



Religious Representation in Gloria Anzaldúa's poem, "A Sea of Cabbages," from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

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"Roses are the Mexican's favorite flower.
I think, how symbolic—thorns and all."

-Gloria Anzaldúa

This quip, which comes at the very end of the prose section, *La conciencia de la Mestiza/ Towards a New Consciousness*, of Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* gives the perfect frame of reference for a discussion of a conversation which was often a part of her work: the conversation between religion, class, and culture. Here, Anzaldúa is using a somewhat wry tone to link pain with beauty. In her language, she is invoking the simplistic idea of a cultural fondness for flowers. However, also present is the link within the image of the rose of the inevitable presence of thorns which go along with the beautiful flowers. This link supplies the image of the Mexican people having a kind of crown of thorns which, to Anzaldúa, makes the affinity symbolic; they are suddenly being placed in a sacrificial position.

Despite the wealth of discourse concerning Gloria Anzaldúa, few conversations really focus specifically on her poetry. Fewer still explore the ways in which religion operates within her poems, even though it is often focused on in her

prose. Like in much of her writing, in her poetry she maintains a strict fidelity to the interconnectivity between elements of race, gender, class, nationality, sexual preference, and religion which make up the "New Mestiza." Many scholars will be familiar with Anzaldúa in the context of her monumental text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In reading this work, it is interesting to consider the fact that it began as a traditional collection of poems developed in six sections. It is traditional in the sense that in the realm of modern 20th Century poetry, many collections employ this construction.

However, what began as a brief introduction to the main body of the work evolved into nearly one hundred pages which mixed elements of prose, poetry, memoir, history and theory into a kind of manifesto of personal philosophies which gave us this multifaceted concept of Borderlands. In her article, "Spirit, Culture, Sex: Elements of the Creative Process in Anzaldúa's Poetry," Linda Garber, a scholar who focuses her attention specifically within the context of Anzaldúa's poetry notes ironically that "while many critics have commented on Anzaldúa's 'poetic' prose, *Borderlands* has been treated almost exclusively as a work of prose theory, virtually as though the second half of the book

—"Un Agitado Viento/ Ehécatl, The Wind," 102 pages comprising thirty-six poems—did not exist" (Garber 213).

In her "Preface to the First Edition" of *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa establishes the way in which she will cut across all of these issues with the unifying theme of the idea of borderlands. Anzaldúa states: "The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border," (*Borderlands* 19) referencing her own background – being born in Raymondville, a small town in the very southern tip of Texas, and moving to Hargill, Texas farther south with her family (Anzaldúa and Keating 325). Anzaldúa goes on to further expand her conception of borderlands by noting that "the psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands...are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch..." (*Borderlands* 19).

Here Anzaldúa is constructing these ideas to be multifaceted and maintains an aesthetic which weaves the personal with the conceptual. This aesthetic sensibility, stated explicitly in her prose, is put into more subtle action in her poems. Many critics like to focus on the spiritual elements which speak to her more sexual, feminist or queer personal passages which involve Coatlicue or La Llorona as well as other elements of Aztec or mythical resonance. Garber claims that "the book's second half, a straightforward (one might even say "old-fashioned") collection of poems, belongs more obviously to Anzaldúa's lesbian-feminist history" (Garber 214). However, in her poetry there is actually an impressive economy of thematic logic; Anzaldúa does not merely dip into some cultural well to equally describe every situation. There are several poems such as "White-wing

Season," "Cervicide," "Horse," "Cultures," "El sonavabitch," and others in *Borderlands* which are not operating out of a "lesbian-feminist" conversation. Others, like "Holy Relics," are operating out of several histories which engage athletically with the Christian Catholic myths in relation to gender. Poems which deal more with the economic, racial and systematic injustices of the border display an absence of Nahuatl and characters such as La Llorona and Coatlicue. Instead they often pull language and images from the Catholic Christian traditions which are also geographically present at the border. She says in an interview with Karen Ikas of different ways of naming the spiritual that she "just [calls] them cultural figures...they are all cultural figures, and what's important is their consciousness and the things they are aware of" (*Borderlands* 241).

Garber posits, at the end of her discussion that "perhaps for the more skeptical reader, the one she believes is resistant to the spirituality permeating her work, Anzaldúa paints a more literal picture of herself writing" in some of her poems (Garber 225). However this assertion is unsupported by many of Anzaldúa's interviews in which she espouses a kind of 'take it or leave it' attitude about the aspects of her work which deal unabashedly with spirituality. She also holds fast to the idea of "the spiritual *mestizaje*" where elements of folk Catholicism are ever present. In that interview with Ikas she talks about her "*desencanto*, [her] disillusionment with traditional Catholicism," and its doctrines but she sees how interconnected all these systems of beliefs are, how "on top of the indigenous elements are put the Catholic scenes" (*Borderlands* 239).

Instead, I suggest that these elements are incorporated in a practical, systematic way which represents reality as she understands it, a reality in which different religious myths apply to different situations. The theories she establishes

and explores in the first half of *Borderlands* are represented in the action of the language in her poetry.

I would, therefore, like to focus on a poem which uses aspects of Christian myth in order to pay attention to the ways in which Anzaldúa represents these aspects of religion in "A Sea of Cabbages." The first stanza both establishes the immediate physical reality of the worker's day to day life and the way in which he deals with it mentally –

On his knees, hands swollen
sweat flowering on his face
his gaze on the high paths
the words in his head twinning cords
tossing them up to catch that bird of the heights. (Anzaldúa lines 1-5)

He deals with the crushing monotony of hard physical labor by searching for his "bird of the heights" (line 5). This initial picture Anzaldúa provides for the reader is strikingly metaphysical in its phrasing because it makes even the worker's reaching for something better beyond his present condition, completely hypothetical: he's trying "to catch that bird of the heights" with imaginary cords of words which remain in his head and are not even uttered (5). He is hoping that, instead of being illusory and out of reach, hope is graspable and tangible. He continues his search:

with arthritic arms, back and forth
circling, going around and around
a worm in a green sea
life shaken by the wind
swinging in a mucilage of hope
caught in the net along with la paloma.
(lines 7-12)

The symbol of the dove has many Christian connotations: it is a Christian symbol of the Holy Spirit. There is also a Virgen de la Paloma which is a variation of the Virgin Mary.

The fact that he is a man in a sea waiting for la paloma, the dove, invokes the character of Noah but without the benefit of deliverance. Instead, there is a tragic irony in the fact that he is not on an ocean but in an unbearably hot field. There is language not just of waiting and searching but also entrapment. He is "caught in the net along with la paloma," then his eyes become like birds as he searches "for that white dove/ and her nest," "he lived face up... searching searching," and never realizing this dove is a part of him and of his own invention (lines 12, 22-23, 44). There are also echoes from the Book of Job as "he curses/ his luck, the land, the sun," but never God directly (18-19). The repetition of "century after century" suggests that he is situated within a long line of suffering, more than a mere mortal's lifetime worth (6, 33). This long line could refer both to class, as he is born into this situation, or the skewed perception of time he might have.

An important aspect of the poem is this fact of attention; he is the main focus of the piece and, though he remains unnamed, he is not one of many in a field; in the poem, he is alone, but it is the narrator's attention, not that of some higher being. Unlike various biblical figures that face trial, he does not get a conference with God in which it is revealed that there will be some light at the end of the tunnel; there is no God in the poem. He is never even given a voice and the reader does not get an active verb tied to him until the third stanza:

At noon on the edge
of the hives of cabbage
in the fields of a ranchito in Tejas
he takes out his chile wrapped in tortillas
drinks water made hot soup by the sun.
(lines 13-18)

With "he takes," and "drinks" he steps out of the world where he is only acted upon, but these are small actions that do not release him from his

fate. Instead, they are small measures of sustenance which allow him merely to keep going. Throughout the poem, and especially in the climactic end:

The whites of his eyes congeal.
He hears the wind sweeping the broken
shards
then the sound of feathers surging up his
throat.
He cannot escape his own snare –
faith: dove made flesh.

He is only existing within this tragic situation.

He is "swinging in a mucilage of hope," trapped by hope like dove that has been tied to the sentiment through religious imagery (line 11). Ultimately this hope is revealed to be of his own weaving and all the metaphors of entrapment have been drawn back to him, it is "his own snare" from which "he cannot escape," and that snare is made of faith (48).

In this poem, the cultural geography of the subject matter is certainly the impetus for the inclusion of Christian Catholic religious aspects. Anzaldúa engages with several myths without subscribing to any one storyline for her main character, this "man in a green sea," to be tied to. To say that Anzaldúa has transplanted the biblical figure of Job or Noah would be far too reductive as she refuses to romanticize his situation. In an interview with Andrea Lunsford, "Toward A Mestiza Rhetoric," Anzaldúa points out that these themes such as the colonizer/colonized dynamic were and are at work in actual people's realities (254-255). She uses this point not only to draw attention to the origins of these theories, but to establish the fact that her work is not purely coming from personal invention. Anzaldúa maintains that "the Borderlands—not only the literal borders but the metaphoric borders as well...is what many people experience" ("Toward a Mestiza Rhetoric" 281)

In "A Sea of Cabbages," Anzaldúa is engaging with the twisted logic of Christianity as it operates within an actual life of hard toil. In the end, death is real, physical, there is no heaven which makes up for his sacrifice. She refuses a simplistic equation of diluting nostalgia which would allow religion to give literal salvation. Anzaldúa gestures to these myths without making them fully realized within the framework of the narrative; they cannot be because, for the life of someone who has worked in the fields, it is a false faith.



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