: "Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hands."<sup>118</sup> The spirit of her words materializes when Anzaldúa takes up the challenge to bring back her muse Coatlicue in writing/body. In this process, she moves into the world of ritual:

I sit there before my computer, Amiguita my altar on top of the monitor with the Virgen de Coatlicue candle and copal incense burning. My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the way metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body.<sup>119</sup>

The skin of the serpent materializes in the printed word squirming on the page, the written word, the concrete, the bridge mentioned earlier, that is what we see in the now; whereas the rest of the parts, "etherealized", are the spirits from the past embodied in letters, syllables, sentences. Their sound, immaterial like the spirit of the written word, exists only in the nick of a time that not all can perceive.

The sound of prehistoric words unearth their deep voice from the lyric persona of yet another recurrent

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 75.

symbol in Anzaldúa's work: the mouth of the abyss. This is the mouth that creates and swallows her/self up and participates in the act of her own transformation both as object and subject of the act of writing. The devouring abyss referred to as mouth has clear associations with primary drives, such as nourishment, sexuality:

To be a mouth--the cost is too high--her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth. Todo pasaba por esa boca, el viento, el fuego, los mares, y la Tierra. Her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing through it. She wants to install 'stop' and 'go' signal lights, instigate a curfew, police Poetry. But something wants to come out.<sup>120</sup>

The symbolism of the abyss lives also in the creation myths of numerous other traditions. It appears in some gnostic sects, like the Valentinians, where the abyss is considered as the original father "[t]he unfathomable Aeon who was there before everything, in the very beginning, the original father of Bythos, the abyss."<sup>121</sup> In that context, however, the abyss appears in relation to Ennoia, also called Charis and Sige, that is, Grace and Silence, both feminine words in Greek.

What comes out of Coatlicue's abyss is the complexity of this figure and the different aspects that

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>121</sup> Marie-Louise Von Franz, Creation Myths, (Dallas: Spring Publications, Inc. 1972), p. 128.

she incarnates, as giver of life and death, mostly absent or made invisible in many mythic records. Coatlalopeuh, Anzaldúa elaborates, is an aspect of earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses, the earliest of which is Coatlícue, or "Serpent Skirt",<sup>122</sup>

She had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet. As creator goddess, she was mother of the celestial deities, and of Huitzilopochtli and his sister, Coyolxauhqui, She With Golden Bells, Goddess of the Moon, who was decapitated by her brother.<sup>123</sup>

As is widely known, many mythic systems, including the male dominated Azteca-Mexica culture, drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting for them male deities, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities: "Coatlalopeuh, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects was divided up into Coatlícue, the Serpent goddess. Her more sinister aspects, Tlazolteotl and Cihuacoatl, were "darkened" and "disempowered."<sup>124</sup>

Tonantzin is the other aspect of Coatlicue who was

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<sup>122</sup>For a detailed reinterpretation of the Christian myth of Creation see Elain Pagals' Adam, Eve, and the Serpent (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1989).

<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>124</sup>Ibid.



split from the former's guises and turned into the defender of the Mexican people, the Nahuas. She became the good mother who gave Mexico the cactus plant to provide her people with milk and pulque. Later on, Tonantzin was assimilated into the figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Once more, a free female figure, Coatlicue, is dissected and forcefully "converted" into a Christian counterpart from the "old" world.<sup>125</sup>

Anzaldúa's recovery of this deity, not only as mother and Virgin, but also as a female sexual being in control of her creative and creation powers, serves to counteract and cut across historical and religious dissective determinism. As woman, and lesbian, the poet further reclaims this deity and enacts the Coatlicue stage, which necessarily involves knowing the female body as an uncensored sexual site for pleasure, and not only pain. Her powers and its uncontrollable aspects, so threatening to patriarchy and those who have assimilated its doctrine uncritically, are recovered as the lost pieces of the New Mestiza. As mentioned above, the

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<sup>125</sup> In "Unveiling Athena: Women in the Chicano Novel," Erlinda González-Berry collapses the triad, virgin/mother/whore earlier on proposed by Lucy Irigaray into the binary opposition good/bad. I think that the triad is a more faithful reflection of Anzaldúa's study of female archetypes within Chicana literature. It separates the Virgin, Guadalupe, and the Christian appropriation of Tonantzin, the motherly aspect of Coatlicue; the mother is also associated with Malinche, la Chingada, the raped mother betrayed by her own people, and goddess Coatlicue, without denying her aspect as giver of life and death.

passage to the new state involves letting go, being out of control, and being able to regain it once more.

Anzaldúa's recurrent metaphor of letting go, crisscrossing borders, and jumping into the abyss, reflect leaps of faith and a firm belief in what she is doing, besides the craftwork that accompanies her poetry. This attitude has a long tradition even in English literature. Frost's essay, "Education by Poetry," coincides with Anzaldúa's understanding of writing. In that text, Frost stated: "[t]here is a literary belief. Every time a poem is written, a short story is written, it is written not by cunning, but by belief. The beauty, the something, the little charm of the thing to be is more felt than known."<sup>126</sup>

The reader of Anzaldúa's text goes through a whole long exercise in order to understand her creative writing. This requirement also challenges patriarchal structures and the reader's sense of order, for it builds on sequences that are, as it were, out of control, as well as a whole range of aspects that also relate to Coatlicue and have to do with the dark. This reality has often been associated with women writers, and non-mainstream writers, in so far as they have been made to fit systematically into this mysterious position of

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<sup>126</sup>Robert Frost. "Education by Poetry." Studies in Prose Writing. Eds. James Kreuzer & Lee Cogan, (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston Inc., 1967), p. 89.

darkness. Anzaldúa herself occupies such a position, although she constantly undermines its fixation by breaking stereotypes. One more example along this line is her identification as serpent, without acquiescing to the Christian model of woman as temptress, but as serpent shelling out layers of experience within the process of creative writing,

The toad comes out of its hiding place inside the lobes of my brains. It's going to happen again. The ghost of the toad that betrayed me--I hold it in my hand. The toad is sipping the strength from my veins, it is sucking my pale heart. I am a dried serpent skin, wind scuttling me across the hard ground, pieces of me scattered over the countryside. And there in the dark I meet the crippled spider crawling in the gutter, the day-old newspaper fluttering in the dirty rain water.<sup>127</sup>

The recuperation of the toad instead of a royal blue prince, and of Coatlicue, needs to be understood as a necessary step to restore the balance of oppositions that the deity originally harbored, since before the change to male dominance, Coatlicue contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death.

The creation of spiritual imbalance is crucial to understanding the triumph of Spaniards and other European colonizers over American peoples, and the Aztec Empire in

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<sup>127</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 72.

particular. The triumph of Spaniards was mostly attained through the annihilation of Native spirituality and religious principles. Regarding this often missing point, Jeanette Rodriguez explains: "[T]he most profound aspect of the conquest was the spiritual devastation of the Aztec people. With the destruction of their pride and their temples, as well as the killing of their people, came a feeling that the gods were angry with them and had deserted them."<sup>128</sup>

The loss of faith, old prophecies, and the betrayal of some peoples earlier subjugated by the Aztecs, themselves looking for expansion, were crucial in the destruction of their empire. According to the Códice Matritense, for instance, the wealth and military power of Tenochtitlan were a result of the conquests accomplished by Itzcoatl, who ruled between 1428 and 1440, and of his shrewd nephew, Tlacaelel. During this period, the old Toltec prayers, most of them directed to Quetzalcoatl, were revised in favor of the war-god Huitzilopochtli. This change would extend the supply of captives to be sacrificed. Thus the original belief in a single, supreme god, called "God of Duality," "Lord and Lady of Duality," "He who Creates Himself" and "Giver of Life" came to an end.

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<sup>128</sup>Jeanette Rodriguez, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), p. 13.

Numerous historical accounts neglect to stress the spiritual imbalance already existing in Tenochtitlan before the arrival of the Spaniards, which largely contributed to plotting and treason on the part of peoples like the Toltecs, who had been subjugated earlier by the Aztecs. This cyclic destruction of order and balance within nature, as well as in the beliefs, brings about the recurrence of disasters, which humans have the tendency to naturalize to justify their inaction and resistance to making things happen differently.

Motifs of war, disaster, human sacrifice and death were prevalent only among a reduced number of peoples within the Aboriginal population, such as the Aztecs. This motif also reoccurs in ancient European tradition. For instance in Greek myths like those of Isis and Osiris, and Demeter and Persephone. On a metaphorical level, Henderson and Oakes reinterpret human sacrifice as related to humankind's quest for death and renewal, yet another way of seeking immortality which extends to these archetypes of mythic traditions:

... the wish for deliverance has to be indefinitely postponed and became a longing for immortality, a resurrection in a life hereafter, made possible only by the future appearance of a "messiah," or savior who could reconcile the law of the prophets with the archetype of renewal. Finally in Christianity the father-son religion had to insist upon resurrection of the body as the only possible kind of survival, whereas the mother-son religion insisted upon rebirth in this life as the prototype

for any future life to come.<sup>129</sup>

Henderson and Oakes's vision of creation myths parallels Anzaldúa's. Nevertheless, an important distinction needs to be made regarding the latter's perspective, that is, it further counteracts imbalance within societies whose social and family structures offered women a dignified position and which had ample space for duality. This was attained by having access to models that encompassed both.

Henderson and Oakes see the erasure of mother-son religion as related to the nineteenth century philosophy of dialectical materialism with its implication that science combined with industry would provide the royal road to achieving all possible human satisfactions. They locate the foundation of such a trend further back in the French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, during the French Revolution, when the Goddess of Reason was enthroned in Notre Dame cathedral in Paris. According to them, the repression of the true spirit of the feminine in favor of a false-masculine intellectual ideal has resulted in "[m]odern neurotics suffering from this type of hypertrophy of the masculine superego... . This state

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<sup>129</sup> Joseph L. Henderson, & Maud Oakes. "Personal Encounter: The Wisdom of the Serpent." The Wisdom of the Serpent. The Myths of Death, Rebirth, and Resurrection, (New York: George Braziller, 1963), p. 22.

of affairs left us in the twentieth century with a confusion of identity which has increasingly made women doubt themselves as women and men as men."<sup>130</sup>

For Anzaldúa, dealing with issues of identity to clarify the long confusion that modern people live in involves entering the serpent skirt emotionally and in writing. It means to re-enact the Coatlicue State, which for her "[f]eels very much like being Chicana, or being queer--a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls."<sup>131</sup> It entails the reinstatement of the full symbolic dimension of the serpent and woman as embodiment of duality since in the Nahuatl world all life was dual in nature. This principle which undergirded all existence had a name: Ometeotl.<sup>132</sup>

When Gloria Anzaldúa dreams of serpents, she dreams of Coatl and revisits ancient American mythology. Apart from being associated with womanhood as symbol of sexual drive, the serpent held many other symbolic layers. For the Olmecs, the serpent was the most sacred place on earth, a place of refuge, the creative womb from which all things were born and to which all things returned. For Anzaldúa, it is also a part of her psyche:

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>131</sup> Anzaldúa, 1987:72.

<sup>132</sup> Rodríguez, 1994:9.

I realized she was, in my psyche, the mental picture and the symbol of the instinctual in its collective impersonal, pre-human. She, 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.<sup>133</sup>

The experience of instinct, intuition, and the senses is directly connected with the creative process of writing. It is both physical and involves the world of the spirit -- life and death. For Anzaldúa, it also goes against practices of the Catholic Church and other institutionalized religions that impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure and encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage to kill parts of ourselves. People are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head and is related to intellectual production. Awareness of all these aspects is what Anzaldúa calls an experiencing of soul (Self).

In numerous mythological systems, the snake epitomizes renewal. Renewal also finds its parallel in writing understood as a path/state to something else, that is, writing as a bodily experience also identified with the metaphor of a cactus needle embedded in the flesh, or with the "carving bone." Once again, Anzaldúa

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<sup>133</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 35.



brings the metaphor back to the physical realm as she literally chisels her own face and heart after having stripped off yet another skin layer, just like snakes do in some of her poems:

A mis ancas caen los cueros de culebra,  
cuatro veces por año los arrastro,  
me tropiezo y me caigo  
y cada vez que miro una culebra le pregunto  
¿Qué traes conmigo?<sup>134</sup>

Anzaldúa's identification and merging with Coatlicue, and more directly, with her aspect as serpent in the quotation above, literally takes us back to the last verses. There, the question undergoes an unexpected switch in the possessive personal pronoun. The change brings the fusion of object, which should read "Qué traes contigo?" ("What are you bringing with yourself?"), and the subject to a full completion: "Qué traes conmigo?", ("What are you bringing with myself?"). The identification of the person with the animal spirit, nahual, is a part of Native Indian tradition, both in the north, center, and the south of America. This invocation of the animal spirit protects the person from evil all their life and is never revealed to the child carrying it

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<sup>134</sup> Down my haunches fall the skins of the snake/I drag them four times a year/ I trip on them and fall/ and each time I look at a snake I ask it/ What do you bring with my-self? (my translation). Anzaldúa, 1987:36.

before s/he can fully understand its significance.<sup>135</sup>

The verses quoted above summarize the purpose of this section. They illustrate how concepts often presented as opposed, like male/female, conscious/unconscious, subject/object, do not necessarily detract from each of the parts involved. Bringing the parts together reestablishes long lost balances. This reflection also applies to a polysemic understanding of myth in the Borderlands. Its making will unfold in the course of the next section.

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<sup>135</sup>For a detailed account of how nahual is conceived in native Indian tradition, see Rigoberta Menchú's Rigoberta Menchú. A Native Indian in Guatemala.

## CHAPTER III

### MYTHMAKING IN THE BORDERLANDS

#### 3.1. "Poets Have Strange Eating Habits."

The reader should be carried forward... . Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air;--at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward.

"What is a Poem?." Samuel Taylor Coleridge

If a poem exists when the reader is carried by the poem's movement and sound that unfold from it, then "Poets have strange eating habits" is a poem. The reader is not only forced to pause and recede, but to visually undertake acrobatic jumps and summersaults from one line into the next.

"Poets Have Strange Eating Habits" is a complex ars poetica that combines Western European and ancient American cultural traditions and myths. Anzaldúa's poetry is also a vehicle for the reconstruction of myth in the borderlands. Formally, this free verse poem builds its tension on the length of its lines; the short and enjambed verses provide a cutting edge to the narrative, whereas the long ones establish the minimum balance necessary to keep together a structure that, otherwise, is threatened with disintegration.

The setting for the poem is a moonless night sky, a sky without Coatlicue, Goddess of the moon which the poet, talking in the first person, coaxes and whips in the shape of a balking mare. This mare or creative force is pushed to feed the mouth of an abyss that will bring about transformation. The transformation that occurs in the course of the poem is a reflection of the protean nature of the poet, who like Proteus, has the power of changing at will both herself and, by extension, the poem,

Dark windowless no moon glides  
across the night sky  
I coax and whip the balking  
mare  
to the edge  
peel the scabs from  
her wounds  
Her body caves into itself  
through the whole  
my mouth.<sup>136</sup>

As mentioned in the previous section, the mouth of the abyss finds its parallel in the mouth of the poet. Both mouths are wide open awaiting the nourishment that will cover the blank spaces with the arrival of inspiration, its materialization into images, and their articulation into words. The poem, as well as Anzaldúa's stories, enact this kind of discourse:

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<sup>136</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 140.

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presence of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural or cosmic powers.<sup>137</sup>

The metaphorical images and lines precede the conscious knowledge of what is actually occurring in Anzaldúa's verses, since images for her are more direct than words and closer to the unconscious. Thus after coaxing and whipping the balking mare, we find the next line, "to the edge," further indented on the page. By not using a simple, descriptive approach but the enactment of associative images<sup>138</sup>, she creates an effect that is carried out through the multiplicity of voices that the poet incarnates through first and third person narrators.

"Poets" involves three main voices, two female that alternatively merge, the mare's and that of the poet, and one male voice, the abyss, which appears in Spanish, "el abismo." The female forces fall tumbling into the abyss in the shape of the mare and the poet. The mare stands

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<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>138</sup>The associative images and their particular interest lie in the fact that the associations acquire their full richness when we understand their relation to ancestral history and myth. This is illustrated in the example of the goddess Coatlicue and also in the mare. The latter, for instance, takes us back to the first introduction of horses in Mexico by the Spaniards and this perception gives a further dimension to our reading.

for sexual energy which fuels the creative process.

"El abismo", on the other hand, is to be understood both as space and performance of a psychological state. It signals the presence of certain obscure forces, which are enacted through the mare, also within "the gaping mouth that slits heart from mind" into which the poet feeds herself.

Stepping into the abyss involves a leap of faith that Anzaldúa enacts in order to lighten up what is gestated within herself. Therefore the exercise entails both the act of giving birth, and fertilizing the abyss.<sup>139</sup>

The blurring of clear cut opposites plays an important role in Anzaldúa's work. This strategy is integrated as the enactment of the Coatlicue State described earlier on. It reflects what goes on in the process of creativity, that is, the fear, the contradictory impulses to move forward while wanting to run backwards. Within the poet's mind, this process also involves crossing back and forth the conscious and unconscious borderlands of the psyche. Despite the harshness of the experience, Anzaldúa chooses to be Coatlicue and embody a most powerful driving force, one that prevents the soul from remaining arrested and pushes

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<sup>139</sup> Interestingly, in the poem the term "el abismo" remains in Spanish, the mother tongue, as does the last line of the poem which I will discuss later on.

it to the edge of action and growth.

On a linguistic level, Coatlicue forces the poet to move back and forth between the English and the Spanish languages. The transformation of the mother tongue into English, like the mare, forces the poet to kick holes out of old boundaries of the self. Each boundary that is overcome, each borderlands that is crossed, materializes into another old skin layer left behind and into the appearance a new rattle in the snake. Each rattle finds a reflection in the new lines of poetry on the page pushing words forward into further action until a particular end is reached. The final stanza in "Poets" is marked by a powerful image of implosion in which the poet delivers herself into the cosmic abyss that engendered her in the first place.

Anzaldúa keeps some terms as "el abismo" in Spanish. In so doing, she brings forth her mother tongue, which in turn triggers a complex range of associations. The Spanish language becomes a double bind for Anzaldúa and Chicanos at large. It stands for the mother tongue after colonization even though it is ultimately the language of the father, epitomized in the Spanish captain Hernán Cortés. This "choice" is inevitable, for her linguistic identities bind her to the English and Spanish languages; it is also imperative in order to invoke the past, a past that she also captures in later work as the concept of

interfacing.

To look at the interface is to look at what lies between the masks that are being ripped off at each stage of the creative process. What lies in the interface necessarily has to do with Anzaldúa's Latina identity, an identity that resists fixation by disrupting the binary opposition object/ subject. In the poem, this resistance occurs literally in language, and up in the air with the image of the female poet feeding herself into the throat of the mare who, as a matter of gender, is also female. Together they feed an abyss, a kind of cosmic womb, which becomes impregnated with Coatlicue's energy of self-creation. The deity, as mentioned earlier, made herself pregnant by swallowing a ball of feathers,

She spreads out her legs  
to catch the wind  
    rushes to fill "el abismo"  
    the nightride has ripped open  
    its hunger rimmed with teeth  
I feed it my throat my hands  
let it glut itself on me  
till it's pregnant with me.  
    Wounding is a deeper healing.<sup>140</sup>

By feeding the abyss, the poet implants herself as the seed within the mare. This fertilization leads to the conception of the eagle foetus. The foetus is Coatlicue's offspring reincarnated in the poet, whereas the poem

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid.



becomes the poet's creation, one which involves harsh physical labor as the following stanza illustrates,

I burrow deep into myself  
pull the emptiness in  
its hollows chisel my face  
growing thin thinner  
eyesockets empty  
tunneling here tunneling there  
the slither of snakes  
their fangs pierce my flesh  
  
falling.<sup>141</sup>

As the poet carves herself into existence, the poem takes shape. As noted earlier on, for Anzaldúa, creativity is a craft best expressed through images like chiseling, tunnelling, piercing, all of which involve heavy physical labor and pain, like the image of birth provided by the earth splitting. This scene is further developed in the highly disjointed stanza, which follows the parting of the earth and the fall of the poet into its entrails,

The Earth parts  
I hit the bottom of the chasm  
peer over the edge  
    coax and whip the balking mare  
    take that plunge again  
    jumping off cliffs an addiction  
flailing pummeling  
    flesh into images  
sticking feathers  
    in my arms  
    slithering into holes  
    with rattlesnakes

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<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

dark windowless no moon glides  
across the night sky  
the maw opens wide I slip inside  
Taking deep breaths eyes closed  
"me la tragó todita"<sup>142</sup>

The wound of the earth splitting open reflects Anzaldúa's own wounds and experience of the process of creation. It involves the transformation of her flesh and the pain attached to it into words. The words then become the new seeds that may give rise to further inspiration.

The birth of the poem itself takes place on a moonless night, "dark windowless," in the scene of a kind of earthquake in which supernatural powers are at play. Both creation and destruction are conjured up by the image of the serpent, Aztec deity of the earth and symbol of life, death and rebirth. As mentioned earlier, Anzaldúa becomes one with the Serpent Skirt Coatlicue, putting "flesh into images/ sticking feathers" in her arms, "slithering into holes/with rattlesnakes." This association evokes Medusa whose hair is made up of serpents and is killed by Perseus whose parallel is the abyss, in this case the eagle winning over the serpent.

The eagle is a key image in the poem. It represents the mythic bird of the Aboriginal peoples in the North of America and in the East for people from Tibet to North of

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<sup>142</sup>"I swallow it whole." Ibid., 140.

Africa, just as the Condor is the mythic bird of the South. They are both considered sacred messengers since they are the oldest birds and the ones that can fly closest to the sun. The eagle in Anzaldúa's poetry should not be seen exclusively as a predatory bird. On the contrary, the figure of the eagle fetus stands for the rebirth of the poet. It occurs in "a fluid sky" which works as a kind of cosmic womb. There "suspended in fluid sky/I, eagle fetus, live serpent/feathers growing out of my skin... ." <sup>143</sup>

Both the eagle/phoenix imagery and the serpent need to be reinterpreted taking into account the more integrative approach of Aboriginal myth. According to Gary Buffalo Horn Man and Sherry Firedancer, the eagle is the sacred messenger, carrying our prayers to the Creator and returning with gifts and visions for the people. In many traditions, the eagle is the spirit keeper of the East, from whence comes dawn and illumination of the darkness. <sup>144</sup>

Through the figure of the eagle, this poem acquires a new dimension. It shows the close interdependence existing between the different traditions that dwell within a borderlands woman like Anzaldúa. The end of the

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<sup>143</sup>Ibid.

<sup>144</sup>Gary Buffalo Horn Man & Sherry Firedancer, Animal Energies. (Lexington: Dancing Otter Publishing, 1992).

poem brings us full circle to the beginning, albeit with some changes. For instance, the poet slips into the maw but instead of being swallowed, she swallows the mare whole: "me la tragó[é] todita". The female figures are both subject and object of the action, feeding the abyss, and swallowing "it", the mare, whole. Anzaldúa's construction subverts the binary opposition of female active and passive agents. Feeding the abyss as eagle fetus illustrates this last point visually, for it brings into the scene an image of flying in which the sky is a receiver of the flight. The eagle feeds the sky and nourishes itself from the wind and air. These elements, in turn, allow for the bird to be in its nature as bird.

The dark aspects that come out of the deep experiences of creation and rebirth are represented by the sound and shape of rattlesnakes, a device often used by sorceresses, "stirring in a jar/ being fed with her flesh."<sup>145</sup> The form of the broken text also comes full circle at the end of the piece, thus repeating the cyclic pattern of mythic experience, "full circle and back dark windowless no moon/glides across the night sky night sky night."<sup>146</sup>

Coatlicue is the unseen, and the "Coatlicue state" clusters the underground aspects of Coatlicue,

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<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 42.

Cihuacoatl, and Tlazolteotl. The deity, like the eagle and the snake, holds an important connection with wisdom, knowledge, and sexual energy. This significant aspect of the deity, which predates Judeo-Christian tradition, underlies Anzaldúa's work through criticism that is not always subtle. The serpent shedding off skin layers symbolizes movement, sexual expression and rebirth not only in Aboriginal traditions, but also in some Gnostic and Christian sects.

An important part of Anzaldúa's agenda involves precisely the deconstruction of an imposed Spanish religious legacy. This exercise becomes un enfrentamiento con el alma, a confrontation with the soul, which subverts binary structures of thought and combines knowledge of the world outside through the development of internal spaces. This combination is closer to ancient ways of understanding knowledge. Curiously, the latter was also practiced by some gnostic Christian sects, whose followers were mostly poets themselves, as well as visionaries.

Anzaldúa does not delve so far back in her analysis of religious determinism, however, it is worth devoting some space to this aspect which she so blatantly challenges.

For some gnostic groups, like the Valentinians, man was divine-- that is, there is a direct connection

between human beings and the creator since the latter is both in man and woman. Knowledge was measured qualitatively rather than quantitatively. This understanding comes at the end of an important journey. This journey for Anzaldúa awakened the already existing direct connection between the Creator/Coatlicue and her seed within each human beings. This understanding of divinity is found among the Nahuatlis too. For this and other ancient traditions, knowledge of reality was the result of 'seeing' through intuition. This kind of seeing then became an intuitive vision.

To see the serpent at the core of Anzaldúa's work makes it compulsory to delve deeper into the symbolic layers of this icon, so religiously charged. There were at least two Christian gnostic sects which derive their name from the cult of the serpent and which identified knowledge with the serpent in Paradise. One was the Ophites and the other was the Naassenes.<sup>147</sup> According to Hans Jonas:

Since it is the serpent that persuades Adam and Eve to taste of the fruit of knowledge and thereby to disobey their creator, it came in a whole group of systems to represent the "pneumatic" principle from beyond counteracting the designs of the Demiurge, and thus could become as much a symbol of the powers of redemption as the biblical God had been

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<sup>147</sup>The name nahas comes from the Hebrew and means serpent. Jonas tells us that the group as a whole is termed "ophitic". Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 93.

degraded to a symbol of cosmic oppression.<sup>148</sup>

One of the versions found by Hans Jonas, the ophitic summary of Iraneus, talks about the transmudane Mother, Sophia-Prunikos who tries to counteract the demiurgic activity of her apostate son Ialdabaoth<sup>149</sup>. The latter tried to seduce Adam and Eve into eating from the tree of knowledge. According to Jonas this is the first success of the transcendent principle against the principle of the world. The principle of the world is vitally interested in "preventing knowledge in man as the inner-worldly hostage of Light: the serpent's action marks the beginning of all gnosis on earth which thus by its very origin is stamped as opposed to the world and its God, and indeed as a form of rebellion."<sup>150</sup>

Jonas also discloses the existence of other gnostic sects, like the Peratae, who regarded Jesus as a

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>149</sup> Jonas quoting from the recently published Apocriphon of John tells us that the first Archon, Ialdabaoth, brought Adam created by the Archons. One of the gnostic tenets sustains that the world is the work of the lowly powers that obstruct knowledge from God and that the Archons or rulers are the genesis of these lowly powers. Thus "their delight is deceit and their tree was hostility. Their fruit is poison against which there is no cure, and their promise is death... Yet their tree was planted as "tree of life." John then reveals the following: "I shall disclose to you the mystery of their "life"--it is their Counterfeit Spirit, which originated from them so as to turn him away, so that he might not know his perfection. (Ibid., 92)

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

particular incarnation of what he quotes as "general serpent." In the barbelo-gnostic (non-ophitic) Apocriphon of John this identification "[i]s narrowly evaded by playing on the difference between the "tree of life" and the "tree of knowledge of good and evil": of the latter Christ indeed causes man to eat against the Archon's commandment, while the serpent, acting from the other tree, the tree of life identified with Ialdabaoth, is left in its traditional (italics mine) role of corrupter."<sup>151</sup>

The serpent and ancient borderlands become reconceptualized here through the eternal present, that is, through the unity and contiguity of hierophanic time. The borderlands of time and myth are vague and become undetermined by the emotional residue of "unnatural boundaries." They are in a constant state of transition and the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.

The prohibited and forbidden lie in invoking the sacred and the profane in the Chicano borderlands that the New Mestiza reincarnates through the body of the serpent skirt and its prophetic spirit.

As noted earlier, hierophanic time encloses recurrence in a borderlands space where magic-religious time and profane time overlap despite their difference in nature. All times come to interact in the myth which the

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<sup>151</sup>Ibid.



metaphor of the serpent creates: an umbrella under which we find the myth of eternal renewal both in Eastern, Western, Northern and Southern traditions.

The symbol of the serpent has taken us back mainly to two mythical traditions: the first, Aboriginal from America, and the second, Greek with reminiscences from Western Christian tradition. There are important interconnections between writing, knowledge, and more precisely, the tree of knowledge, in Anzaldúa's work that are reminiscent of passages in Genesis as shown above. The Native Indian connection is brought about by Anzaldúa's reincarnation in the serpent, shedding off skin layers, signaling the yearly period of hibernation and appearing renewed and wiser after this process.

Anzaldúa helps create literary balance by unearthing hidden aspects of the serpent. Critics like Henderson and Oakes find further associations between the serpent and wisdom in its watchful lidless eye. For them, wisdom "lies essentially in mankind's having projected into this lowly creature his own secret wish to obtain from the earth a knowledge he cannot find in waking daylight consciousness alone. This is the knowledge of death and rebirth forever withheld except at those times when some transcendent principle, emerging from the depths, makes

it available to consciousness."<sup>152</sup>

Both in the work of Henderson and Oakes, and Eliade, Eastern and Western myths are not only myths, but systems of thought that can rule people's understanding of their role and place in society. The role of the poet is ultimately protean in nature. It fulfills the role of mythmaker at the expense of being a kind of alien, someone who suffers from constant exile and displacement. The poem "El sonavabitch" which I analyze in the next section further exposes this situation of displacement for a people like the Chicanos.

### 3.2. El sonavabitch

The poem "El sonavabitch" works as a series of transparencies laid one on top of the other. People are prehistoric boulders whose past reverberates from deep waters up onto the surface of this scene brought to us on the page. The poem describes an incident between a landlord and some illegal Chicanos, wetbacks, who are being exploited by him. The incident happens to be witnessed by a school teacher who is driving by the scene at the moment when the police, called by the landlord himself, are chasing the illegal workers. The whole

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<sup>152</sup>Joseph L. Henderson and Maud Oakes. The Wisdom of the Serpent. The Myths of Death, Rebirth, and Resurrection, (New York: George Braziller, 1963) 36-7.

process follows a stream-of-consciousness technique in which the flow of a lava of cars becomes the fire counterpart to Rio Grande:

Car flowing down a lava of highway  
just happened to glance out of the window  
in time to see brown faces bent backs  
like prehistoric boulders.<sup>153</sup>

In this particular setting, the borderlands become the metaphor for trespassing time and spatial constraints. Trespassing describes a movement of criss-crossing both a physical and psychological space and languages. The crossing over of a geographical space like Rio Grande finds its reflection on the crossing of linguistic barriers when dealing with several languages within the text, as illustrated in the title "El sonavabitché." The psychological dimension of both going back and forth between two or more linguistic realities also is informed by the cultures involved. The challenge here becomes the destabilization of pre-conceived "fixed" cultural identity.

Ideas are built upon a multiple-experienced reality, and so are the changes operating in the languages at play: English, Spanish, Native Nahua. To convey this message, Anzaldúa uses the techniques, such as

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<sup>153</sup>Anzaldúa, Borderlands, 124.

multilayered symbology, as illustrated in the previous section, and the linguistic reenactment of the split tongue of the serpent which is Anzaldúa's Nahuatl.<sup>154</sup> The title of the poem "El sonavabitché" is an excellent epitome of the linguistic reenactment of the split tongue and its materialization on the page. The latinization of English retrieves the gender of nouns and articles from Castillian<sup>155</sup> Spanish. By latinization I mean both the alteration of English words using Spanish word formation techniques, such as addition of suffixes or appearance of Spanish articles to indicate gender. To this strategic use of language pertains the reclamation of linguistic gender identity which would, otherwise, remain largely neutralized in English. The immediate ideological implication is that the presence of Chicano Spanish signals a maternal culture which is not pure but already mixed with Native cultural baggage; its epitome is the first mestiza, La Malinche, also the first woman translator who spoke in tongues: her spirit breathes through the texts of Anzaldúa and many other Chicanas.

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<sup>154</sup>The Nahuatl represents the animal soul. In Native tradition, every child is born with a nahuatl. According to Rigoberta Menchú the nahuatl is like a shadow, the protective spirit that goes through life with him/her.

<sup>155</sup>I use the word Castillian because Spanish homogenizes all the different languages spoken in Spain. Castillian recognizes and locates the distinct origin of the language of colonization and the cultural and political connotations involved. Latin American Spanish would be a different language in itself since it is affected by native languages and cultural background.

**Snakes viboras:** since that day I have sought and shunned them. Always when they cross my path, fear and elation flood my body. I know things older than Freud, older than gender. She-- that's how I think of la víbora, Snake Woman. Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent. 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.<sup>156</sup>

Anzaldúa identifies herself as Snake Woman, the split tongued woman. Like the Olmecs<sup>157</sup>, she sees the Earth as a coiled Serpent but needs to reconcile antagonisms between Indigenous American spirituality and Christian traditions. The symbolic meaning of the snake adds a mythical dimension to Anzaldúa's creative powers, which I have addressed in the previous sections of this chapter.

"El sonavabitché" speaks in a split tongue and blurs clear-cut boundaries. On a geographical level, it creates new understandings of borderlands which connect "The Homeland, Aztlán/ El otro Mexico" with the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California. Timewise, the borderlands takes us back to a part of the poem "El Sonavabitché," which refers historically to the 1930s. After Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the

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<sup>156</sup>Ibid., 26.

<sup>157</sup>Olmecs are considered to be the first mesoamerican civilization (1500-500) and were located in the south of the Gulf of Mexico.

small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of Mexicans to irrigate the desert. Later, the Anglos divided up the land and sold it by the 1950s. These states were invaded by the U.S.A. and occupied in 1846. The border fence that divides the Mexican people was born on February 2, 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. It left 100,000 Mexican citizens on the U.S. side. These slowly were swindled out of their land. For many Chicanos, the choice was to stay in Mexico and starve or move north. North Americans called this return to the homeland the silent invasion.

"El sonavabitch" is a silent invasion in the borderlands text. The illegal crossing finds its parallel in the use of words in English and Spanish. It involves wetbacks, the "mojados", floating on inflatable rafts across "el río Grande", wading or swimming. On the other side, the Border Patrol awaits and sets traps around the river beds. Hunters in army-green uniforms track these refugees with powerful electronic sensing devices. Wetbacks are caught, handcuffed, locked in jeeps, caught up in the English language and kicked back across the border: Spanish, like puffs in dust, gasps through the poem.

"El sonavabitch" harbors the silent invasion of Chicano languages (Standard Mexican Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, regional variations of Chicano

Spanish from Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, Tex-Mex, Pachuco) under the constant threat of the predatory imagery of English. Stylistically, there is a linguistic engagement between the reported speech of a mythical omniscient voice whose consciousness streams (as in the first stanza quoted above), and a direct first person narrator,

I got to the farm  
in time to hear the shots  
ricochet off barn,  
spit into the sand,  
in time to see tall men in uniforms  
thumping fists on doors  
metallic voices yelling Halt!  
their hawk eyes constantly shifting.<sup>158</sup>

The poem in itself is divided up into verses and stanzas that zig-zag on the page; yet another visualization of the Borderlands crossing, running along the poem is the river "flowing" with the wetbacks. This is a direct reference to the history of Mexico which finds its counterpart in the present, the subject remains elliptical until later on, the verbs flow in the present continuous which lengthens the action carried by the uninterrupted flow of words: an eleven-verse stanza with no punctuation. In contrast with the continuous tenses, the immediacy of the observer's glance out of the window

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<sup>158</sup>Ibid.,

is punctuated by preterits ("happened") and infinitive forms ("to glance", "to see"). In one breath, the stanza reverberates the long sentences of Spanish syntax.

Car flowing down a lava of highway  
just happened to glance out the window  
in time to see brown faces bent backs  
like prehistoric boulders in a field  
so common a sight no one  
notices  
blood rushes to my face  
twelve years I'd sat on the memory  
the anger scorching me  
my throat so tight I can  
barely get the words out.<sup>159</sup>

Flashbacks maintain the quality of a dream, memory recovered by a lyric persona, replayed in the use of stream-of-consciousness technique. The act of remembering is reflected in the omission of articles, prepositions, sometimes the subject is elliptical, that is, connectors, particles lost in the process of language articulation,

" [the/a] Car flowing down a lava of highway  
[I/we...]just happened to glance out [of] the  
window  
in time to see brown faces bent backs  
like prehistoric boulders (mass of rocks) in a  
field  
so common a sight no one  
notices  
[my/the] blood rushes to my face  
twelve years I'd sat on the memory  
the anger scorching me  
my throat [is] so tight [that] I can

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid.



barely let the words [come] out.<sup>160</sup>

The oral quality of the mother tongue is recreated as it becomes re-incarnated in the phonetic transcription of words or the latinization of the writing and pronunciation, as in the title "El sonavabitché" instead of "the son of a bitch": on the one hand, we hear the phonetic transcription of the title in English in which the intervocalic voiceless fricative "f" is softened by the vowels into a "v", always voiced in that position; and, on the other hand, through the alliteration of b's in "brown", "bent backs" which find their antecedent in the simile of the "prehistoric boulders". A transparency of future over past, of Chicanos, brown bent backs naturally fossilized in the land.

Chicanos, formerly described as a silent invasion, like rocks, speak the language of the landscape, their presence is an affirmative statement of color and sound. However, at this precise moment, we are back in the present, twelve years after the recalled image breaks down into new sets of associations ("twelve years I've sat on the memory/... my throat so tight I can/barely get the words out"). The object of the description and the voice of the subject describing it merge in one. The "brown faces bent backs" also reproduce the physical

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<sup>160</sup>Ibid.

difficulty of speaking while in this position of further  
submissiveness after the police have caught the wetbacks,

The bare heads humbly bent  
of those who do not speak  
the ember in their eyes extinguished.<sup>161</sup>

The transition from the boulders to the lyric voice is brought about by a close-up to the speaker's face and through another liquid metaphor "blood rushes to my face" which highlights the stream of cars, the river, blood, as well as the stream-of-consciousness technique or dream-like quality of this part of the poem. The use of verbs like "rush", "scorch", "tight" contribute to stress the image of a bottleneck situation. Tension gathering momentum and about to be released. We see a camera focusing on the previously blurred picture and readjusting to reflect a stanza shifting towards the left side of the page.

the world a blinding light  
a great buzzing in my ears  
my knees like aspens in the wind.<sup>162</sup>

Immediately after, syntax and active voices perform a

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<sup>161</sup>Ibid.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

hunting scene, bullets and people moving fast and all over (ricochetting) and sounds. The metaphors of metallic voices, hawk eyes, yelling, spit, thumping fists, and the exclamations mark the abrupt action. The whole scene reflects the predatory action of hunting people, illegal workers, who are being chased by hawks in police uniforms. The shorter sentences and more frequent punctuation speed up the action. The following shifting imagery of the hawk eyes has a mimetic effect: shifting of the next stanza, to the right side of the page, yet another spatial crossing. Stanzas zigzagging the whole poem make the thematic content match the movement described by the action of crossing the border, thus bridging the gap between content and form.

As noted earlier, Anzaldúa's aesthetics of the Borderlands involves the latinization of English through the genderization of words. The split tongue first reflected in the title "El sonavabitché" serves as a bridge, a construction that oversees languages and cultures making integrative currents of different densities flow together and evenly and merge.

The analysis of Anzaldúa's work describes the cyclic patterns of hierophanies and reflects back to us the artificiality of borders. Her narrative requires a method of analysis that moves as a spiral, that is, beyond merely cyclic parameters that repeat the past in the here

and now. Within this context, the polysemy of myth reveals its wide variety of connections within various disciplines and discursive processes.

Myth, like poetry, is not only made of words nor can it be understood in terms of linear time. This is the message that this chapter has tried to reproduce. Myth and the poetry from Anzaldúa's Borderlands aesthetics are the expression of what comes out of the land, its icons, its people and spirits. They generate themselves in the blank spaces, and in so doing are more truly revealed in the absence of written words.

CHAPTER IV: DISPLACED FRONTIERS: A CANADIAN GEOGRAPHY  
OF EXILE.

Traditional Eurocentric associations between wilderness and women have returned to Canadian current debates and resurfaced with new suggestions. The displaced voices of Aboriginal Peoples and "new immigrants" are being heard as they offer some alternative approaches to Eurocentric perceptions of the world. These new contributions are currently reshaping a Canadian literary landscape and describes a more balanced approach and exchange between peoples from different backgrounds and the environment.

The literary changes that we are witnessing come as a result of the deep sense of disconnection that many groups of human beings in the West and Europe are experiencing. Writers who live in exile are particularly sensitive to the experience of loss of roots and old traditions. This phenomenon is precisely one which has permeated the works produced by many women in the contemporary Canadian literary scene. Some of these writers have a multiple cultural background. For instance, poets such as Marlene Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris and Dionne Brand, who are Caribbean-Canadian with strong African ties, have felt the need to express this sense of loss and remap their identity as poets from a

geography of exile.<sup>163</sup>

This part of my research becomes in itself a borderlands and a transition to briefly recapitulate on some Canadian literature written by women. The works that I analyze complement each other in the mapping out of Canadian literary borderlands which takes the Canadian territory as the borderlands between the Northern territories and the USA. I have extended this borderlands metaphor to the space that women writing occupies within a pluricultural Canadian literary scene. This scene of immigrant critics and poets becomes conceptualized by critics like Arun Mukherjee as oppositional aesthetics and as a space occupied by the hyphenated Canadians, that is, those who are not from the "two founding nations":<sup>164</sup> Similarly, for Carmen Rodriguez this space involves writing and living in a hyphen. For her, living and writing in a hyphen implies translation: "[I] write in Spanish, my mother tongue, and then re-work my pieces in English, my second tongue. My Chilean English speaks Spanish. My Canadian side translates."<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup>For a wider spectrum of differences within the Canadian literary scene, see Sounding Differences. Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers, edited by Janice Williamson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).

<sup>164</sup>Arun Mukherjee, Oppositional Aesthetics. Readings from a Hyphenated Space (Toronto: TSAR, 1994), p. xiii.

<sup>165</sup>Carmen Rodriguez, "I live in a language that's not mine." The Other Woman. Women of Colour in Contemporary Canadian Literature. ed. by Makeda Silvera (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1995), p. 212.

The borderlands space becomes here a space of multiple possibilities. In the case of early and contemporary white Canadian women writers it is a "pseudo-wilderness" (Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness.")<sup>166</sup> Regarding artistic creation this space can be identified as one of schizophrenia (Sander L. Gilman, "Inscribing the Other"). When writing from a woman's perspective the label "schizophrenia" is emphasized by the struggle with a language that is configured through deeply ingrained patriarchal mental structures. Within these structures, many women writers of the past have had to reconcile internal messages or voices that clashed violently with the world that surrounded them.

Lastly, Claire Harris' parallel metaphor for the borderlands is conceptualized as a "limbo" space ("Poets in Limbo"), that is, as the threshold where Caribbean-Canadian writers create their work. Language here necessarily includes the oral quality and psychological structures of Caribbean English. Harris' perspective evokes the work of Edward Brathwaite for whom the Caribbean is a space of contradictory omens in which the classical 'plural' paradigm is based on an apprehension

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<sup>166</sup>Heather Murray, "Woman in the Wilderness." A Mazing Space. Writing Canadian Women Writing. Ed. Shirley Newman & Smaro Kamboureli, (Edmonton: Longspoo /Newwest Press, 1986), p.74-83.

of cultural polarity.<sup>167</sup>

#### 4.1. White Canadian Literary Borderlands.

In English Canadian discourse, the border figures in a way that is greater than its physical and political existence. The 49th parallel is the borderlands referred to metonymically as essential to the definition of the country as a whole. This sense of the border as the expression of a Canadian condition initially appears as different from that of the South Western USA as explored in chapter one.

The geography and history that have shaped the Canadian/USA borderlands have not created a zone and identifiable living conditions as is true of that experienced by Chicanos at the USA/Mexican border. Firstly, because both sides recognize in each other the sharing of numerous cultural backgrounds and ethnic similarities. Secondly, because in Canada there is the consciousness of another kind of border. It is a border which has been most prominently identified in relation to and mainly against the unexplored wilderness of the northern territories, mostly seen as a threat.

Historical and literary accounts have examined the

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<sup>167</sup>Edward Brathwaite, Contradictory Omens. Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean, (Mona: Savacou Publications, 1974), p. 52.



Canadian wild landscape from the viewpoint of seventeenth century pioneers. This earlier perception of Canada shaped the minds of people living in this country to the present. The geographic and literary history of colonization first built on bias and at the expense of Aboriginal Peoples can still be felt as it becomes extended to later arrivals of immigrants from materially poor countries and former European colonies.

In "Ironies of Colour in The Great White North: The Discursive Strategies of Some Hyphenated Canadians," Arun Mukherjee describes what she calls "a tongue-in-cheek description of race relations in Canada."<sup>168</sup> The core of Mukherjee's argument unveils numerous ironies that emerge in the discourse produced by non-white Canadians. These ironies, "[b]y highlighting the conflicts between Canadians of different colours, belie the claims of unity and homogeneity made by the custodians of Canadian culture."<sup>169</sup> Mukerjee quotes writers, such as Joy Kogawa, Obasan, and Himani Bannerji, "Paki Go Home," from her collection Doing Time. These works create ironies and parodies of the dominant discourse "[t]o indicate that its tonalities of glory, or patriotism, or moral

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<sup>168</sup>Arun Mukherjee, "Ironies of Colour in The Great White North: The Discursive Strategies of Some Hyphenated Canadians," Oppositional Aesthetics. Reading from a Hyphenated Space, (Toronto: TSAR, 1994), p. 69.

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 70.

superiority rub them the wrong way. The ironic voices of non-white Canadians are, then, not directed to God or universe, but to white Canadians."<sup>170</sup>

Originally, English Canadian literature was shaped by geography, the elements and hardships of having to live in the wilderness, or more generally within a space that resisted and was resistant to the presence of Europeans. This experience was synthesized in Frye's renowned statement that Canada is characterized by a "garrison mentality," that is, by an image of a safe haven or shelter. This first encounter with wilderness experienced by European pioneers of the 17th and 18th centuries, however, has been amply reshaped in the last few decades as the voices of new immigrants and Aboriginal Peoples have started to be heard. The question of Canadian identity, which had been answered earlier on with a statement of difference regarding the northern side of the USA is providing now a new defining contrast against the "wilderness" of Aboriginal Canadians. The premises for such a defining contrast were already present in the words of Frantz Fanon pronounced almost half a century ago:

Moi, l'homme de couleur, je ne veux qu'une chose:  
Que jamais l'instrument ne domine l'homme. Que

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<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 71.

cesse à jamais l'asservissement de l'homme par l'homme. C'est-à-dire de moi par un autre. Qui'l me soit permis de découvrir et de vouloir l'homme, où qu'il se trouve.<sup>171</sup>

Fanon's words find resistance from Canadians of European descent, for most of whom the USA/Canadian and the Northern borders distinctively defines a separation and a psychological framework. These psychological barriers have permeated most Euro-Canadian writing and the writing about Canada widely published to this day. For instance, Frances Brooke's History of Emily Montague (1769) is usually spoken of as the first white Canadian novel, together with Susanna Moodie's Roughing it in the Bush (1852). A contemporary equivalent still alive is Margaret Atwood who has become central to white Canadian ontology, and to Canada's literary presence. A sense of continuation certainly appears in her rewriting of Moodie's journals, where she identifies the Canadian with the immigrant to this place for "even if we were born here... This country is something that must be chosen." (Journals of Susanna Moodie, 1976: 63). Another example from this writer are the opening paragraphs of Surfacing (1972) where the protagonist longs for a wilder environment and journeys north, away from the border world of technology, of the American north. Within such

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<sup>171</sup>Frantz Fanon, Peau Noire, Masques Blancs, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 207.

a literary framework, the border becomes a demarcation of difference and a space of physical struggle as is the case for the Chicanos. This scenario still reflects the present situation of Aboriginal communities living in the north, for whom progress has not meant the improvement of their basic living conditions.

For a critic like Arun Mukherjee, earlier white critics have been providing explanations to account for their garrison mentality because of the intimidating physical environment. Mukherjee, remarks that environmentalist explanations of a Canadian identity have been challenged often enough but have yet to be replaced by more inclusive theories of Canada and Canadian literature. According to her, we hear talk about dominants and marginals, "[b]ut we do not hear any concerted responses to what Aboriginal and racial minority writers tell us about Canada and Canadian literature."<sup>172</sup>

Numerous other critics have pointed out the difficulty, even within Canada, of seeing Canadian culture without the distortion of an American overlay. Failure to maintain the distinction between America and Canada is also quite common and most distressing to many Canadians. For them, the persistent crossing over into Canada of American myth and national narrative has

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<sup>172</sup>Ibid., Mukherjee 1995:428.

frequently produced cultural dissonance and confusion.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the identification of Canadian society has shifted considerably. It used to encompass a society proud of having overcome the hardships of nature and yet managing to retain the spirit of a less modern, less urban, and more agrarian environment than its neighbor, the USA.<sup>173</sup> From the American side, Canada was for a long time looked upon as a pastoral alternative to America's urban-industrial culture. Atwood's dystopia, The Handmaid's Tale (1985), involves a close examination of contemporary Canadian/USA borders, for it is portrayal of an escape over the border of Gilead, which has been often read as a future totalitarian America. This is one of a number of Canadian stories in which Canada is a refuge because it offers an "escape" to those seeking alternative modes of living. The counterpoint to this tale, however, lies in its being a dystopia. Thus, being a dystopia the tale also becomes a sad parallel that epitomizes the existence of Aboriginal people, for whom there is no escape from white hegemony. The work of Aboriginal writers, which is set in Canada, focuses on Canadian events and issues; however, they are not deemed part of the Canadian

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<sup>173</sup>In the last decades, there have been further changes in the understanding of the notion of wilderness, for the latter has started increasingly to mean order, and balance according to the laws of nature and especially in relation to Aboriginal Peoples whose voices have started to be listened to.

literary canon.

Escaping or not being able to do so is not the only important fictional thematization of dangerous situations regarding the Canadian borderlands. In the last few decades, escaping has acquired new dimensions of meaning, especially since it has started to apply to the large numbers of immigrants arriving from Africa, the Caribbean, South-Asia, and Latin America, that is to say, from the former European colonies. Within this framework, Canada's border reality has become much closer to that experienced by Chicanos for whom the South West border is a place to cross in order to escape poverty and exploitation. As a contrast to this reality of colonized peoples, there is the double standard of white Canadians and most Europeans for whom the border remains a place of refuge to which not all can have access.

In other words, one may come to the border from the south, for instance, encountering it in flight from America; or, living in the north, one may insist on maintaining the border as a protective barrier. In either case, the symbolic boundary is very often dramatized as a place of dangerous uncertainty, a crossing that is seen as a hazardous undertaking, not so much because of the unknown territories, but because of the certainty of their existence and the changes that such acknowledgement entails. Being and writing within this framework requires

the firmness to experience the constant displacement of one's own identity.

To cross the border is different from living in the borderlands, which I understand as living displaced, that is, constantly having to change and integrate the past and the present, from heres and theres. As pointed out in relation to Gloria Anzaldúa's work, to cross is to be for a moment dangerously between, to make oneself vulnerable to unforeseen depths. This is the border as point of entry and as threat: two sides of the same coin highly central to Canada's self-awareness. It is part of Canada's own image, as well as the image that America supposedly reflects back to Canada. The borderlands can thus also structure the Canadian thought on a much more profound level by integrating the voices of a non-Euro-Canadian majority.

As many have observed, Canadians have had to learn to be comparatists and, in the case of writers and critics like Himani Bannerji, it has involved engaging in the act of "Re: Turning The Gaze." Returning the gaze involves an "apparent" act of disassociation between the public and the private self, according to Bannerji.<sup>174</sup> On a deeper level, this disassociation is not such because each part permeates and crosses over to the more

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<sup>174</sup>Himani Bannerji, "Re: Turning The Gaze," Thinking Through. Essays on Feminism, Marxism, and Anti-Racism (Toronto: Women's Press, 1995), pp. 97-119.

or less distinct others. Here the level of perception plays an important role which has often remained unacknowledged by the formalities of Eurocentric perspectives. For instance, a reflection of this absence of acknowledgement of a more plural perspective can be seen in the doubleness which has had more to do with Canada's internal boundary between French and English than with its external border. Numerous writers who are part of the literary canon, such as Atwood, have implied in the past that the way to maintain perspective is by seeing double. Recognition of a Canadian vision as double is also implicit in Northrop Frye's suggestion that the Canadian imagination is divided between the alternating moods of pastoral populism and imaginative terror. This necessity to understand the border as a borderline has been grounded in Canada's fear of being overwhelmed by American culture and values, as well as by wilderness and the unknown. The latter have often been based on a narrow interpretation of difference, which is largely associated with Aboriginal people, their culture and ways of perceiving the world.

Fear of difference and inexperience to deal with several cultural and linguistic realities have solidified the representation of "the other" and a discourse built upon binary opposition. This old legacy was reinforced by 19th century positivism and its dogmatic rejection of any



claim of truth that could not be scientifically tested. The artificial divide between the north and the south, first and third worlds becomes an extension of that dogma. The border, then, is seen as a dividing line and separation from whatever and whoever is placed in the position of the threatening other/s. This notion of a threatening other, however, is an artifice built on that which is unrecognizable within ourselves. The larger this lack of recognition is, the deeper the sense of alienation and exile.

Marginality and exile, which is one of its most profound expressions, have begun to yield to a whole new understanding of borderlands within the Canadian literary scene. This is a position that has been largely occupied by immigrant writers who later have become Canadians. From this position now claimed and chosen, these "new Canadians" have started to voice alternative perceptions and perspectives about literature, Canada, and the role of the writer within these wide borderlands. The crossroads in which writing from a marginalized position and wilderness come together is a borderlands space originally allotted to women writers worldwide. This space has also been identified as schizophrenic precisely because it encloses multiple polarities. Anzaldúa calls it la encruzijada, which in Spanish has the connotation of a crossroad that is at the same time a dead-end. To

remain in la encrucijada has often led to madness or to "a point of no return" for many women writers. For someone like Bannerji and Anzaldúa, who are acquainted with those psychological borderlands, however, the return is possible and necessary. Thus they write and share some of their powerful poetry, which is not only made of words, but involves myths and voices that frequently escape modern Western means of perception. As poet, critic, and teacher, for Bannerji, the return involves integration of her private and public: "[T]he content of my public utterances are also the reflexes, impulses, emotions of my private self. What is coded as patriarchal, or as "racist" is felt/discernible, in the deepest emotional interchange."<sup>175</sup>

In Canada, there are borderlands presently opening up to women and writers of South-Asian, Caribbean, Latin American and Aboriginal descent. South-Asian women such as Arun Mukherjee and Himani Bannerji, and Caribbean women writers such as Claire Harris, Dionne Brand, and Marlene Nourbese Philip are some acknowledged examples. As women, and as a lesbian in the case of Brand, these writers are borderlands women because they occupy a borderlands space and the multiple crossroads of

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<sup>175</sup>Ibid., Bannerji, 99.

womanhood, writing, being "colored"<sup>176</sup> within the Canadian literary scene. This Canadian literary scene has been identified as "pseudo-wilderness,"<sup>177</sup> by critics like Heather Murray for whom it exists in between wilderness and "civilization." Other critics like Mukherjee and Carmen Rodríguez articulate this space as reading from a hyphenated space and living and writing in a hyphen respectively, as will be seen in the following section. Later on, poet Claire Harris identifies this position as "limbo" in her article "Poets in Limbo."<sup>178</sup> Both essays serve to establish a first contrast to Canadian mainstream literary canon and older binary oppositions. The view that emerges from this comparative analysis of their suggestions is that Canada is not a country of two or three solitudes but a country of deep differences and multiple alienation.

#### 4.2. Pseudo-Wilderness and Hyphens in Canadian Literary Borderlands.

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<sup>176</sup>I use the term in the same way as these women writers do, that is, to signify women whose background is not white Anglo-Saxon.

<sup>177</sup>Heather Murray, "Women in the Wilderness." A Mazing Space. Writing Canadian Women Writing. Ed. Shirley Newman & Smaro Kamboureli. Edmonton: Longspoon/Newwest Press, 1986.

<sup>178</sup>Claire Harris, "Poets in Limbo." A Mazing Space. Writing Canadian Women Writing. Ed. Shirley Newman & Smaro Kamboureli. Edmonton: Longspoon/Newwest Press, 1986.

Heather Murray's position regarding the image of women and wilderness offers a redefinition of this large category by breaking it down into three distinct segments: a) there is women's wilderness writing but it is buried or lost to us; b) women have been denied the experiences on which such writings would be grounded; and c) the writing is existent, different and unacknowledged.

Murray postulates an alternative model for 'land' as it is construed in the culture/nature of a "garrison mentality" and attempts to show how this third system accommodates women authors. Using Susanna Moodie as an important focus, she surveys the situation of women authors and the paradox at its heart. This paradox is founded in a deep cultural contradiction, that is, in a "valorization" of nature and natural values in art which ultimately privileges "culture" and disenfranchises those who are seen as being actually close to nature, women and Aboriginal people for example.

The exploration of culture has traditionally involved the breaking of land patterns and calling for a redefinition of the "natural." It has also engaged current controversies over women's place, language and the possibility of an 'écriture feminine.' Murray's essay suggests that the situation of the woman author in English-Canada is paradigmatic of woman's place--both

within and without the symbolic order.<sup>179</sup> However, wilderness in Canada is a white's category, defined as much by absences and contrasts as by certain characteristics.

In Canadian fiction, there is a strong tradition of wilderness writing which takes us back to the concept of the borderlands as elaborated in earlier chapters. Despite substantial differences, the north or "wilderness" represents one of the ends of this space. The deep bush or far north country is not a 'pseudo-wilderness' like a rural area or camp. And there is no simplistic correspondence in city equals bad, wilderness equals good, and pseudo-wilderness equals schizophrenia. The term schizophrenia, however, remains highly problematic, for it is after all the creation of a medical system ruled by men. Bannerji talks about acts of dissociation instead, which come as a result of having to deal and challenge extremely dysfunctional social patterns. These patterns involve violent acts of racism and having to undo history:

And yet I chose to do this violence to myself. Because I choose to de-colonize, to teach anti-racism, not only for myself but for others as well. This slow, long, extended anger of a method, perspective, theories, ideology, instances,

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., Murray, 75.

political economy and history.<sup>180</sup>

There is a complex interrelationship between place and quality where a multiplicity of conditions of land is available, and where a variety of values may be attributed to anyone. This multiplicity of conditions often labelled as a schizophrenic zone, especially when it has been associated with women can also be understood as a borderlands space. This space within which conflicts and multiple allegiances come to happen has been occupied by white heroines in the work of numerous Canadian writers, such as Margaret Lawrence, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro. Their physical journey is paralleled by a quest for truer speech and more direct communication.<sup>181</sup>

For Murray, the basic framework underlying English-Canadian fiction is a city/pseudo-wilderness/wilderness continuum. The city is often the eventual end for the characters, and the location of a debased society; the pseudo-wilderness is a ground for redemption; and the wilderness is inspirational evidence of God's creation, a place of possibilities as well as transition and change/place of freedom: another archetype often found in

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<sup>180</sup>Ibid., Bannerji, 105.

<sup>181</sup>It should be noted here that these writers are struggling with one language as opposed to Gloria Anzaldúa's split tongue and to Nourbese Philip's use of the demotic language of the Caribbean, which will be addressed later on.

the Canadian literary context which involves women and borderlands of wilderness.

More recently some Canadian writers and critics like South-Asian Arun Mukherjee and Chilean Carmen Rodriguez have articulated the space from which they write and read as hyphenated. The hyphen is the signifier that symbolizes a crossroads of lands and languages and their displacement from an original environment.

The hyphenated Canadians, as those of us who are not from the "two founding nations" have been called, have challenged their otherization by the unitarian notions of national identity and asserted that being "different" by no means equates with being un-Canadian.<sup>182</sup>

Mukherjee reads the work by hyphenated Canadians to learn about their community's experience in Canada and its different migrations from India to Africa, the Caribbean and North America. For her, as well as for many of us, that is a knowledge that no other work of literature can provide. Within this framework, the work of Aboriginal and racial minority writers is challenging the universalist constructions of the white canon;

Because racial minorities' experience does not respect Canada's borders and because they have global links, diasporic for racial minorities and political for Aboriginal peoples, their writing

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<sup>182</sup>Ibid., Mukherjee, 1994:xiii.

necessarily brings in these other places and their histories.<sup>183</sup>

Metaphors of borders and frontiers reinforce a nature/culture dichotomy which have cast women and marginalized cultures as nature (land, wilderness) versus culture (society, civilization). These limited frames invariably have constituted these groups of people as an "other."

Writers who write from a country that they call exile, such as Chilean poet Carmen Rodríguez, have hyphens in their surnames. For them, life and exile go together. Rodríguez sees herself as inhabiting a country that she calls Uncertainty. Living and writing in such a country involves challenging assigned positions in society and the realization that, on this day and age, exile is not only related to geographical displacement: "[i]t has only been after many years of territorial displacement and a great deal of thinking, talking, and writing that I have begun to understand the complexity of my exile as a Latin American woman at this time in history,"<sup>184</sup>

In Rodríguez' case displacement also involves carrying two tongues, "[o]r may be just one, with two

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<sup>183</sup>Mukherjee, 1995:438.

<sup>184</sup>Rodríguez, 1995:217.



tips."<sup>185</sup> Her poems, she tells us, were written in a country called Exile. They were written in Spanish, her mother tongue, and then reworked in English, her second tongue. Exile in her case further entails living in language that is not hers. On the other hand, she concludes:

"But who doesn't? Perhaps "home" is only a search interrupted by brief moments of contentedness. Perhaps home is nothing but my own dark skin, reflected in the Canadian mirror of my here and now. Perhaps.

Rodríguez' last remarks take us into a deeper level of understanding living in exile; a conclusion that, unfortunately, not many have had the opportunity to reach. The consequence of our near sightedness, thus, becomes perpetuated in the scapegoating patterns that we find in theories of exclusion and in the actual term othering. Ultimately human beings seem to live exiled from the potential of their rich existence.

In contrast to the views presented above, one is faced with a new set of dilemmas. Heather Murray's alternative of a pseudo-wilderness<sup>186</sup> as a site for

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<sup>185</sup>Ibid., 216.

<sup>186</sup> This term can be problematic if associated with women as "pseudo." On the other hand, this is perhaps a closer identification if applied to the writers that Murray refers to, such as Atwood, for their relationship to nature is certainly highly mediated by the experience of the "civilized."

women and women's fiction needs to be reformulated. Moodie's own descriptions, according to Murray, show the land continuum in formation and indicate that the idea of a spectrum of land and land values enters early on in the literature because it grows from contemporary views and models of nature to which writers such as Moodie adhered to. One of the problems with the idea of a land continuum, however, is that it presupposes a smooth transition from one state to another, whereas Roughing it in the Bush (1852) largely conveys friction, a harsher reality and experiences which cause soreness and pain. This perception is more in line with Anzaldúa's borderlands where two worlds grate against each other and bleed.

In earlier works like Moodie's, Aboriginal people remain the threatening "other," whereas for Anzaldúa, they are part and parcel of the identity of the writer, poet, and critic who identifies herself as mixed blood. For Mukherjee English Canadian literature as created, published, taught and critiqued under the aegis of Canadian nationalism has promoted the settler-colonial view of Canada. Mukherjee's approach offers a contrast to the Canadian literary examples addressed above. She exposes the binary structures ingrained in the nature-versus-culture debates so detrimental to the understanding of literature written by women and by

Aboriginal people. Her reading from a hyphenated space counteracts the polarization of debates which still contribute to and perpetuate the Eurocentric naturalization of culture. These debates have accentuated the already acute tendency to construct images of women as extensions of nature not to be respected but ravaged. They have also substantially impacted upon more contemporary interpretations of earlier literary works.

Regarding how nature is construed, it is important to distinguish between what comes from nature and what is a convenient and biased fabrication of nature by human beings.<sup>187</sup> For instance, when women are placed between nature and culture, they are given a mediating function, in this sense women epitomize a kind of pseudo-wilderness. As Heather Murray has suggested, woman is performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture. The space of pseudo-wilderness can then become one of extreme inauthenticity and confusion, and thus relatively identifiable with schizophrenia. In such a case, the borderlands become a site of conflict. In relocating this site from the

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<sup>187</sup>Critics like Judith Butler have argued that nature itself is a cultural construct. This is often the case in relation to many scholars who write from capitalist countries and refer to nature as that which existed in these places prior to the plunging of the environment by humans. This notion of nature is, however, far from its original sense, which involves harmony and balance between the environment and people. For more detailed explanations see the corresponding sections on Anzaldúa and Nourbese Philip.

geographical space to the psychological realm, the ambiguity of the middle ground becomes more blatantly risky and bound to misinterpretation.

The view described above still petrifies women into a narrow category, which involves an element of nature and an element of culture within materialistic economies. Numerous groups struggling for the equality of women have pointed out the toll to be paid by being caught within such a controversial space. However, few have realized that using patriarchal and hierarchical power and language structures without transforming this infrastructure becomes a multiple-edged sword. In language and its articulation lies the power to shape and transform our perception of realities. How we construct this perception is precisely the challenge taken up by the two poets discussed in depth within this dissertation.<sup>188</sup>

In order to counteract the endemic negativity that language carries within, we need to depart from a different ground; for instance, that language is not patriarchal in and of itself but a free ground full of possibilities. In order to establish this premise, basic paradigms of argumentation need to be questioned more

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<sup>188</sup>In the next chapter, I illustrate this point extensively by focusing again on myth and the gaps which announce the voices articulated in silence. Language articulation irremediably involves many silences as will become clearer in the course of this study.

deeply by writers, theorists and people in general. Failure to do so brings about the recurrence of linguistic patterns which are mostly conducive to reactionary and highly emotional discourses.

By creating new discursive approaches that move away from binary oppositions, such as Anzaldúa's aesthetics of the borderlands and Nourbese Philip's Frontiers (1992) and Looking for Livingstone. An Odyssey of Silence (1991),<sup>189</sup> new borderlands of language interaction can come into existence. Concepts like "pseudo-wilderness" and "limbo" can also contribute to a better understanding of language's possibilities, and some new realities. Ultimately, as Toni Morrison remarks, "[W]ord-work is sublime... because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference-- the way in which we are like no other life."<sup>190</sup>

Through the blurring of clear-cut boundaries in language, we counteract theories grounded on binary oppositions and defensive discourses. This is the challenge that the borderlands aesthetics of the new mestiza and mixed blood women writers have to offer.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup>Throughout this part of my study, I will refer to this work as Odyssey of Silence (OOS) because of the focus of this research on silence.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid., Morrison 1993:22.

<sup>191</sup>I am not trying to disregard the work done by women in the past, from eighteenth century liberal feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, to European and American Marxist, and socialist

As Morrison reminds us, "[W]e die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives."<sup>192</sup>

Working within patriarchal linguistic paradigms without altering them substantially constrains rather than liberates women. The discourse that emerges from these paradigms is similarly rigid, and hierarchic. The construction of women's texts, and bodies by extension, fits, then, the imagery of a wild zone in which womanhood is reduced to damaging linguistic and psychological abstractions, as I demonstrate in the coming section.

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feminists. Each of the groups of women who were involved in these movements contributed to the further awareness of the economic and social changes in which most women were not taken into account. The multiplication of theories will endlessly continue within a capitalist economy which seeks the over-exploitation of weaker others (less power to consume) rather than the accommodation of the majority. One of the phrases that made me realize the vicious dynamics in which we are trying to work, was expressed by Art Salomon, Aboriginal medicine man, at the 1993 Canadian Native Elders Gathering in Toronto. He said that most of our confusion started when women lowered themselves to equality with men and that men must help heal the women and the children. In Salomon's wise words we can trace the core of the problem: it is not so much gender, class, ethnic differences, but the absence of dignity against which human beings have to struggle.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid.

#### 4.3. Writing and Psychological Borderlands.

We form ourselves based on those fictions which exist in the world (such as the idea of the artist, the meaning of the work of art, the function of work, the sense of ourselves as dependent or independent members of family or society); but we are also constantly restructuring these received fictions to create patterns more appropriate or "meaningful" for ourselves in terms of our earliest internalizations of the external world ... .

(Sander L. Gilman, Inscribing the Other)

There are borderlines set up to differentiate the subject and object of artistic creation from their external environment. They are as crucial as artificial both in fiction and what passes for an account of reality, or non-fiction, in literature. The space between these two extreme positions creates borderlands in which various degrees of psychological polarities interplay.

Being a woman writer bears much in common with occupying the space of the borderlands, una encrucijada, a kind of crossroads as developed earlier on in this discussion. It reflects a reality that women occupy a conflictive space. In Lacanian psychoanalytical discourse, the space of woman is related to the imaginary realm; a realm that accurately reflects the exclusion that they have suffered from the symbolic order, that is, from the space of language. This realm is the realm of speech and power. Nevertheless, woman exists in language despite this oversimplified notion of sexual and

linguistic division that informs the social construction of gender.<sup>193</sup>

Rethinking Gilman's proposition, two questions come immediately to mind: how have women writers created themselves and their experiences in a language and patterns appropriated by men; and how have women writers learned to communicate the confusion of earlier internalizations of a world "originally" identified as patriarchal and ruled by phallogentric mental structures.

There are no easy answers to the above questions; however, I propose to contribute some alternative positions by discussing how the women writers included in this study have resolved some of the conflicts that arise when engaging in their creative process.

In the course of this part of my analysis, I identify the issues that hinder women writers from full development of their creative skills. This identification involves a complex psychological level shaped by rigid social, economic and political structures. Earlier on, I identified the issue of women and wilderness. I now address how gender and language structures have operated and misinformed women's experiences and writing.

Patriarchal gender constructions have been

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<sup>193</sup>For an extensive development of female gender identity in relation to Lacan, Freud, and Foucault see Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge, 1990. And Marilyn Frye's The Politics of Reality. Essays in Feminist Theory. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983.



instrumental in denying women access to verbal expression and written language. Nevertheless, literature has gradually provided an arena in which women's experience and their imagination have found room to play at ease and create new subject positions and alternatives from which to recreate their experiences. Women writers have first had to recognize the deep confusion passed on to them through language and psychological mental structures modelled by and for men. Earlier linguistic and psychological foundations in which woman "was" only in as far as she operated within a patriarchal linguistic system have started to crumble.

Considering that humans construct reality from and into language, and that written discourse in particular has been the realm of men, supports the argument that the position women writers have found themselves in is one in which extreme contradictions are necessarily at play. To write as a woman is still a challenge that implies an awareness of intricacies deriving from the ambiguous position of having to create women's realities from the position of patriarchal discourse yet remaining in the position of an outsider. For some female psycho-analysts like Kristeva, this realm has kept woman in a negative space, that is outside a symbolic order where woman is not. This attitude has gone hand in hand with Western thought as the latter is still reflecting that realities

are constructed according to binary oppositions, such as female/male, good/bad, black/white, up/down to mention some key ones. These binary oppositions have informed the way one perceives and shapes the world around. This perception has also ruled over how people mentally process issues of difference like race, class, gender and sexuality.

According to many Western psychologists, Freud and Lacan for instance, this form of construing the world has its deeper roots in child psychology. More recently, Sander L. Gilman has also reiterated this point of departure. In his work Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality Race and Madness (1985), for instance, he reminds us that in child development there is a movement from a state of being in which everything is perceived as an extension of the self. This extension gradually thins down into a separated identity within the first five months of a child's life,

During that stage, the sense of "difference" is directly acquired by the denial of the child's demands on the world ... . As the child comes to distinguish more and more between the world and the self, anxiety arises from a perceived loss of control over the world. But very soon, the child begins to combat anxieties associated with the failure to control the world by adjusting his mental picture of people and objects so that they can appear "good" even when their behavior is

perceived as "bad."<sup>194</sup>

It is significant that Gilman recurs to the binary division of object/subject, good/bad as a way of explaining how people construct their own perceptions of the world. This understanding is crucial and it reflects the dynamics present within societies like Canada, which embrace a wide range of people from different backgrounds and origins.

Gilman suggests that the split of the self and the world into "good" and "bad" pervades our mental representation of the world. This division, in turn, unfolds into building our sense of self and the world based upon the illusory understanding of the world as being divided into two external battle grounds, "us" and "them."

Gilman notes that this narrow division is a "primitive distinction which is replaced early in development by the "illusion" of integration. However, should this be the case, one would think that on reaching adulthood such development into integration would eliminate or at least mitigate considerably racism, sexism and many other "isms," which still nowadays permeate human relations.

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<sup>194</sup>Sander L. Gilman. Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.17.

The model that Gilman reproduces is still based on a structure that presents the world as made up of two antagonistic extremes. This model is problematic for it still draws heavily on psychological patterns of exclusion. Reality, on the other hand, has constantly proved that it is in the middle ground where human beings struggle the hardest. It is also the various inner spaces within the individual subject where the first battle with inner differentiation takes place. The other, or external environment, is the ground of projection of unresolved internal issues. If theories are not expanded in order to enclose the middleground and acknowledge the deep interdependence of the extremes, we are once more reproducing and perpetuating mental binary models. These models are then projected on the outside world and give birth to clear-cut forms of difference. These differences, however, remain unrecognized within us. They are severed from our self when they are wild, threatening or raise emotions, such as fear.<sup>195</sup>

In contrast with Gilman's understanding of

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<sup>195</sup>For Jung, natural transformation of the self regarding the process of individuation are present in dreams in which inner transformation and rebirth into another being occurs: "This "other being" is the other person in ourselves-that larger and greater personality maturing within us, whom we have already met as the inner friend of the soul... . We should prefer to be always "I" and nothing else. But we are confronted with that inner friend or foe, and whether he is our friend or our foe depends on ourselves." Carl G. Jung. The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. Bollinger Series XX (New York: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 131-147.

difference and the "other", we can look to the alternative approaches proposed by Gloria Anzaldúa and Marlene Nourbese Philip. Through their language and mythic narrative one can demonstrate that the illusory image of the world is not illusory at all. There is no actual dividing line between the self and the Other but a thread of connection between "us" and "them" and among the many layers that constitute our fragmented selves. One does not need to find that "an imaginary line must be drawn ... so that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled."<sup>196</sup> As we see in chapters two, three, and five, mythic narrative and the borderlands metaphor provide a dimension that surpasses an artificial division and allows paradigms of the conscious and the unconscious, of time and space to interact and exchange positions.

In a not too distant past, literary works by women were repeatedly discarded as the threatening "other" on the grounds that they did not deal with "real" issues because they were too emotional and were not focused on the world of men. This attitude has created models and stereotypes of fiction, which have, in turn, given rise to a multiple "othering" of women's realities. According to Gilman, the Other is "that which threatens order and

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<sup>196</sup>Gilman, Difference and Pathology, 18.

control."<sup>197</sup> On the other hand, order and control are artificial linguistic paradigms aimed precisely at veiling the opposite reality.

Although Gilman's note is important in relation to polar opposites and mental representation of difference, it still shifts between the extremes. According to him, the representation of difference "[i]s but the projection of the tension between control and its loss present within each individual in every group."<sup>198</sup> The tension created in this process produces then an anxiety that is given shape as the Other: "The Other is protean because of its source, the conflicts within the individual as articulated in the vocabulary of the group."<sup>199</sup>

Understanding of the other as protean takes us full circle to the initial problem of assigning changeability unilaterally to the other. Earlier patriarchal projections have done the same to women as they have been assigned roles to the needs of the time. In this process, women's physical and mental space has been largely controlled and hindered from development by the fact that they have had to relate to the external world through the filter of tightly controlled versions of it. Consequently, women's mental structures have been

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

manipulated and presented by protean patriarchal models that, later, have been internalized as universal.

Women's reality has been conditioned by a highly limited sense of the world. Therefore, in order to be able to write, women writers have had to first struggle against stereotypes of womanhood through a language and systems of representation highly contaminated. Some of the effects of such forms of representation have given rise to two equally extreme positions: one, the assimilation of women's experience to a broad and universal notion of self that is male centered, thus actively denying important realities of difference among women; and two, the severing of woman from the public space and into an unknown, secret, and fearful realm of the Other.

As shown earlier, within the Canadian literary scene, women's space was associated with an Other that was wild, and often identified as wilderness. The externalization of the loss of control that the first pioneers experienced gave rise to the projection of tension between control and its loss. This tension shaped a perception of an Other stereotyped as a bad Other. Following Gilman's notion of the negative stereotype, the bad Other is that which we fear to become. I would add, however, that the bad Other is within us yet unrecognized as such. Similarly, the conjunction of women and

wilderness reinforces this identification of difference/bad Other/fear. Within this framework, woman remains caught between multiple tensions the outlet to which can only be found in a language that is rigid and patriarchal.

Earlier on, I showed how Heather Murray conceptualized Canadian women writers and their heroine(s) in relation to the metaphor of the 'frontier' and pseudo-wilderness. This metaphor emphasizes mechanisms of exclusion by reinforcing a nature/culture dichotomy. The land continuum<sup>200</sup> that she establishes is her attempt at departing from paradigms artificially construed as clear cut,

Both women authors and characters are excluded, for the frontier is by definition the place which is far enough to leave women behind. On the other hand, the English-Canadian myth (in which the wilderness and its attendant freedoms are

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<sup>200</sup>This position has also been widely explored in more contemporary works by Canadian writers such as Margaret Laurence (in her Manawaka works, A Bird in the House, The Diviners, The Stone Angel) Margaret Atwood in Survival, The Journal of Susanna Moodie, Sheila Watson in The Double Hook, Alice Munro in Lives of Girls and Women, Marie Claire Blais in Mad Shadows, to mention some. This is a framework that predominates in twentieth century English-Canadian fiction. Heather Murray emphasizes that this pseudo-wilderness does not only mediate between civilization and wilderness, "but may substitute in both experiential and imaginative senses for that wilderness, and may facilitate the introduction of revitalizing natural ways and values to the community (Murray, 1988:77)." My concern about this model of the pseudo-wilderness, also associated in her article with "the land continuum," is that the term may connote too close a sense of harmony which we do not find in earlier works of Canadian Literature.



connected, however tenuously, to the civilized) asserts the ultimate accessibility of the wilderness state of mind.<sup>201</sup>

The focus on pseudo-wilderness as opposed to wilderness or civilization offers a site for women's fiction and reality. It is a zone in which survival may occur but, given the features and struggles at play, this zone is also identifiable with a borderlands space which connotes schizophrenia. Atwood described this zone as one in which an almost intolerable anxiety prevails. When the borderline is crossed and becomes blurred we also find, according to Gilman, the zone of the psychotic. For him the line between art and reality may be invisible for the psychotic but it is real for the creative artist.

Gilman's statement becomes once more problematic, particularly if read vis a vis Anzaldúa's aesthetics of the Borderlands and Nourbese Philip's *Frontiers*. To associate invisible differentiation between art and reality only in the case of psychotics implies a narrow perception of art created by those like Anzaldúa who are not psychotic. Having a dividing line between the psychotic and the "normal" is problematic when related to la facultad, a concept extensively explored in Anzaldúa's zone of the borderlands, a space where borderlines are criss-cross. It is a space where conflicts are confronted

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<sup>201</sup>Murray, "Women in the Wilderness," 77.

and possibly resolved. Therefore, it challenges Gilman's zone of the psychotic and the calcification of stereotypes that it reinforces. In the next quotation, his justification of stereotypes makes this point more obvious,

Stereotypes arise when self integration is threatened. They are therefore part of our way of dealing with the instabilities of our perception of the world. This is not to say that they are good, only that they are necessary. We can and must make the distinction between pathological stereotyping and the stereotyping all of us need to do to preserve our illusion of control over the self and the world. Our Manichean perception of the world as "good" and "bad" is triggered by a recurrence of the type of insecurity that induced our initial division of the world into "good" and "bad". For the pathological personality every confrontation sets up this echo.<sup>202</sup>

Gilman proposes to preserve stereotypes in order to preserve our illusion of control over the self. This view, however, still participates in using artificial models based exclusively on binary oppositions. In doing so, Gilman does not elaborate on the constant state of conflict the human mind struggles with for being both good and evil, for embodying male and female aspects, for being constituted in-between the "us" and the "them" at the same time.

In Gilman's model, the merging of borderlands/woman/

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<sup>202</sup> Gilman, Inscribing the Other, 7.

bad/Other still prevails. An aesthetics of the borderlands is the alternative to this model, for it rescues the space between polarities. Anzaldúa further develops this metaphor into the concept of an interface between masks as explored earlier on. In the experience of writing, as she gathers the voice of many other Latinas (Chicanas, Puertorican writers) she becomes a challenge to Gilman's formulation since she writes from a multiply othered position.

The world of the borderlands in the context of Anzaldúa becomes the space in which the representation of the "real" and the "fictive" co-exist and occupy each other's ground. This zone, using Gloria Anzaldúa's words, is like an "open wound" where two worlds grate against each other and bleed. And before a scab is formed it hemorrhages again.

Despite the difficulty in creating new models and incorporating them into systems characterized by their high rigidity, there have been forms of doing so. Another poet who offers new alternatives to patriarchal models is the Caribbean Canadian poet Nourbese Philip. She suggests that experiences which have never been reclaimed and integrated metaphorically through language and so within the psyche, can never be transcended. For her, "[t]o reclaim and integrate experience requires autonomous image makers and therefore a language with the emotional,

linguistic, and historical resources capable of giving voice to the particular i-mages arising out of the experience."<sup>203</sup>

Nourbese Philip's quotation shifts our attention to the importance of transcending the old patterns and the necessity to engage in a dialogue which fiercely challenges monolithic ways of representing and interpreting the world. The metaphors of the borderlands and the frontiers serve women writers as places of empowerment and resistance. This is a rhetorical space for the carving out and privileging of non-centric convictions.

The poets chosen for this study share in their rejection to take up the centre of discourse and insist on the value of the conflictive zone of the borderlands. Their focus does not lie in the absorption of the Other but in the unfolding of multiple levels of perception which challenge single subject positions and voices.

For writers like Nourbese Philip, as it will be seen in the next chapter, the challenge to create new perspectives from which to interact with the world also involves a transformation of the space we inhabit. Women's space has usually been that of silence. For the longest time, this muted space of silence has been devoid of its powerful features and misused. Nevertheless, when

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<sup>203</sup>Nourbese Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, 15-16.

Nourbese Philip's silence speaks, many binary oppositions start crumbling. Language and silence take on a different dimension. They become a bird, a living creature, as in Toni Morrison story of the old woman, blind and wise, as referred to in the introduction. The silence in which the old woman answers is deeper than the meaning available in words. It tells us through the old woman, wise and blind, "[w]hat only language can: how to see without pictures. Language alone protect us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation."<sup>204</sup>

There are numerous examples of women who have occupied the literary space and restored the power of silence. As both poets and critics, some of these women have started to voice their findings. Claire Harris, "Poets in Limbo," and Nourbese Philip, Odyssey of Silence, have done so departing from an English language that does not convey the rich cultural background of their African and Caribbean roots. In order to overcome these shortcomings, they have had to transform their use of the English language substantially. In the next section, Claire Harris' article illustrates the progress and changes occurring at the threshold of writing, a space that she as a black woman identifies as being "in limbo."

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<sup>204</sup>Ibid., Morrison, 28.

In "Poets in Limbo," Claire Harris exposes the fact that, in Canada, supposedly so open to immigrants, there is still a blatant ethnocentricity that condemns people of color to the sidelines. According to her, "they are eternal immigrants forever poised on the verge of not belonging. This is bound to deeply affect writers and to be reflected in their work."<sup>205</sup>

Harris complains about how few writers seem able to review works simply for their quality of poetry or prose, their inability to reflect authentic experience, to hint at a slippery truth, or cast a new light on old concerns, and then sum up without fear or favor. Harris is here directly addressing the question of authenticity in relation to black women writers:

How to be true to the black self; to the female self; how to reflect accurately the Canadian experience. But the experience of blacks in the Americas is a continuum ... .<sup>206</sup>

This continuum relates to the roots of black people in the Caribbean, in this case, a successful slave state requires people to be exiled from their "authentic" self.

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<sup>205</sup>Harris, "Poets in Limbo," 115.

<sup>206</sup>Ibid., 116.

Harris confronts laws that were aimed at the destruction of language and culture, and examines an imposed reductive version of christianity which led to deep dehumanization: "Dehumanization became an essential part of the daily life of the enslaved."<sup>207</sup>

Harris, and some of her contemporaries, such as Nourbese Philip and Dionne Brand, were educated in the Oxbridge tradition in Trinidad and in semi-private schools where they were taught by European-educated Trinidadians, or by Europeans. Their instruction involved the British syllabus and writing exams that were set and marked in England. This essentially foreign indoctrination took place within a cultural framework that could be described as schizophrenic, which, according to Harris "entailed acceptability to the hierarchy, precariously preserved by education and 'proper behavior' with all the limitations on expression that imposed."<sup>208</sup>

Underlying all this educational structure, and providing a firm foundation, was the extended family of grandparents and great aunts. They passed on the oral tradition. Their stories saved their imagination. They survived an educational process inimical both to Indigenous culture and African selves, one which negates

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<sup>207</sup>Ibid.

<sup>208</sup>Ibid., 117.

the experience of those non-blacks and women, for whom autonomy is not perceived as an option: "our challenge as poets is to restore the sense, the ability to perceive, of the real self, to use language, image and form in original ways in the service of this goal... similar challenge to feminist writers who recognize the need to liberate their own sensibilities from male as well as European and American domination."<sup>209</sup> The poetry and the arts that come out of this realization play a political as well as healing role in the life of a people, through the images of the self that they provide.

Harris' important argument acknowledges that one cannot erase the formative experiences of many years of one's life. Thus they remain poets rooted essentially in the English tradition:

When we turn away, that is what we turn from. What we turn to we have essentially to make ourselves. And we have to make this here, as we make our lives, in Canada.<sup>210</sup>

In this same article, Harris comments on Nourbese Philip's Salmon Courage. She refers to the place where hills are active participants in the life process and to a landscape which is not description merely, but one that often guides and offers entrance to a sense of wholeness.

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.



Regarding Chronicles of the Hostile Sun (on the invasion of Grenada by USA) by Dionne Brand, she comments that the poet has a much more ambiguous relationship to the landscape. In either case, nature is a major participant in the act of writing because of the close relationship with creativity, creation, fertility, beauty, and natural wealth. The contributions of these poets seem to share one particular concern, that is, the attempt to express "the cry of the disinherited. Out of language. Out of touch..."<sup>211</sup> which is reinforced in Brand's poems from the same collection, "I am not that strong woman" and in "P.P.S Grenada." For her, only the land suffers like its people.

In the search for an authentic black self, these three poets from the West Indies, have escaped from their island society and found their voices in Canada. Harris has said that 'to reclaim sensibility black women have to discover/define two aspects of the self: the authentic black self. The version of Negritude that she proposes is based on a first search of the colonial childhood for seminal experience, and the language in which that experience would be most accurately captured.

There are decisions to be made about language. English, like other languages, is as antagonistic to the dispossessed, as it is to women. But dialects, or demotic

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<sup>211</sup>Ibid., 119.

languages as Nourbese Philip calls them, carry their own difficulties. The Trinidadian dialect used by some Toronto blacks, Harris thinks is secret, witty, vivid, inventive, but linguistically it is simply sloppy speech. It is spoken in villages, it can have influences from English, French, Spanish, or other languages from India. It is possible to use the rhythms of island talk but it does not reflect the language of blacks in Canada. This differentiation is an important one since it both reflects a connection with earlier roots and a difference among those sharing this connection.

Harris identifies one of the main concerns of nearly all black writers in Canada. It is the problem of audience: "We all know for whom we write; the ambivalence, and it's a dangerous one, lies in to whom we write."<sup>212</sup> She, unlike Nourbese Philip, who is searching for a language that instantly identifies her work as black and detoxifies it from the standard English language, is content to trust the authenticity of image. Language for both must be accessible to the general public. Philip talks about "a new house of language by means of which the equation between the image and word was balanced again."<sup>213</sup> This is her way of detoxifying the English language and at the same time, of creating a

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<sup>212</sup>Ibid., 121.

<sup>213</sup>Ibid.

channel to and from an authentic black sensibility. This channel, which is found in Philip's conceptualization of her Caribbean language as demotic, is not a dialect but a lingua franca, an oral version of the language of Trinidad. Her tribute to this language is rendered in her collection of experimental poetry She Tries Her Tongue. Her Silence Softly Breaks (1989). In this work, Philip elaborates on what happens when the word is taken away and the word/image equation is fractured; this is one of Philip's major concerns:

Fundamental to any art form is the image, whether it be the physical image as created by the dancer and choreographer, the musical image of the composer and the musician, the visual image of the plastic artist or the verbal image, often metaphorical, of the writer and poet.<sup>214</sup>

What makes the word or the image authentic is not openly addressed by Claire Harris. For Philip, on the other hand, authenticity needs to be validated in some degree by her audience: "the power and threat of the artist, poet or writer," she points out, "lies in this ability to create new i-mages, i-mages that speak to the essential being of the people among whom and for whom the artist creates. If allowed free expression, these i-mages succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself

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<sup>214</sup>Nourbese Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, 12.

and, eventually, its collective consciousness."<sup>215</sup>

These black women writers have taken a stand on a quest for authentic sensibility, which entails turning to the subject of childhood experience and reclaiming their African roots and black selves.<sup>216</sup> This strategy involves going back to the roots and integrating the past in order to move forward. In order to experience change and personal development it is necessary to undertake a deep re-examination of the past. Self-definition is of primary importance. But, as Harris reminds us, unlike the self-definition of men, everywhere accepted as the particular illustrating the universal, the self-definition of women is seen as self-indulgence; and the self-definition of blacks as simply an irrelevance.

For these Caribbean Canadian poets the quest for self-definition has returned them to Africa, physically or metaphorically. An African mythologized female principle, that is, the 'mother,' source of authenticity, wholeness, and original innocence. Harris sees the most common vehicle for this exercise to be the Mask or Godfigure. The mask is a pattern that reveals an overwhelming sense of loss and grief, such as we find in Philip's loss, which can also be viewed as mutual: "the relationship between God and man as impossible, and the

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<sup>215</sup>Ibid.

<sup>216</sup>Harris, "Poets in Limbo," 122.

treatment verges on the surrealistic.<sup>217</sup>

For Harris, the myth of the moral rational West is over and one has to find one's own way. This is frightening and Brand's Chronicles of the Hostile Sun (1984) (invasion of Grenada, an island of 110,000 people and sixty square km. by the USA) serves to illustrate her point about the endemic attitude of Western barren views of the world. These views extend to our relationship with the environment, and with each other. Just as Brand's testimony as witness of violence became part of her authentication journey. Harris' article about "Poets in Limbo" is also part of her sense of self-identification. In the case of Nourbese Philip, as will be seen in the next chapter, authentication requires an odyssey of silence. This is the means that she resorts to in order to articulate the paradox at the heart of Africans who had to learn both to speak and give voice to their experiences and yet remain silent:

The only way the African artist could be in this world, that is the New World, was to give voice to this split i-mage of voiced silence. Ways to transcend that contradiction had to and still have to be developed, for that silence continues to shroud the experience, the i-mage and so the word.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup>Ibid., 123.

<sup>218</sup>Nourbese Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, 16.

This rejection of Western understanding of privilege and patriarchal hierarchies runs parallel to Philip's black identification of self. This authentication of being black can only truly take place after the approach to Africa has been made. It entails the recognition that everything that happens to blacks everywhere in the world happens to us. This in spite of one's individual sense of self. Black experience is white-washed and ignored because it is literally too awful to contemplate: the worst nightmares become fact.

## CHAPTER V

### Borderlands of Physical Exile and the Exile of Being

The physical geopolitical space of the borderlands seen through the study of Gloria Anzaldúa's work takes us now into a more comprehensive understanding of the aesthetics of the borderlands as a psychological mind space of creation. This mindscape connects our human consciousness to a moment prior to the articulation of the word, when its constituents are still vibrations of sound and silence.

The categories of silence that I address within this chapter differ from a notion of silence that results from the repression and oppression of words. Although still built upon those principles, the silence that I am referring to here is a chosen kind of silence, one that emerges as a result of recognition and understanding. It makes its presence felt in Anzaldúa's work at the moment before creativity starts, as elaborated in the section "the Coatlicue State," and to la facultad in the first part of this dissertation.

This chapter reconnects the silence before creation to earlier sources of expression. I use the triad word, sound/voices (mental formations in progress) and silence, which are present at the moment prior to the creative act

and its written expression. The connection to these layers of creative force are also present in meditative mood, Eastern mantras and Aboriginal healing chants and drumming.

For this chapter, I depart from the work of Maurice Blanchot in The Writing of the Disaster, which involves a comprehensive analysis of history, writing. I keep my focus on the language of myth and mythic narrative and concentrate on Blanchot's interpretation of the myth of Narcissus and its interconnectedness to the myth of Echo. The borderlands at which both myths intersect set up the theoretical framework for the recontextualization of Western history and models of perception. Then, I go back to ancient understanding and origins of word articulation previous to its written expression. Through the process of defamiliarizing the written expression of poetry, I break it down into its constituents, that is, word, sound and silence. This strategy allows me to take a different approach to words, sound, and silence. Words are then perceived as exiled from their earlier association with the creative energy that first originated them. The result is poetry that does not fixate itself merely in its physical expression on the page.

Poetry is not made of written words, but of a cluster of different sources that we need to recover in order to apprehend its deeper dimensions. The mythic



narrative of Nourbese Philip's Looking for Livingstone. An Odyssey of Silence (1989) provides the material for the second part of this chapter. Odyssey of Silence is the vehicle that further connects us to ancient perceptions of the Word as origin and as invocator of creative energy and power.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup>There has been a long tradition within literature and philosophy of the study of the poetic space. For some like Gaston Bachelard, "The poet speaks on the threshold of being. Therefore, in order to determine the being of an image, we shall have to experience its reverberation in the manner of Minkowski's phenomenology," The Poetics of Space (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), P-xii. Trans. The Orion Press, Inc. Bachelard follows the same line as Bergson in accepting the notion of "élan vital." My exploration of poetic discourse and imagination, however, differs from these approaches in that it takes mythic narrative to study the constitutive parts of poetry. For me time and space are also limiting parameters and myths are the best vehicle to illustrate this point by way of a metadiscourse which echoes voices of the past and the present.

\* Aclaración

El reflejo\* en un lago o en una gota perdió a  
Narciso.

Si en lugar de observar sus límpidas facciones  
hubiese hundido sus brazos en el líquido  
los hubiese visto deformados por la refracción  
y hubiera desconfiado de ser perfecto.  
Así pues, hay que penetrar la transparencia  
para contemplar los propios defectos.<sup>221</sup>

Que humor puede ser mas raro  
que el que, falto de consejo,  
el mismo empaña el espejo,  
y siente que no esté claro? <sup>222</sup>

The ancient myth of Narcissus can be read as a myth about  
lack of identity. This myth foretells the death of an  
individual subject who can not relate either to himself  
or to the world around him, and whose death provides the  
ultimate evidence of this incapacity.

Narcissus' myth, often misinterpreted as a myth

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<sup>221</sup>Javier Lentini, Espejismos, Reflejos, Dioses y Otras Imprescindibles Realidades. (Ferrol: Colección Esquío de Poesía, 1991)P. 19.

<sup>222</sup>In "Sátira filosófica," Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz does a profound study of human nature and gender issues. She pinpoints the lack of understanding between men's actions and their effect upon others, women in this case. This is a gender parallel to the myth of Narcissus that triggers off a more profound understanding of human dynamics. My quotation of Sor Juana preceding this section on the myths of Narcissus and Echo is intended as a preface for the first part of this chapter. Sor Juana's words were written in the seventeenth century. They remain as powerful as unheard and prove once more the human incapacity to grasp the obvious. Her words bear witness to the cyclic repetition of history. Margaret Sayers Peden trans. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz Poems. A Bilingual Anthology. (New York: Bilingual Press, 1985).

about self-love, encompasses a larger set of issues and provides a context to reflect upon what happens when there is a deep fragmentation in our perception of reality. Poetry can capture such moments. When poetry is not made of words alone, it becomes in the cracks of the fragmented whole rather than in a description of it. Otherwise, poetry tends to be stifled by written words that, like concrete blocks, impede the free circulation of air. When this happens, that is, when poetry does not attend to the sounds, voices, and silences before and after the written expression, then, there is no connection with the undertow and ripples that are so much a part of this process.

Narcissus suffers the fate of one who fails to recognize himself in his own reflection. Likewise, writers often approach writing as something separate from themselves, that is, as a process that involves a targeted object with which there is a material exchange. The poem or reflection, then, much like critical discourse, becomes an estranged or "othered" part that remains unknown to the poet or writer and, thus, a deep split in perception becomes deeper. None of the writers selected for this dissertation fall under this category, for they all delve deeply into the transparency that mythic narrative provides.

In Maurice Blanchot's text the othered Narcissus is

presented within a comprehensive framework, which flows into an external replica dimly embodied in the figure of Echo. She, like peoples who have been silenced or othered by written history, is punished to repeat that which she hears, but to never speak first and freely. The writer and writing that Blanchot relates are also caught up in this fate. Thus this myth of incompleteness illustrates how historical records are severe misreconstructions of history.

On a linguistic level, Echo's nature exposes the shortcomings of written language to capture human reality and experience. The myth of Echo also captures the reality of written history and words that mostly remain exiled from past events and reflect the partiality of reproducing them in the present.

The first myth as presented by Ovid reproduces the struggles of a young man who is condemned to fall in love with his image. In Ovid's tragedy, Narcissus is known as a scorner of love and of those who love him—men, women and nymphs like Echo who was Artemis' favorite. Narcissus' fate changes when one of those he wounds prays a prayer that is answered by the gods. Thus, the great goddess Nemesis, whose name means righteous anger, condemns Narcissus to fall in love with his image. At that moment, he recognizes the suffering of unrequited love and his pining eventually leads him to despair and

death.<sup>223</sup>

In The Writing of the Disaster, Maurice Blanchot's reading of the myths of Narcissus and Echo in juxtaposition sparks some reflections on writing and the writing of history. This mythic juxtaposition creates an interactive dynamics between Echo's temporal-verbal gap and Narcissus' spatial-visual gap. The temporal-verbal gap is the silence existing between the articulation of the word as voice and its echo; the spatial-visual gap is the other Narcissus, that is, the image mirrored on the pool not recognized to be his own. Neither of the gaps is empty, nor is silence the absence of sound, as it will be shown.

There are important connections between Blanchot and Philip's approaches to myth and writing. Nourbese renounces the silence that history has imposed on people of Caribbean and African descent in Frontiers and in Odyssey of Silence. She does so by using myth to communicate a "many-layered" and "many-faceted" reality. I articulate this state as exile of being and see it as

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<sup>223</sup> In Spirituality and Human Nature, Donald Evans argues that both Echo and Narcissus have one thing in common, that is, that each of them has fallen in love with a fiction that fits a fantastic hope: "Echo does not love Narcissus, but an image of Narcissus. Narcissus does not love Narcissus, but an image of Narcissus. Before either of them can love a real person, each must renounce the fulfillable infantile cravings that are involved in "being in love;" and each must initiate some true self-love." "Spirituality and Depth Psychology." Spirituality and Human Nature, (New York: State University of New York, 1993) p.53.

part of our human condition which is one that can not be known entirely. Blanchot also renounces silence by writing. According to him, writing is necessary even when it is insufficient and when written language becomes in itself extremely problematic. The order and systems in which thoughts need to be articulated and systematized is part of this problem.

Blanchot's understanding of writing does not only involve the renunciation of silence, but its interconnection with forgetfulness. Silence does not necessarily imply forgetfulness in this context. On the contrary, it can be a powerful means to signal absence and through that absence, vividly invoke the presence of those silenced in written history but not forgotten in the minds of many people. Forgetting, then, is neither secondary, nor an improvised failing of memory,

L'oubli est une pratique, la pratique d'une écriture qui prophétise parce qu'elle s'accomplit en renonçant à tout: annoncer, c'est renoncer peut-être.<sup>224</sup>

Writing as a renunciation of everything is also a form of exile. The fate of a writer under these circumstances is to live in a permanent state of exile, which for Blanchot is like a country. In this country whoever writes is

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<sup>224</sup>Maurice Blanchot, L'Écriture du désastre, (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 122.

exiled from writing, which is the country where he is not a prophet.

Blanchot's contextualization of writing in exile refers specifically to his own experiences after World War II. The links with his exposition of the Narcissus myth show the deep roots of repetition and destruction in history and in our own mind. Within this framework, the role of a writer is somehow prophetic; however, no matter how much is written or left out, there does not seem to be much change. Paradoxically, Blanchot's focus shifts to forgetfulness, for forgetting can lead to an awakening produced by the shocking recognition of having forgotten in the first place.

I see the role of writers like Anzaldúa and Nourbese Philip as prophetic as well, although in a rather Cassandric way. They share their visions with the world at the risk, and often certainty, of not being listened to nor believed by many. On the other hand, they seek to transform this "pre-determined" fate through a mythic narrative, which exists beyond human destruction, for myth is a vehicle that can re-establish the deep psychological connections between different layers of our collective unconscious and the present moment.

Myths of creation occur at the threshold that integrates the past and the future, the conscious and the unconscious. This is the borderlands in which the

"language of awaiting" exists. For Blanchot, this language "Parole d'attente, silencieuse peut-être, mais qui ne laisse pas à part silence et dire et qui fait du silence déjà un dire, qui dit dans le silence déjà le dire qu'est le silence. Car le silence mortel ne se tait pas." <sup>225</sup>

In the myth of Narcissus and Echo, the language of awaiting is the language of Echo who is condemned by Zeus' wife, Hera (Juno in other accounts), never to speak unless spoken to. Echo is doomed to having the last word, but it is never her own, only a partial repetition of what she hears. In this sense, she is perhaps the closest representation of written history, that is, multiple combinations of silences and partiality.

The myths of Narcissus and Echo have their foundation in the articulation of two different yet complementary densities: water and air. These elements, like silence and speech, are in essence two manifestations of a substance which through transformation can become each other. In these myths, water is the vehicle in which the mirror-image of Narcissus manifests itself. The air is the vehicle through which silence and voice interact to give rise to an echo. As in the case of written history, we can only have access to a partial reconstruction and manifestation

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<sup>225</sup>Ibid., 98.



of words/voices, the rest remains in silence.<sup>226</sup> This is another version of what Nourbese Philip articulates in the term "m/othering" as we will see shortly.

In the myth, Echo is the medium through which the voice of Narcissus drifts. There is no voice without silence, but silence is precisely in the absence of voice, which Blanchot calls the language of awaiting. Absence of voice, however, creates a powerful language. It is in the absence of voice that historical records have denied the existence of peoples and written them out of our memories. On the other hand, it is precisely this absence<sup>227</sup> which makes remembrance possible.

Blanchot and Nourbese Philip counteract the silences in written history in their denunciation of silence, an act that exposes the misconstruction of written history,

Si tu écoutes "l'époque", tu apprendras qu'elle te dit à voix basse, non pas de parler en son nom, mais de te taire en son nom.<sup>228</sup>

To be silent in the name of history is to allow the survivors of silence, those who have been silenced or

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<sup>226</sup>Silence, according to some gnostics, such as the Valentinians, was in the beginning together with depth (see chapter one).

<sup>227</sup> Absence in written records does not mean lack of voice. For instance, women are the ones who tell stories and transmit history orally in numerous cultures and traditions.

<sup>228</sup>Ibid., 107.

denied the word, to speak for themselves. This is what is denied to Echo as a result of Hera's rage against the nymph, whose fate is always having the last "word," but never the power to speak first.<sup>229</sup>

To have voice yet not to be able to speak first is also Blanchot's position regarding Ovid's account of the myth of Narcissus. For him, Greek myths do not, generally, say anything although they are seductive: "[s]éducteurs par un savoir caché d'oracle qui appelle le jeu infini de deviner. Ce que nous appelons sens, voire signe, leur est étranger: ils font signe, sans signifier, montrant, déborant, toujours limpides, disant le mystère transparent, le mystère de la transparence."<sup>230</sup>

Blanchot intersperses much of his work with this myth, which replays a position of self-centeredness justified by saying: "[q]u'est-ce qui ne serait pas narcissique? Toutes les positions de l'être et du non-être."<sup>231</sup> The interaction with Echo, on the other hand,

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<sup>229</sup>The issue of woman not being able to speak first and unless she is spoken to raises other issues that would divert the argument I am developing at this point. However, it is important to state that for centuries there has been a systemic misrepresentation of the role and rights of women. In ancient traditions and laws of nature, the female principle is receptive. In more modern times, this principle has been misused to make women accept oppression and abuse as a natural phenomenon. On the other hand, there exists a blatant contradiction between the silence that women have been subjected to and their crucial role in traditional cultures as story tellers and their role as raisers of children.

<sup>230</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>231</sup>Ibid., 192.

causes a disruption in his self-centeredness although no new understanding comes out of this incident.

Sound, for Blanchot, relates to the conceptualization of books, "Il n'est d'explosion qu'un livre."<sup>232</sup> The answer to an alternative understanding of temporality, one which no longer lets us be tranquilly our own contemporaries because it is silently interrupted by "the echo of language." These two distinct moments also appear in the myth of Narcissus: first, in the moment of identity in which Narcissus does not look at his reflection, the other; and second, in the moment of difference in which he identifies another in the figure of his own reflection, but still does not identify it as himself. He does not know himself and, therefore, he does not have an identity to relate this mirror-image to.

The mystery of the myths of Echo and Narcissus lies in the reflection of the sounds and waves evoked by these figures and which parallel those associated with deep layers of the unconscious. They are as hard to ignore as the signs of history that tell us that there is something that escapes us and is being forgotten. Narcissus, in his first moment, does not recognize the image in the pool because he does not have an identity to relate this experience to. In the meantime, the figure of Echo is brought into existence by Narcissus' voice. The spatial

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<sup>232</sup>Ibid., 190.

difference allows her to briefly come to life and bring back the memory of history which is always incomplete. We, like Echo, do not own the word, nor do we have power over it; we are just recipients of a pre-selected part of what has been transmitted as history. On the other hand, we, like the heroines of Odyssey of Silence, learn that the voices missing from history are not "a thing to be discovered, so much as recovered."

Within the whole process described above, the Western myths of Narcissus and Echo bear a kind of tragic fate. The figures of Narcissus and Echo are caught up in the position of having to bear a heavy past. The readers on their part are begged to listen to the words that plead for us to keep silent. Thus, we become enmeshed in the multiple meaning of eloquent silences and muted speeches.

As the title of this chapter suggests, the fate of being is often one of being exiled from oneself, just like Echo and Narcissus. Human tendency to live disconnected from deeper layers of existence parallels how meaning and its original source are exiled from the written expression. Words often suffer sudden twists and become more of a curse than an unconditional blessing as we will see through the findings of the heroine in Philip's Odyssey of Silence. For this heroine, travelling starts at the moment of realization that there is

something that has been forgotten, which she needs to search for.

I had been travelling in circles these past hundred years-circle upon circle- ever widening; as I went I questioned with very little success, everyone I met about what I was searching for. And what was I searching for? I was not at all sure-had only the barest of intimations of what it might be.<sup>233</sup>

Philip's work can be inscribed within a Canadian-Caribbean framework which involves constant crisscrossing of literary and geopolitical frontiers. Philip's search to balance out the literary and the political come together in her exploration of human search for a commonground in which to relate. Her approach in Odyssey of Silence takes us onto a different level of perception of humanity and the world. It involves an unnamed heroine in exile from her own being.

Exile can be seen as a state of being which is beyond geopolitical dimensions and borderlands. This state of exile is experienced in countries like Canada, for they become an artificial second home for many immigrants. The works of a first generation of immigrant writers confirms this reality. Currently, Nourbese Philip occupies this position, to a large extent, within the Canadian literary scene.

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<sup>233</sup>Nourbese Philip, Odyssey of Silence, 10.

Nourbese Philip's Odyssey of Silence is an elegy which helps spell out some deep misunderstandings around exile through the recovery of women's silences, and female principles. More broadly speaking this can be read as a work about being othered not only from different levels of the social ladder but from our own ever changing selves.

In Odyssey, Philip shuns reproducing a myth of defeat and favors new possibilities of articulating human existence. These alternatives function in contrast to the myths of Narcissus and Echo, which expose the shortcomings of incompleteness. When polarity and differences are not integrated within the self, this lack of integration results in highly deficient interaction with the world outside. These myths that reflect the fragmentation and dissociation of the self are still the basis of Western models and power structures.<sup>234</sup>

Western models are recreated in relation to a partial image mistaken as a whole. In the process of reconstruction of a fragmented identity, Narcissus' myth has helped us discern the lack of connection among the internal parts of an individual. On the level of the

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<sup>234</sup>In relation to Nourbese Philip's Canadian/ Caribbean background, Edward Brathwaite's Contradictory Omens. Cultural diversity and Integration in the Caribbean maps out some crucial points in the context of cultural diversity and in relation to Afro-Caribbean tradition. He particularly addresses the dynamics between polarity and integration and the relationship that various Caribbean cultures have regarding each other.

community, this rigid structure hinders the integration of differences. The figure of Narcissus exposes the unrecognized reflections which often make up human identity. Narcissus' image on the pool eludes integration and hence it results in a deadly fate.<sup>235</sup>

The combined myths of Echo and Narcissus articulate the fragmentation of history and women's language of silence. The language of silence and female principles were repressed and forgotten and with them the richest source of intuitive knowledge in its expression as oral history. Maurice Blanchot's reading of these myths in The Writing of the Disaster (1986) and Philip's Odyssey of Silence, should be seen as complementing each other, for both address and question the effectiveness of words to make change happen in history and society.

Deeply aware of man's ignorance and destructive instincts, Blanchot conceptualizes the writing of history as disastrous. Within this framework, language is a mere faulty tool at our disposal to register past events, or rather a written version of a past full of wars and haunted by man-provoked disaster. From an alternative angle, Nourbese Philip acknowledges the curse of the word

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<sup>235</sup>In Beers' Women and Sacrifice we find a detailed analysis on narcissism and self-psychology. Beer approaches this topic using Kohut's neo-psychoanalytical theory to elaborate on issues, such as the grandiose self and narcissistic transferences. William Beers, Women and Sacrifice. Male Narcissism and the Psychology of Religion, (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1992).

and moves beyond it by finding new possibilities in a language of silence which also integrates sound and word. On the one hand, this is the language of those who have been silenced by history or written out of historical records. It is, first, the silence of the oppressed and the repressed. On the other hand, however, silence involves more than just the absence of words and voice. It transforms the first silence into a Silence that emerges out of a deeper understanding of the workings of language.

The language of poetry then reveals itself through its translucent interconnection with myth. As in the case of Anzaldúa, myth is a vehicle that conveys a deep message and passage beyond time and space. Philip's particular message is embodied in the rites of passage that an unnamed heroine undertakes in an odyssey of silence.

As argued in earlier chapters, mythic time is cyclic and exists in a dimension beyond time and space. The journey of Philip's heroine also cuts across linear time since it takes the form and oral quality of an epic poem. The difference, in this case, lies mostly in that this epic involves the study of silence. Invoking silence amounts to tracing back several steps before poetry's written expression, that is to say, the mental stages before creation in which words are gestated. It



takes the reader from the concrete, physical expression of the word on to the realm of inspiration, the borderlands where time meets space.

Ultimately, silence and inspiration cross their ethereal existence to meet and embody the written expression. The elements that surface when integrating the polarities of silence and the word are then recomposed as an interdependent whole of words, voice/sound and silence.

Nourbese Philip, like Blanchot, identifies writing with a kind of exile. This writing in exile does not only involve geographical boundaries, and physical exile, but also entails a psychological component, which escapes fixation,

THE POSITION FROM WHICH I WRITE this introduction is a hazardous and difficult one, if only because its fluidity does a disservice to the fixedness implicit in the word "position." It is, however, appropriate that I should be writing this introduction in Tobago, since this is the first and remembered place of exile. Exile--which has come to be the signature and permanent mark of the modern age.<sup>235</sup>

A comprehensive understanding of exile as "the signature and permanent mark of the modern age" brings us closer to our human condition. Thus considered, exile helps elucidate some of the obstructions that arise within the

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<sup>236</sup>Nourbese Philip, Frontiers, 9.

discourse of identity. Philip's quotation from Caribbean writer George Lamming's The Pleasures of Exile provides a stimulating note that is based on the "paradoxical" pleasure that exile can involve. His concluding remark could not be more direct: one belongs wherever one is.

Philip's discourse specifically facilitates the connection between the presence of exiled people in Canada and their Caribbean and African roots<sup>237</sup>, which she articulates as:

Many-faceted and many-layered, this condition of exile is the legacy of colonialism and imperialism that first exiled Africans from their ethnicity and all its expressions-language, religion, education, music, patterns of family relations-into the pale and beyond, into the nether nether land of race.<sup>238</sup>

The nether nether land invokes Africa, the geography of origin and one of the cradles of civilization. In Nourbese Philip's quotation, we see how multiple layers of discourse and expression that constitute culture gradually unfold. Later in the same text, she denounces

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<sup>237</sup>It is important to note here that Nourbese Philip's roots are different from that of numerous other ethnic groups represented in the Caribbean. For instance, her educated background places her in a different position from Aboriginal Caribbeans (Caribs and the extinct Arawaks). Her ethnic roots, on the other hand, differentiate her from groups such as East Indians, Chinese, Hispanics, Portuguese, and Whites from French and British descent also present in the Caribbeans.

<sup>238</sup>Nourbese Philip, Frontiers, 10.

the devastation that capitalism wrought on Africans, Caribbeans, and Native Peoples of America.<sup>239</sup> Her awareness coalesces in two crucial questions: "how do we lose the sense of being "othered?," and "how does Canada begin its m/othering of us who now live here?"<sup>240</sup> This last point brings together Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands and Nourbese Philip's frontiers. In both poets, the latter are anchored in ancient cultures and move beyond a physical, and geographical plane.

Philip, like Anzaldúa, bridges the temporal and spatial gaps of the borderlands by integrating the geographical ends of the Caribbean and Canada into the narrative of myth. The patterns that hierophanies describe come to mind once more as a means to establish a series of connections that involve "otherness," and differentiation simultaneously thus breaking up binary oppositions. In "Mandalas de Piedra y Centros Sagrados," Eduardo A. Azcuy refers to hierophanies as follows,

La hierofanía no se agota con la otredad de la diferenciación; sino que comporta una quiebra del nivel ontológico. Es algo que se manifiesta pero pertenece a otro universo, y sólo el símbolo es capaz de establecer un puente, arbitrar una meditación, reunir la oposición en una

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<sup>239</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>240</sup>Ibid., 16.

coincidencia.<sup>241</sup>

The symbol that establishes the interconnection of differences is the borderlands. The integration of such geographical polarities as Africa, the Caribbean, and North America is paralleled in language, more tangibly in the expression "m/othering." This term and the slash which marks the separation and symbolizes the borderlands of two different and yet interdependent wor(1)ds, "mothering" and "othering." The term "m/othering" also reflects Philip's constructive linguistic attempt to restore some balance among the cultural diversity present within Canadian society,

We need now, however, to be m/othered by those very societies and cultures which have destroyed our cultures, enriched themselves on our exploited labor, and who would now banish, if not destroy us. By Canada. . . Her salvation depends on m/othering all her peoples . . . .<sup>242</sup>

Nourbese Philip's message from Frontiers synthesizes a call to balance and to make reparations for past and present destructive attitudes on the part of those holding power by force, those being initially Europeans

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<sup>241</sup>Eduardo A. Azcuy, Arquetipos y Símbolos Celestes. (Argentina: Fernando García Cambeiro, 1976)P.77.

<sup>242</sup>Nourbese Philip, Frontiers, 23.

and more recently white North Americans; because "m/othering" involves both the bond with the mother or original culture, and an "othering," of differentiation. Here differences do not need to imply the mutual exclusion of specific cultures. In this approach, there lies an implicit invitation to enrich a common cultural background with what new groups arrived in Canada have to offer. This initiative is meant to bring about transformation and an open dialogue: "finding out what we can offer to and accept from each other. It is the only way we will transform this place from a stranger place to one of true be/longing."<sup>243</sup>

Within the English language, Nourbese's frontiers find a written expression in her frequent use of the slash. The slash can be read as severing, but it also offers the possibility of engaging in constructive approaches that acknowledge difference as illustrated above. This device strengthens the interdependence among the linguistic parties that constitute words in ways similar to the interaction between the myths of Echo and Narcissus. On an individual level, they uncover how issues of fragmented identity affect by extension the interrelation with others. Thus the fragmented identity of Narcissus remains dissociated and the lack of integration of the fragmented parts of the self

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<sup>243</sup>Ibid., 25.

eventually leads to failure to interact with those around him, including his own image reflected in the pool. This fact extends to the figure of Echo, whose fate of not being able to speak unless spoken to adds to the initial difficulty of the exchange. In between Narcissus' voice and Echo's incomplete response lie the silences of history.

Looking for Livingstone. An Odyssey of Silence depicts the rites of passage of an unnamed female traveller through mythic time and space. The heroine who can be closely identified with the writer and the process of creativity first has to set out to recover, rather than discover, what she is searching for, which takes place in "the first year of our word."

The year of our word in Philip's Odyssey of Silence is not the year of Our Lord, neither is the word in the beginning as in John's Gospel. The word is what the heroine traveller of Odyssey of Silence starts with; however, before the word there is silence and this silence is precisely what she first sets out to recover. The dichotomy of word and silence, together with sound, is one that needs to be spelled out in detail.

In Odyssey of Silence, time is measured in relation to "our word." This device takes us back to an understanding of the word as origin, and stemming from the deep Silence of the universe, that is, the word as

voice or life principle that creates all, otherwise, referred to as an ungendered God. In this way, the Word and Silence create a flow in the borderlands of transcendence that unite and connect inner and outer realms of intuitive knowledge.

It takes journeying to seven lands for the heroine of Odyssey of Silence to complete her epic. It also took Judeo Christian God seven days to complete His creation. It is no coincidence that this number and no other is chosen. Seven relates to stages of inner development in many mystic tradition. For instance, the well known Spanish mystic Teresa de Avila in the revelation Las moradas del castillo interior,<sup>244</sup> refers to the seven stages in the soul's path to spiritual elevation. This progressive development is achieved through the ritual words of prayer. This choice is also related to the readable anagrams that can be formed with the jumbled syllables of the word silence. Seven, therefore, becomes the magic number of stops involved in this odyssey before the meeting with Livingstone: ECNELIS, SINCEEL, LENSECI, SCENILE, CESLIENS, CLEENIS, and NEECLIS.

Words but not the Word is what the heroine finds when she first starts her journey the land of the ECNELIS. The traveller of Odyssey of Silence starts her

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<sup>244</sup>Teresa de Avila, Las moradas del castillo interior(1583-1585), (España: editorial fraile, 1994).

search in the land of word-believers, who are about to go to war with the SINCEEL, worshippers of silence. There the first hint at the importance of her undertaking is revealed:

God first created silence: whole, indivisible, complete. All creatures - man, woman, beast, insect, bird and fish - lived happily together within this silence, until one day man and woman lay down together and between them created the first word. This displeased God deeply and in anger she shook out her bag of words over the world... . God cursed the world with words and forever after it would be a struggle for man and woman to return to the original silence. They were condemned to words while knowing the superior quality of silence.<sup>245</sup>

According to some Gnostic Christian groups, such as the Valentinians, in the beginning there was silence together with depth. At this point, however, the heroine is exiled from this silence. Empty of understanding, she first needs to journey through time and space in order to announce the condition of her ignorance and acquire the understanding through which silence is renounced.

The protagonist roams the foreign territories of past history, in permanent exile, until she learns to weave her silence into a new identity. Her task consists of piecing together silences and words in order to weave herself into the story. Before this point, however, the

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<sup>245</sup>Nourbese Philip, Odyssey of Silence, 11.



heroine must first seek out what it is she is looking for. This revelation is made to her in the lands of the ECNELIS: "As soon as you see it, you will recognize it."<sup>246</sup>

ECNELIS is the first land that the heroine of silence visits. The word-believers are the people who "believe in the power of words-to do magic, solve problems, grow crops; words to live by and die, and more than anything else to banish silence."<sup>247</sup> These people are at the outset of the odyssey. They rely heavily on the power of material words to colonize the silences of peoples and are, therefore, the least spiritually developed. They are a fallen people, for the initial purpose of the word as life principle is lost as they misuse it in destructive battles to conquer and exert their power over the SINCEEL, worshippers of silence. This section is also Philip's direct critique of British imperialism and other patriarchal systems, such as institutionalized Christianity. The voices of the ECNELIS are incarnated, for this occasion, in a God that takes the shape of a man:

Their stories tell of how God, feeling bored, came down to earth one day in the shape and form of a man and offered a choice to the first person he

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<sup>246</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>247</sup>Ibid.

saw-a poor peasant: the word of God or silence. Quelled by the splendor of God made man before him, and being devout and very frightened, the poor man chose the word of God-believing that silence was the same as being one of the dumb animals he cared for. God laughed, believed himself vindicated, and rewarded the earth with words and more words.<sup>248</sup>

God's creation is here demystified. He resembles more the product of man making Him in his own image than the reverse. This view, on the other hand, seems a closer reflection of reality, for human beings are far from being divine. We are as disconnected from the divine source as words are from their original source. Thus seen, the fall of Man is not caused by a woman or by his hunger of knowledge, but by his own ignorance. The curse of words and language is precisely what separates us from a pseudo-God who does not intend to share His own "perfection." By presenting us a different perspective of the creation of man by God, Philip's poem becomes also a sharp and witty parody of religious determinism and indoctrination.

This critique extends to the conquest of the people of America by Europeans and India by the British, who were heavily oriented towards spiritual subjugation, otherwise called "conversion." In Odyssey of Silence those who follow uncritically are fooled and remain ignorant despite having the "power of words." The change

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<sup>248</sup>Ibid., 12.

of perspective in valuing silence rather than the word works by reversing this value system which we are so accustomed to. Showing the power of silence and using this as her premise, Nourbese Philip turns our perceptions around. This is the power that I see in her work as well as in her critique of the massive production of written literary works.

From this land of material words, the heroine ends in the other extreme, that is, the land of SINCEEL, the silence-believers. They stand for those who choose only silence as a tool to fight thus relinquishing the power of words when adequately used. Both groups take extremist positions and, therefore, this first stage of her journey becomes one of extreme confusion. Since both of these peoples are at war and the loser is condemned to follow the beliefs of the winner, she is never sure about what the ECNELIS believed:

"Had they, believers-in-silence, been losers, cursed and damned to the sacrilege of the word, all the while craving silence; or were they word believers secretly vouchsafing their belief with every word they uttered, as they prepared to win again?"<sup>249</sup>

In the meantime, hundreds of years have passed and the heroine's mind still lacks a sense of identity. She needs

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<sup>249</sup>Ibid.

to continue her journey in search of what it is she is looking for, which remains as unrecognized as the heroine's name and identity. These details function as direct references to the fact that the moment of identity can not be fixed beforehand. Nor can identity be totally captured in words because it is in a state of constant transition, growth and progress.

Lack of recognition, on the other hand, propels repetitive patterns, which show in the genre of the odyssey. In terms of the story line, the heroine of Odyssey of Silence moves on to another stage of development but still remains in the realm of the purely physical, the world of contaminated words and harshness. This is the land that she finds as she reaches LENSECI, "[a] community rooted in a land harsh and hostile to all their efforts at cultivation." In this community "brute labor had erased all thoughts beyond food, sex and sleep."<sup>250</sup>

Not knowing where to go, the heroine remains in the same place "laboring in the body" until she comes upon Dr. Livingstone, "a ghostly shape standing tall and thin among the stalks of cane."<sup>251</sup> This frugal vision ignites her anger, for the figure is recognized as the sign that

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<sup>250</sup>Ibid., 14.

<sup>251</sup>Ibid.

she had been waiting for, that is, the encounter with the explorer symbolizing the British conquerors. For Nourbese Philip and many other Caribbean writers, those who impose the word, in this case the English tongue, contribute to the silencing of voices which had spoken in a different tongue and now speak in a different accent. This difference in accent signals the demotic languages of the Caribbean, which capture orally what formal written English could not, that is the traces of more ancient backgrounds.

In Odyssey of Silence, this feature appears in the illusion of having seen Livingstone and thinking that the yet unnamed thing that she is searching for will be hers and can be possessed. At this thought, the illusion, that is, the vision disappears. These sporadic events parallel the moment previous to creation, when inspiration makes haste to leave the writer when she tries to bring cohesion to the voices and images that clutter the mind before words reach a comprehensible array and can be articulated.

There is a counterbalance to this event and sense of loss, which acquires the shape of a nurturing old woman who gives the traveller a bundle of food and a map with drawings. As she prepares to leave the LENSECI, the old woman visually indicates to her, that is without words, where to go: "touching the map, then touching the heart

area of [her] chest."<sup>252</sup> Thus, the heroine departs towards the place of the heart, which she still, at this point, searches for in the outside world. Should the story end here, she would suffer the fate of Narcissus, that is to say, death before recognition of what lies within and its respective identification in the outside world. Death would come then without recognition of the interdependence between the parts that integrate the process of mental journeying and its whole purpose.

The parts in between the prose narrative offer a break allowing the words to breathe and signal the discontinuity and artificiality of orderly narrative. The highly disjointed poems that are interjected within the prose sections function also as ritualistic voices that guide the more descriptive narrative before and after. They capture and resonate the spirit of words in a more pure form. Like mantras, they transcend the materiality of prose and invoke the encantatory power of voice and sound, thus breaking within the silence of the blank page,

Beyond the beckon in  
the last sea beyond  
the ultimate Thule  
where space is  
the page  
blank

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<sup>252</sup>Ibid., 15.

ignorance made monstrous.<sup>253</sup>

The poem continues by exposing the ignorance and monstrosity of the explorer, adventurer or expert who arrives with certificates in silence. The reach to the edge of the universe as the writer reaches "the straight line margin/ in circles/ widening/ into ever/ from the silence of/ stone/ dropped."<sup>254</sup>

Lack of a more profound understanding of the nature of Silence and the Word sentences the heroine to journey on for another five thousand years until she reaches the land of the SCENILE where she stays for a few hundred years. Her work there consists in working in the library of ancient books. This is a job that she obtains due to her ignorance, for "knowledge of the script meant power in their society, and only a few people were ever admitted to such power. Since I couldn't read their script, I was the ideal transcriber."<sup>255</sup>

For the heroine, being in the land of senility has a touch of irony. The meaning of "senility" does not apply equally to the heroine and to the people of SCENILE. For the latter, Nourbese recovers a place and moment in life in which the past can be re-lived in calm

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<sup>253</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>254</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>255</sup>Ibid., 19.

reflection and in the gathering of past experiences as exemplified in the wisdom present in ancient books. The heroine does not capture the richness of her environment, nor does she suffer any transformation as a result of it. The surprise comes when she is not allowed to leave until she answers the following three skill-testing questions,

1. What is the quality of silence?
2. Why was Dr. Livingstone buried at Westminster Abbey?
3. When Stanley first met Dr. Livingstone, what were his first words to the Dr.?<sup>256</sup>

These questions are a direct reference to the British school system in which Nourbese Philip was educated in Tobago. The answers provided for the questions constitute a parody of this same system of education, which were largely based on the memorization of data rather than the development of a critical mind. The random answers that the heroine provides speak to the teachings of such systems and, thus, provoke nothing but fits of laughter. The answer to the first question, "what is the quality of silence?" is silence followed quickly by a guess that a canonized classic such as Shakespeare must have written something on it. To the second question, the heroine, growing bolder, ventures that Dr. Livingstone not only discovered, but owned and possessed silence like nobody

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<sup>256</sup>Ibid.



had before. And to the third, she replies that the first words exchanged between Stanley and Dr. Livingstone were "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." This last answer, which is actually recorded in history books, is received with even more laughter, feast and dance.

Nourbese Philip parodies British institutionalized education, historical records in particular, and language and literature as well. Regarding the latter, Edward K. Brathwaite's work comes to mind, particularly in relation to his critique of historical determinism and the fixity that poetic oral expression is often subjected to. In the poem "Aachen," from X-Self, for instance, Brathwaite exposes not only the language of the Spanish and the English empires, but also those who have adhered to them: "the dialect of the tribes will come beating up against the crack/ foundation stones of latin like the salt whip speechless lips/ of water eating the soft tones of venice// sparing us back to purest parthenon/ to simple anglo saxon chronicle/ to ga to gar to derek walcotts pitcher of clear metaphor."<sup>257</sup>

After this last test is successfully passed, for reasons never indicated to the traveller or the reader, the heroine is allowed to continue her trip for thousands more years. She arrives then at CESLIENS, a land with echoes of "CEleStial aLIENS," where she learns about

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X-Self. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. P.29.

silence,

I learnt about silence and how wrong, how very wrong, I had been about it. Nothing in nature is silent, they taught me, naturally silent, that is. Everything has its own sound, speech or language, even if it is only the language of silence ... and if you were willing to learn the sound of what appeared to be silent, you understood then that the word was but another sound- of silence.<sup>258</sup>

Among the CESLIENS, the heroine becomes fluent in their silence. This is the land of remembrance where the heroine recovers her past and undergoes the rites of initiation guided by the oldest woman of the CESLIENS. She is put within a sacred circle and is given a string, which symbolizes her own umbilical cord. The test consists of holding on to this cord which keeps being transformed into a snake until fear of it is overcome; then it no longer changes. The rite is carried out through imagery of gestation, such as the womb-circle in which she is placed, and she can not leave: "[e]ach time I tried to step out of it, some unknown force hurled me back to the center... until finally I lay there, curled like a fetus, crying, holding the string, snake, or birth cord, or whatever it was... ." <sup>259</sup> Eventually, while in this state, it dawns on her that none of her earlier

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<sup>258</sup>Nourbese Philip, Odyssey of Silence, 35.

<sup>259</sup>Ibid., 37.

knowledge was of use to her any longer and all that she had was the language of the CESLIENS, the language of silence.

The rite is over when, by instinctive impulse, she starts to trace a circle in the earth around her with her finger-tip, "around and around-scoring the earth deeper and deeper."<sup>260</sup> The creation of the inner circle soon reveals the key to cross the outer circle. This passage and the moment of growth that occurs upon finding the way out is a parallel to Narcissus' attempts at reaching his own image in the pool. He, however, loses himself in the ripples that he creates. The heroine's movement inward, symbolized in the drawing of an inner circle, on the other hand, allows her to resume her journey,

Now I was safe. Within my own circle-contained by theirs. And inside this circle-my circle-my hand wrote what I hadn't known until then-the solutions to the anagrams the SCENILE has given me: SURRENDER and WITHIN.<sup>261</sup>

A further level that can be extricated from this passage lies in the experience of writing creatively. It replays the conflicts and clashes between words and silence, between ideas that struggle to make their way into the story, just as sentences make it as far as the page, just

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<sup>260</sup>Ibid., 38.

<sup>261</sup>Ibid.

as the heroine reaches each of the lands that constitute her journey. This self-reflexive motif becomes increasingly evident as we move on to the sixth and seventh destinations of this journey. She is now ready to move on again after fifty years, and after this initiation that had first started underneath the Tree of Tears- the great Samaan tree that always wept at night "a red rain that kept the earth under its branches sacred."<sup>262</sup>

The heroine roams for many million years more until she arrives at the purgatory land of CLEENIS. The most crucial and intense test awaits her as she makes her way towards the sweat-lodge where she is only to take three words. In the sweat-lodge all words except the ones she chooses will leave her. These words she must share with the female leader of the CLEENIS. After a year in the sweat-lodge sweating words and purifying the mind as in profound meditation, she becomes very weak and is left only with her three chosen words: "Birth, Death and Silence."<sup>263</sup> Thus the curse of the word to which she had fallen prey starts to leave her and she is now ready to resume the journey towards the interior. The journey inwards takes her and us a step closer the end of her odyssey, and closer, as well, to the final encounter with

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<sup>262</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>263</sup>Ibid., 43.

Livingstone.

The renunciation of silence culminates at the NEECLIS, the seventh anagram and last stop of the word silence. In the land of the needlewomen and weavers, the unnamed protagonist is about to create herself. The task is set out when she is asked to piece together the words of her silence and is placed in a prison cell by her female lover who proclaims,

as a thank-you for your stay here; weave yourself something- something new- never seen before - using what you have, what is yours," and she bent and kissed her on the lips. . . . "word and silence - neither word alone, nor silence alone, but word and silence - weave, patch, sew together and remember it is 'your' silence - all yours, untouched and uncorrupted.<sup>254</sup>

The passage is situated more than half way through the work. At this point, the heroine is ready to recover, rather than discover, what she is searching for. The moment is situated in "THE EIGHTEEN BILLIONTH YEAR OF OUR WORD, WHICH IS THE SAME AS THE END OF TIME..."<sup>255</sup> which corresponds to the age of the universe and creation by the God alluded to earlier on.

NEECLIS, the land of needlewomen and weavers, is a kind of paradise where people spend long hours discussing

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<sup>254</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>255</sup>Ibid., 60.

problems of aesthetics. In this idyllic place, full of creative energy, the heroine falls in love with Arwhal the story teller. After some time, however, Arwhal realizes that the heroine has to proceed with her journey. It is then that the latter is told that before leaving, she has to pass a test, which consists of remaining in a room full of colored fabric and yarn until she can piece together the words of her silences: "words and silence - neither word alone, nor silence alone, but word and silence - all yours, untouched and uncorrupted."<sup>266</sup>

Silence, and not just the word, becomes the focus of this last part of the Odyssey of Silence. The heroine becomes engaged in working on the threshold of silence and speech.<sup>267</sup> Left on her own, the protagonist first finds out that in order to weave her quilt she has to make the separation between words and Silence. Silence is written here with capital "S" because it is the outcome of a deep search through words. The separation runs parallel to Nourbese Philip's exercise in writing her experiences as a black woman within a racist and imperialist society and language. For both of these

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<sup>266</sup>Ibid., 52.

<sup>267</sup> For an elaborate study of the problems around Freudian psychoanalytical theories and those following them on the level of language acquisition, such as Lacan, and Kristeva, see Feminine Sexuality. Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne. Eds. Juliet Mitchell & Jacqueline Rose. New York: Panthenon Books 1982.

women, it is an imperative to find their Silence of understanding, and silenced history, before being able to weave it back into a different fabric. Finding Silence not only amounts to tracing back the history of black people, but it is extensive to tracing back ancient traditions and ways of knowing.

Nourbese Philip's return to silence rather than the right words to say in certain contexts challenges rational modes of expression. The African female explorer in her work realizes soon enough that the ways of silence are arduous when she is left to cling to her own anger: "[i]t was very hard to let go of it -- but when I began to give it up to the Silence around me, my fingers, as if of their own accord, began to weave ... in finding my own Silence I was finding my own power--of transformation."<sup>268</sup>

The power of transformation is wrapped up in the discovery of what colors and sounds make up her Silence. To her own astonishment, as creativity steps in by letting go of words, her anger gradually vanishes.

Similarly, Nourbese Philip's writing of this Odyssey "cannot be in defense but in acceptance- of life, of death."<sup>269</sup> The point of departure is the reconstruction of language by way of interweaving new

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<sup>268</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>269</sup>Nourbese Philip, Frontiers, 71.

figments of a woman's imagination. She proposes art in the shape of writing or weaving, designing imaginative and poetic-scapes with women at the center. The metaphor materializes in a colorful quilt after a rite of passage that entails, above all, sacrifice. The sacrifice for Nourbese Philip, as well as for her heroine, involves, first to sweat literally all the words that restrain our contact with some kind of original essence or nonverbal expression; the second step is to let go, "the artist lets go, literally gives up on the faith that something else will appear. Magic? Witchcraft? It often does appear to be. To transform reaction into statement ... ." <sup>270</sup>

Letting go for the heroine of the story is to let go of the word, a word that has never belonged to her because it had been owned and whored by others long before. The word stands for white imperialist discourse from which this black woman has found herself irremediably excluded. In order to challenge this presupposition that woman can only exist through patriarchal discourse, Nourbese Philip advances a new form of expression that formulates a woman's language that uses the Word as it was in the beginning, that is as recovered from an original Silence and Depth.

Once the silences of oppression and repression are overcome, the heroine is left alone to fully grasp the

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<sup>270</sup>Ibid., 70.



riddle. Eventually, she realizes that silence does not always mean the absence of sound. In this revelation she envisions the carnival of color and shapes she now has to choose from:

And how I loved the silence of purple - those purple silences- almost as much as I loved the absolute in the silence of black, or the distilled silence of white; the burnt sienna of silence- red, green, blue- color greeting shape- pentagram, hexagon, octagon, circle - squares of silence - and as I worked, my anger left.<sup>271</sup>

The result of incorporating all these shapes and colors is a multicolored quilt of Silence "held together by the most invisible of stitches - the invisible but necessary word."<sup>272</sup>

Nourbese Philip creates new forms of abstraction to express a message in the language of figurative speech, which lends itself to a wider range of interpretations than merely descriptive and rational discourse.

The Quilt, symbol of female ancestry in numerous cultures, has often been a symbol for the bringing together of different experiences. Once she sees and understands the complexity of what she has created- that is her protective multicolored/ cultured/ cultivated shield- the heroine is ready to leave knowing now what

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<sup>271</sup>Nourbese Philip, Odysse of Silence, 55.

<sup>272</sup>Ibid.,

she is looking for, that is, both her Silence and Livingstone.

Alone again the heroine has this time an understanding of what she is searching for, that is, her Silence. A Silence that signals the uniqueness and multiple variations of sounds and hues of color, not just absence of words.

In the final stage of the journey, both the value of words and silence undergo a reversal of meaning: in the lips of the colonized heroine, the word of the Empire is measured up against the silence of Livingstone. His silence also combines an understanding of his own ignorance and impotence at not being able to change the past.

In this last part, Nourbese Philip dispels the heroine's dreams-fantasies about her encounter with Livingstone. The meeting is both an adjustment of past injustice and a reversal of roles, for in this confrontation the heroine uses words to expose Livingstone to the experience of Silence. As in Blanchot's text, Silence remains powerful for in the lips of Livingstone, it exposes the weak foundations upon which history is built. The ultimate surrender is then to "the SILENCE within."<sup>273</sup>

The Silence within Livingstone at this point of

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<sup>273</sup>Ibid., 75.

Philip's Odyssey exposes the void within, that is the final awareness of what "imperial heroism" has lead to. The lack or scarcity of speech puts him in the position of Echo, thus, reversing the illusory power that binary structures offer: colonizer/colonized, male/female, the written/oral.

In looking for Livingstone through an odyssey of Silence, Nourbese Philip does the same as the heroine who finds new combinations for composition. She avoids clear-cut structures and creates anew the borderlands to understand the relationship between the writer and the written, the artist and the work of art. This is what Anzaldúa explains explicitly in her elaboration on "la facultad" and the shamanic nature of the artist as addressed in earlier chapters. This is also what many theoretical approaches miss in their attempt to capture everything through written discourse. This experience, on the other hand, is one which can be recovered if one departs from the premise that Poetry is for the most not made of words.

## EPILOGUE

This thesis has proposed an alternative critical approach to overcome the limitations of North American cultural criticism in dealing with literatures from the borderlands. These literatures embody two or more cultures, therefore, the explanatory parameters drawn from the geopolitics, history, ethnicity and gender of one culture are insufficient and often even contradictory as cultural context for literatures from the borderlands.

Beginning with an analysis of geographical and historical borderlands, the succeeding chapters have traced the various ways in which women writers can create new spaces beyond temporal and spatial constraints set up by fixed territorial and literary borders. The language of myth used by Gloria Anzaldú and Nourbese Philip has provided the main vehicle to counteract widely spread theories based on binary oppositions.

My ultimate goal has been to demonstrate that poetry is not made of words because the transcription of voice and sound predominantly signals that which remains unsaid. Hence the strategic switch from words to silence, back to the Word as the mythic voice of the past, and into the Silence recovered in awe and understanding of that which is not present within the written text.

When we look at poetry as not being made of material

words, poetry can be reinscribed as the voices, sounds and silences of history. The verses then mark the invisible paths suggested by ancestral myths. Poets like Anzaldúa and Nourbese Philip create strings that connect and encompass entire ancient civilizations. These strings refuse to build their strength on delusions of indoctrinated theories, unquestioned perceptions and biases.

The women poets and critics studied in this dissertation create mental borderlands that they cross and involve walking the air and falling into the deep abyss. Anzaldúa's fall in "Poets Have Strange Eating Habits," has given us a chance to catch a glimpse of the lines that keep this poet suspended as she walks and before she falls into her exile from an original source. The link to that primal origin occurs through the myth of Aztlán and through the Aztec mother of gods, Coatlicue. Both stand for Chicanos' cultural background as they map out the geopolitical, historical and mythic landscape of their borderlands. They also stand out of linear conceptions of time and physical space. Through Anzaldúa's work, the reader is invited to reach to the edge of creation and creativity, cross it and return with a deeper understanding of the process.

The metaphors of reading, living and writing from a hyphenated space ( Arun Mukherjee and Carmen Rodriguez)

and of poets in limbo used by Claire Harris in chapter four has served to emphasize the literary space that borderlands women occupy, as well as a moment of suspension before the articulation of thought into voice, and before it is then shaped into the written word. This is a moment of full existence rather than negation or absence. Through this process, one can better understand that borderlands women have often lived, even if only temporarily, in a space that should not be seen as fixated. It entails the crisscrossing of mental borders from which return is possible. This space was earlier on in history mistaken for nature's wilderness and reconceptualized by Heather Murray as "pseudo-wilderness." These concepts, although instrumental, remain vague, for they reinforce abnormality and deep misunderstanding of what natural processes and interrelation with nature involves. The creative space is a place of deep turbulences; it can also be as ethereal as the mental moment in which poets can live in a hyphen, in timeless spaces or become a summersault or pirouette.

Anzaldúa's pirouette of existence finds its parallel in Philip heroine's fall out of Silence and in the poet's capacity to transform herself. The fall out of an original meditative Silence entails a transition and recovery from this space full of potential and possibilities into the articulation of voice. The fall

out of this chosen silence lies in the articulation of sound into voice and its transcription into new written words.

As I have demonstrated, the concept of "the other" is a fallacy which, like the myth of Narcissus, can not be perceived if difference is not recognized within and without ourselves. This recognition involves self-transformation, which consists of recognizing and integrating new parts recovered from within. We, like Echo, do not have the last word. The last word lies in the space between the lines, in the land, and in the silences of history, the silences that reveal themselves to us through vast borderlands of interconnected dimensions.

I would argue that geographic borderlands are small compared to the unrecognized psychological borders and walls that we all carry inside. The latter can be re-created every time that someone casts a different light upon language and creativity to illustrate that poetry is not made of words. Gilman's work has been instrumental to understand and reinterpret some of society's deeply ingrained beliefs in the supremacy of scientific discourse, the privileging of the ego and processes of individuation. Unfortunately this type of work largely overlooks the plural nature of the human self. Research on this point could be further developed in many

directions.

As I have pointed out in several footnotes and in the main text, in order to counteract the shortcomings of binary oppositions more analysis should be done taking into account new sources and methodologies, such as those stemming from ancient traditions. In this study, the latter have not been addressed extensively because of spatial and time constraints. Nevertheless, the intellectual and psychological notes from Jung and Aboriginal teachings have provided a subtle yet solid link to the discussion of difference. Interdisciplinary approaches are the next cornerstones to help bridge many of the extreme oppositions within current theoretical debates.

From a methodological point of view, the writing of this thesis has involved the personal letting go of many concrete words and teachings that stood in the way and obstructed my understanding of poetry's potential. At points, words have felt like a cascade of thick cement pouring out of my grey matter. Upon reflection, thickness started to thin out and flow more freely.

My naive goal at the outset was to attempt to liberate poetry from theories that destroy it rather than enhance it. To my surprise, I was unable to do so until it dawned on me that in order to liberate even a poem from the curse of words, I first needed to liberate



myself from them. I thus created a structure of temporary borderlands and chapters in order to establish threads of interconnection between different levels of my mind and the worlds of geopolitics, history, psychology and myth. Perhaps this last string -myth- is the most ethereal one; it has, however, proved to be the most fruitful.

Myth and poetry have worked as backbone within the basic structure of the borderlands in which linear time and physical space have overlapped, merged and separated as the pieces of a kaleidoscope referred to in the introduction. I have not liberated poetry but I am positive of two things: one, that for the most part poetry is not made of words; and two, that one can liberate a poem when spacial and temporal gaps are bridged. The gaps can then be bridged through the recovery of a different kind of silence. This silence, Toni Morrison reminds us, is like the language of meditation; one that the old lady wise and blind from her Nobel Lecture piece speaks. There, she tells us that language is like a bird, alive or dead, depending on what we decide to do with it. In this understanding, "[t]he choice word or the chosen silence, unmolested language, surges toward knowledge not its destruction."<sup>274</sup>

Ultimately, the poem becomes, like soft ripples of energy, in an instant of recognition between the poem and

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<sup>274</sup>Ibid., Morrison, 21.

us, an instant in which we see ourselves in each other.  
The darkness of this consciousness reveals itself in the  
new lights of understanding and awe which are then  
recovered in Silence.

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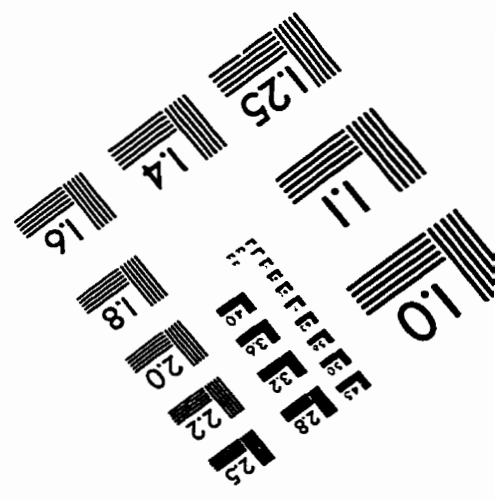
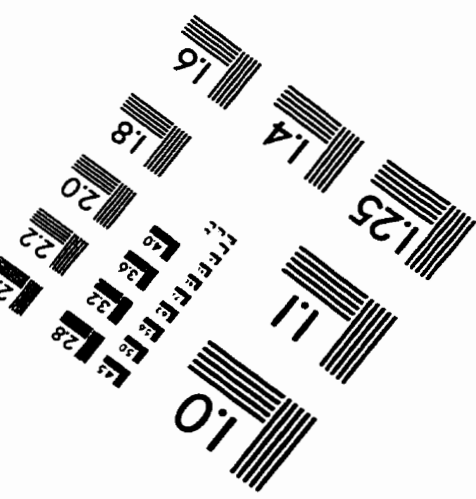
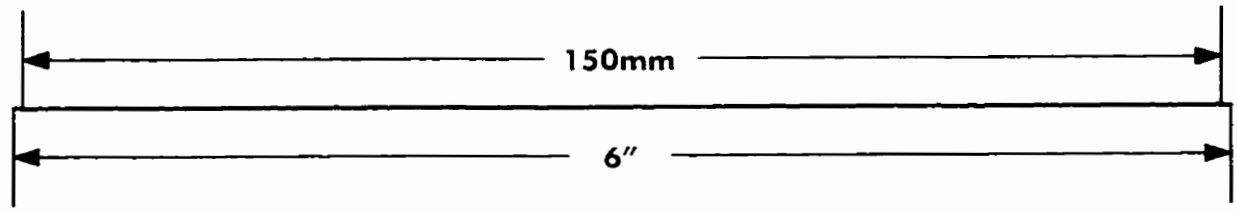
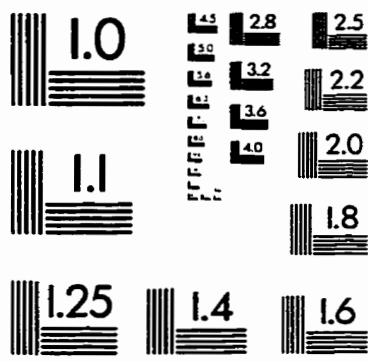
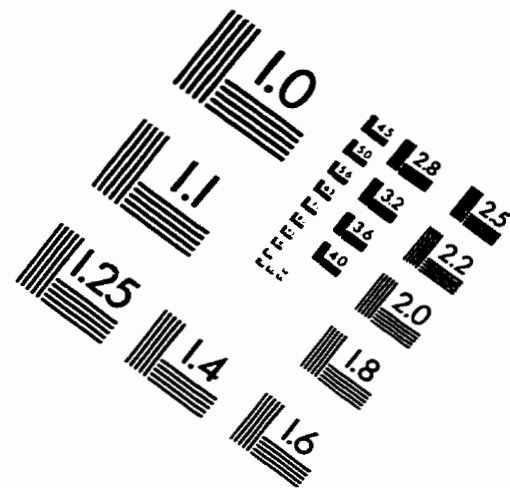
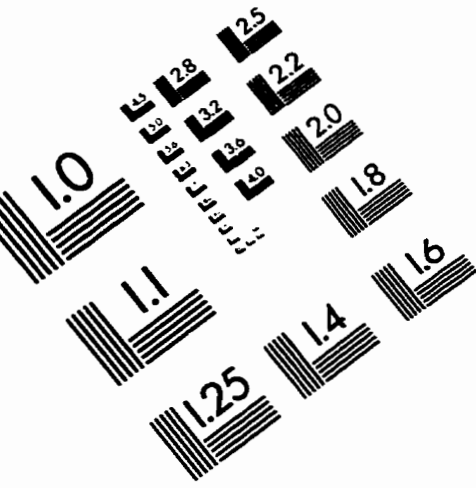
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