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Suzanne Bost

Loyola University Chicago, sbost@luc.edu

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## **Disability, Decoloniality, and Other-than-Humanist Ethics in Anzaldúa Thought**

Suzanne Bost<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Loyola University Chicago. Corresponding Author- Email: [sbost@luc.edu](mailto:sbost@luc.edu)*

Gloria Anzaldúa's writing has been read as decolonial based on her resistance to dominant national, racial, and cultural formations. This essay turns to unpublished documents from the Gloria Anzaldúa archive that are decolonial at a more fundamental level. In autobiographical writings about her own experiences with disability, as well as doodles and figure drawings, the alternate forms of human life that Anzaldúa depicts defy the logics of identification and differentiation that underlie colonial hierarchies. Refusing to fix bodies with labels, Anzaldúa accepted mystical encounters and inter-species minglings without judgment. She experienced her own disabling conditions (including a severe hormone imbalance and Type 1 diabetes) in the epistemological fold between medical diagnoses (which enforce the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being) and trans-corporeal perceptions that defy empirical analysis. I analyze the ways in which these more capacious ways of being resonate with recent developments in posthumanist theory and disability ethics.

**Keywords:** Gloria Anzaldúa; disability; posthumanism

### **Introduction**

I came to disability theory as a scholar of Gloria Anzaldúa, trying to understand the meaning Anzaldúa drew from her experiences with hormone imbalance and Type 1 diabetes: the corporeal surprises, the unwanted reliance upon the practices of conventional medicine, the shifts in consciousness, and the altered productivity that comes with prolonged discomfort. Though some might argue that chronic illnesses like diabetes are not 'disabilities', the upheavals and the deviance from normative bodily functioning that come with diabetes resonate with disability frameworks. Disability encompasses a variety of conditions (visible and invisible, temporary and permanent, corporeal and psychological) and undermines the idea that bodies must be static and coherent. In its power to challenge universal assumptions about the forms and functions of the human, disability theory is a crucial ally for feminist, queer, and decolonial inquiry.

After introducing my theoretical framework below, I turn to an analysis of how Anzaldúa's work defies the identities produced by colonial power structures. In particular, 'La serpiente

que se come su cola [The snake that eats its own tail],’ an unpublished memoir found in her archive at the University of Texas at Austin, takes Anzaldúa herself as a reference point that challenges conventional understandings of human life<sup>1</sup>. Shifting from the verbal to the visual, I then analyze a few figure drawings from the archive that vividly illustrate the ways in which Anzaldúa’s imagination pushed against the individuation of human and other-than-human beings. These figures resonate with disability ethics and posthumanist theory but emerge from other sources.

### **My theoretical toolbox**

Though studies of Anzaldúa’s work through the lens of disability are emerging (see for example Bost, 2009; Levins Morales, 2013; McMaster, 2005, and Minich, 2013), Anzaldúa is generally known for her decolonization of race, nation, and gender. Most famously, her theories of the borderlands and mestiza consciousness— as elaborated in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) – shift the terms of identity away from national and racial boundaries towards fluid interactions among multiple ways of being: the ‘new mestiza,’ for instance, ‘operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned’ (1987:79). And, ‘though it is a source of intense pain,’ the energy of mestiza consciousness ‘comes from the continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm’ (80). As Chicana feminist critic Norma Alarcón (2003:367) has argued, the subject in Anzaldúa’s work is ‘a crossroads, a collision course, a clearinghouse, an endless alterity who... appears as a tireless peregrine collecting all of the parts that will never make her whole.’ In this ‘endless alterity’, Anzaldúa adopts a ‘pathological condition’ and presents a ‘break with a developmental view of self-inscription’ (362). Alarcón’s use of the term ‘pathological’ is particularly apt, in my view, as Anzaldúa specifically embraces fluid embodiments that exceed the normative standards of (physical and mental) health in the United States today.

In this paper, I turn to the ways in which Anzaldúa’s writings about her own experiences with disabling conditions are decolonial at a level even more fundamental than race, nation, or gender. Her approach to bodies defies the colonial logic of representation and identification itself. Refusing to fix bodies with labels (including the label ‘disabled’), Anzaldúa accepted mystical encounters, unknown worlds, and inter-species minglings without judgment.

In an interview with AnaLouise Keating, for instance, Anzaldúa (2000:284) explained how when she’s ‘trancing,’ she becomes her totem animal, a jaguar, a serpent, or an eagle looking down at the ground from above. When Keating asked how literal she was about these trans-human embodiments, Anzaldúa explained that a second or third body can leave the physical body to become a jaguar, can even lose the flesh-and-blood body and ‘stay in the jaguar reality, in the jaguar form.’ The implications of these propositions are tremendous, laying the

foundation for a radically expansive understanding of identity. These claims also have particular resonance for a writer whose diabetes brought about sudden changes in blood sugar, dizziness, extreme fatigue, bleeding eyes, and the threat of amputation. 'I felt as though I had been transformed into an alien other and it was cannibalizing my flesh from the inside,' she writes of her early experiences with diabetes (Anzaldúa, n.d2). The illness made her body strange, irrational – the latter term signifying defiance of reason as well as something that cannot be counted according to established frameworks of identity.

Anibal Quijano (2000) and María Lugones (2008) have demonstrated that identity (especially race, class, and gender) is a product of the colonality of power. In order to differentiate the colonizer from the colonized, or the citizen from the savage, identities were sorted by visual classification systems based on skin color, labor, dress, and gender roles. Resisting identity categories, as Anzaldúa consistently has, is a decolonial practice that undermines the foundations of these hierarchical structures. And, more radically, by blending species and shifting shapes, the bodies that populate Anzaldúa's work undermine the logic of domination and exceptionalism that depended upon race and species differentiation.

For Quijano (2000:555), the separation of body and non-body was also foundational to the colonality of power in that the justification given for the colonization of certain races was that they were 'closer to nature,' more body than reason. The ways in which Anzaldúa redraws the boundaries of the body and reclaims 'nature' (and nonhuman animals) as a source of intellectual and ethical action, defies this colonialist narrative:

Your identity has roots you share with all people and other beings – spirit, feeling, and body make up a greater identity category. The body is rooted in the earth, la tierra itself. You meet ensoulment in trees, in woods, in streams. The roots del árbol de la vida of all planetary beings are nature, soul, body. (Anzaldúa 2002:560)

If humans share 'roots' with trees, woods, and streams, we must be aware of how our actions are intertwined with these other-than-human elements, with repercussions shared among species (an insight long at the center of ecocriticism).

Colonialism and Humanism conceive of progress as evolution from primitive nature to rational civilization. Anzaldúa's embrace of pre-colonial indigenous epistemologies, turning to the past in order to rethink the future, subverts this historical linearity<sup>2</sup>. In the 1980s and 90s, while other feminist, queer, and postcolonial thinkers were turning to postmodern theory, Anzaldúa was turning to Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of creation and destruction, and her disloyal daughter, the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui. According to Aztec legend, Coyolxauhqui was dismembered by her brother, the war god Huitzilopochtli, in retribution for plotting against their mother. Her parts were cast into the sky where they were reconstituted as the moon. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa theorized the 'Coatlicue state' as a

process of regeneration, unraveling and rebirthing the self. In her later works, especially in the essay she wrote in response to the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks, she developed the ‘Coyolxauhqui imperative’ as a vision for reassembling the world in new shapes:

Coyolxauhqui is my symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you’re embroiled in differently. It is also my symbol for reconstruction and reframing, one that allows for putting the pieces together in a new way. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing. (Anzaldúa, 2005:100)

In posing this ‘imperative’ as a response to global terrorism and global imperialism, Anzaldúa rejects the United States’ self-defensive nationalism of the early 2000s and poses a vulnerable subject in its place, one that rethinks configurations of power. This gesture is as decolonial as it is precolonial, embracing forms of selfhood that are outside the Humanist frameworks of European Empire. The Coatlicue state and the Coyolxauhqui imperative reject the assumed necessity of the bounded, stable human subject and revolve around continued incoherence. I return to Coyolxauhqui as a figure of corporeal disability below.

Just as the rise of Enlightenment Humanism coincided with the rise of global imperialism, emerging critiques of Humanist thought coincide with decolonial critiques<sup>3</sup>. I have found posthumanist theory helpful in understanding the ways in which Anzaldúa undermines the foundations of social hierarchies. Posthumanism has been defined in a variety of ways, from a projection of human values onto other-than-human entities to a rejection of ethics that value human flourishing. Cary Wolfe (2010: 127) strikes a good balance, in my view: extending ethics beyond Humanism by rejecting the assumption that ‘ethical standing and civic inclusion are predicated on rationality, autonomy, and agency.’ Acknowledging that Humanism is at the root of many forms of discrimination (especially against nonhuman animals and bodies with disabilities), Wolfe looks for ‘an ethics based not on ability, activity, agency, and empowerment but on a *compassion* that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity’ (141, original emphasis). This sort of ethics resonates beautifully with Anzaldúa’s aim to use ‘wounds as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others’:

Although all your cultures reject the idea that you can know the other, you believe that besides love, pain might open this closed passage by reaching through the wound to connect. Wounds cause you to shift consciousness – they either open you to the greater reality normally blocked by your habitual point of view or else shut you down. (Anzaldúa 2002: 571-72)

This embrace of vulnerability, pain, and love offers a powerful way of rethinking our shared belonging on the planet, ‘reaching’ and ‘connecting’ rather than competing and excluding.

But, as Anzaldúa says, this idea is rejected by cultures (and individuals) that demonize ‘others’ and obsessively defend their own borders. How do we create a world that values vulnerability and difference more than hegemony? A disability ethics demands that we do so.

### **Beyond classification**

Anzaldúa became canonized as a Chicana lesbian, and since her death from complications related to diabetes in 2004, has increasingly been claimed within the frameworks of disability studies. Yet, throughout her life, she rejected identity labels. In her 1998 essay ‘To(o) Queer the Writer,’ she wrote:

Identity is not a bunch of little cubbyholes...Identity is a river— a process. Contained within the river is its identity, and it needs to flow, to change, to stay a river – if it stopped it would be a contained body of water such as a lake or a pond. The changes in the river are external (changes in environment— river bed, weather, animal life) and internal (within the waters)...Changes in identity likewise are external (how others perceive one and how one perceives others and the world) and internal (how one perceives oneself, self-image) (2009:267)

This dialogue between self and context that Anzaldúa finds in identity is an ecological phenomenon: rivers are a product of interaction among water, dirt, and animal endeavors (such as building dams or creating climate change). Later, in a 2003 e-mail message to AnaLouise Keating, though she agrees to having experienced disabling conditions, Anzaldúa critiqued how the label ‘disabled’ draws medicalized parameters around fluid bodies (Anzaldúa, 2003), freezing them into one category and rendering invisible any qualities that exceed the priorities of institutionalized medicine. Instead, she identified with the continued cycles of destruction and regeneration associated with Coatlicue and Coyolxauhqui. To stay a river, a river must keep flowing.

Disability is an environmental term, not solely an intrinsic quality but, rather, a statement of misalignment with social structures. It shifts determinism from bodies to the social structures that incorrectly assume all people are capable of walking, hearing, reading printed words, or reaching for light switches that are four feet off the ground. Tobin Siebers (2006:11) writes that: ‘Disability seems to provide an example of the extreme instability of identity as a political category, but it would not be easy, I think, to prove that disability is less significant in everyday life for being a category in flux.’ It is important to emphasize that the fluidity and decentered formation of disability coincide with its existence as an identity and as an experience. Disability makes demands upon the societies that construct disabling environments, and it does so without abiding by any coherent or singular framework. By overflowing the bounds of corporeal norms, bodies marked as disabled challenge our systems

of classification.

Before disability studies and posthumanism drew critical attention to the willed ignorance involved in circumscribing a universal form of human life, Anzaldúa was already writing about subjects with fluid sexual morphology (half male, half female)<sup>4</sup>, shape-shifting between multiple species, and the ethical and material ties between humans, spirits, and nonhuman nature. Anzaldúa's approach to bodies evades the Humanist logic of representation and identification. In describing her experience with hormone imbalance, she explains 'the stuff that was going on with me is like seeing a movie or reading a science fiction book, you know?' (Anzaldúa, 2000:35). Anzaldúa experienced her own disabling conditions in the epistemological fold between medical diagnoses (which enforce the coloniality of power, knowledge, and being) and trans-corporeal frameworks, like mysticism and science fiction that defy empirical analysis. In the process, she imagines more capacious possibilities for human life. While I find the tools of posthumanism helpful for analyzing these orientations, the primary source for Anzaldúa's alternative to humanism is her imaginative reclamation of premodern sensibilities. She developed these ideas parallel to the emergence of posthumanist thought (she was working on her PhD at UC Santa Cruz and was associated with famous posthumanist theorists like Donna Haraway and Karen Barad), but she insistently claimed an indigenous genealogy for her ideas about the permeability and pliability of being ('I know things older than Freud, older than gender,' she pointed out in *Borderlands* (1987:48). I refer to her vision, then, as other-than-Humanist rather than defining it relative to a historical temporality of prehumanism, Humanism, and posthumanism. Anzaldúa's ideas move outside this genealogy.

Another important element of her other-than-Humanist perspective is its spirituality, its embrace of 'irrational' experiences, like being occupied by spirits and soaring over her bed as an eagle at night. I use quotation marks for the word irrational here because these experiences are only irrational from the standpoint of secular Humanism; from the standpoint of Aztec cosmologies, however, shape-shifting is part of a systematic worldview. 'Irrational' indicates epistemological friction. By bringing the ontologies of Aztec thought into her writings about her own embodiment, Anzaldúa creates friction between temporalities and epistemologies; she undermines assumptions about human life and human history that are rarely questioned. What does it mean to live like an Aztec goddess in the late twentieth-century United States? We must use our imagination to answer this question because there is no historical or empirical model to draw on.

### **Life, hormones, and other matters**

The 'irrational' becomings of Anzaldúa's unpublished autobiographical writings (found in the Gloria E. Anzaldúa Papers) resist circumscription within even her own acclaimed decolonial



theories. I have written elsewhere about the ways in which Anzaldúa's experiences with diabetes cut across identity politics: corporeal instability undermined any coherent sense of self, and the technologies and medical institutions she relied upon created intimacies across identity borders. But her earlier experiences of hormone imbalance— another chronic illness with disabling symptoms— challenged conceptions of the human even more radically.

In the archive, I found an unpublished autobiography, 'La serpiente que se come su cola,' which discusses in great detail the various uterine and hormone disorders she briefly refers to in her early publications. 'La serpiente' is an undated manuscript, but, since many of the life experiences it describes overlap (often verbatim) with the contents of 'La Prieta' (Anzaldúa, 1983) and *Borderlands* (1987), I assume it was written in the 1980s. It consists of 276 pages, with page numbers hand-written in the corners, and is a nearly complete text, with some unresolved revisions (inserted edits and typeovers) and some sections still written in note form (many of these consist of strips of paper cut and pasted onto the backs of fliers and other 'used' paper).

The subtitle of 'La serpiente' is 'The Death and Rites of Passage of a Chicana Lesbian'. Indeed, this is a life story in which the subject, herself, dies multiple times, so death is embedded in life, neither singular nor permanent<sup>5</sup>. She speaks of past lives and recurring out-of-body experiences (Anzaldúa, n.d.1: 65-68, 88-89, 110), suggesting that life transcends the boundaries of individual human anatomy<sup>6</sup>. Further breaking with conventional understandings of human development, Anzaldúa began menstruating at three months of age, and her body developed breasts and grey hair prematurely. Menstruation brought her intense pain: 'raging fevers cooked my brain. Full flowing periods accompanied cramps, tonsillitis and 105° fevers' (Anzaldúa, 1983:200)<sup>7</sup>. In 1980, when she was living in San Francisco, her internal pain worsened:

The pain woke her. The imperceptible flutter of a moth in her womb, followed by the slow sure steady scissoring of bird wings, then the vulture beak. Pain: chalking first her nostrils then her cheeks; haciendo sus manos nieve. Then the dull drone of bees stirring restlessly in her nightmares. This the rhythm of her pain. And the cycle would repeat itself a thousand times a day. (n.d.1:102)

In this description, she experiences her illness as a variety of different entities, all of them nonhuman animals, all of them in motion. Her own interpretation of the illness is mobile— first moth, then bird, then bees— and it turns her hands to snow ('haciendo sus manos nieve'). The unexpected verb 'chalking' could be a typo, an error in an uncorrected manuscript. Perhaps she meant 'choking' or 'chilling' rather than chalking. In any case, these transformations are unexpected, not usually caused by pain, and these material descriptions resist coherent form and grate against expectations.



According to the text, she goes to Valencia Clinic on March 12, and then St. Luke's Hospital on March 13, and receives an 'official diagnosis': a grapefruit-sized mass in her uterus crowding out the other organs and an *E. coli* infection in her intestinal tract, which 'leaked into the uterus, the ovaries, the tubes, the vagina, the anus' (n.d.1:128-29). In the next sentence, Anzaldúa reclaims definitional power over her own body, claiming that the bacteria were spawning not just tumors but 'a monster growing in my uterus. My womb pregnant with a demon, a virus that wouldn't die. No antibiotic could kill it' (29). She shifts the terms of her illness from the rational to the irrational, from understandings offered by modern medicine to the mystical: a monster or a demon that resists elimination by the doctors' tools. I see this representation not just in terms of cultural resistance but as a refusal to be normalized according to the terms of Humanism.

A couple of pages later in the memoir, Anzaldúa includes a poem that she wrote (dated March 20, 1980) about the operation to remove her uterus:

She is asleep when the surgeon's knife opens her.  
The portal.  
She awakens on the ceiling. She is  
very small. She huddles  
in a corner near the ceiling and watches  
the red flowers blooming on the body  
below. The body which is hers.  
The white-robed priests hover over her. Vultures  
feeding on her insides. (n.d.1:130-31)

Though she speaks of this body in the third person, and speaks from the perspective of an entity that has left the body and floated up to the ceiling, she still claims the body as hers. She identifies with/as a split self. She also describes her blood as flowers, a metaphor associated with beauty and life, and describes the doctors as both priests and vultures. If vultures are feeding on her, presumably she is dead, so her body couples life and death. This vision also removes the hysterectomy from the terms of modern medicine and secular Humanism; she re-codes the surgery as both sacred ritual and animal predation. This poem thus undoes the progress narrative wherein medicine has 'evolved' beyond 'primitive' rites and 'nature' as well as undoing linear conceptions of life and death.

A few pages later, Anzaldúa writes: 'For her, the dismemberment meant a breaking up of the old patterns, the death of the old self that had gotten fat and complacent... She had had to create her own mysteries for man had long ago outlawed women's mysteries' (134). Dismemberment equals both progress and regress here: breaking up 'old,' 'fat,' and 'complacent' patterns and creating mysteries that were lost 'long ago'. Regeneration is implicit in this backward looking. Trying to reclaim the 'mystery' of women's health and

embodiment, recalls Rosi Braidotti's critique in 'Mothers, Monsters, and Machines' of the modern worldview that deems embodied motherhood as a monstrosity requiring medical normalization. Like Anzaldúa, Braidotti (1994:176) seeks to reclaim monsters' pre-Enlightenment associations with 'something wonderful, fantastic, rare, and precious'<sup>8</sup>. Monsters, I would argue, are allies in disability ethics since they point out the insufficiency of our normative identity categories and require that we honor the role of deviation in life.

Anzaldúa's hormone imbalance was not a visible disability, but it altered the functioning of her body at a basic level, leading to sometimes unpredictable discomforts. As with her experiences of diabetes, Anzaldúa learned to expect corporeal fluidity as a part of her self, and she had to turn to frameworks outside of secular Humanist medicine in order to find value, rather than stigma, in her embodied multiplicity. Mel Chen (2012:7, 11) shares a similar experience of illness leading to a reconsideration of the shape of life. Chen, too, starts with a 'veering-away from dominant ontologies and the normativities they promulgate,' a questioning of human foundationalism brought about by contemporary developments in reproductive technologies, prosthetic devices, chemical toxicity, and other challenges to traditional understandings of bodily coherence. Putting mothers, monsters, and machines into dialogue denaturalizes human reproduction, normalizes monsters, and highlights the degrees to which embodiment is permeated by other-than-human elements. With Braidotti, Chen, and others, I welcome the openings that these other-than-Humanist developments provide for disability theory and their new configurations of honor, love, and kinship that resonate with critical race studies, feminist studies, and queer studies. I embrace, as well, the creation of new material possibilities and ethical imaginings that come with broadening our conception of human life.

### **Irrational figures and other-than-Humanist ethics**

Later in her life, Anzaldúa embraced the Aztec moon goddess Coyolxauhqui as a model for rethinking our place in the world. Here is the image we know as Coyolxauhqui, carved into a stone that was uncovered at the Templo Mayor in Mexico City in 1978 (see Figure 1 below). We never see Coyolxauhqui in the conventional shape of a woman. She is recognizable only as this composite of corporeal fragments, some with and some without flesh, arranged in a lunar circle. Life and death converge in this image that offers an alternative way of conceiving human wholeness. Rather than standing on her two legs, Coyolxauhqui's torso floats above legs that are separated in a configuration that suggests motion, as if the dismembered parts were running. Drawing from indigenous narratives like that of Coyolxauhqui, thinking beyond and without the norms instituted by colonial Humanism, enables Anzaldúa to accept fragmentation and fluidity as not just viable but sacred forms of embodiment. Coyolxauhqui's image is both terrifying and provocative: a punishment of the disobedient daughter turned into an alternate kind of agency. (*You can cut me up, but I will*

*come back with an image strong enough to motivate generations of feminist, queer, and Chicana theory!)*



*Figure 1: Coyolxauhqui Stone*

When I look at the Coyolxauhqui stone, I think about Levinas's writings on the face and the ways in which, when confronted with the face of an Other, we are wrought into an ethical relationship. In Judith Butler's interpretation, Levinas's face is not a human one: it is a resemblance of the precarity of life that cannot be captured by the representation of a human form. Since normative schemas limit what a livable life is supposed to look like, Butler (2004:144) argues that we need to highlight the ways in which precarious lives exceed the conventional frames of representation:

For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented* by the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, the representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give. (original emphasis)

For Butler, 'schemas of intelligibility' perpetuated, for instance, by mainstream media decide 'what will and will not be publicly recognizable as reality' (147). Conventional frames of the human exclude not only victims of U.S.-managed violence (Butler's topic in *Precarious Life*) but also, I would add, those who are disabled by conventional social structures and living environments. In order to represent those who are unrepresentable in the shared conventions

of the dominant culture, one must first point out the violence committed by those normative conventions. This is precisely what the Coyolxauhqui stone achieves for Anzaldúa (and others who invoke her image): its form is defined by violence and precarity. It forces us to contemplate the violence that tears apart the disobedient daughter and, perhaps, to imagine alternate possibilities for being and agency.

Yet Coyolxauhqui's story is a closed circuit. Though her association with the moon means that her body is changeable, her mythological story and her image are fixed in stone. The fluidity of the moon follows a script that cannot be disrupted, waxing and waning in a predictable fashion. I found other images in the Anzaldúa archive, though, that are more uncertain and open in their structure, more critical of the limiting 'status quo stories' (AnaLouise Keating's term) that limit how we think of the human. Anzaldúa was also a visual artist, and most of the drawings I found depict fantastical creatures: part human, part animal, part nonsense. She calls these drawings 'doodles,' a term I keep because it allows for lack of rigor and imaginative freedom. She likely did not intend the doodles I analyze here to be made public, but they provide evidence of the ways in which she used the visual to clarify some of her more abstract ideas.

In an untitled sketch from 1977 (Figure 2), a figure is emerging from, but still embedded in, an abstract background. The head and torso look human, but it is not clear how many arms the figure has, and there is no distinguishable body below the torso. One of the arms holds something that looks like a mask, on a string? It is not clear where the body ends and the background begins in the lower half of the drawing. Is there a curly tail in the middle? It's also not clear what exactly undergirds the figure: chair? animal? toilet? But the curved shapes and parallel lines of this shape are echoed in the figure, which suggests dialogue between figure and background. I see this image as a form of environmental being; like disability, it is shaped by its context. There is no determinate or autonomous form. This image literally trans-shapes (another Anzaldúan term) every shape within it and allows for many different stories to be told. It disrupts any one interpretation we might offer, at the same time that it provokes and invites interpretation.

Another doodle (Figure 3) is ambiguous in both its title – either 'Two Fishy Cats' or 'Fishy Two Cats' – and shape – conjoined animals that don't look like either fish or cat (There are two tails, but no fins or gills, no ears, and multiple antennae!). But this figure does make us think about corporeal blending, species demarcation, and the possibilities of imagined creatures. Is it fish or cat? One body or two? Does the jagged line in the middle represent separation or suture? I would answer 'neither' or 'both' to all of these binary questions.



*Figure 2: Undated drawing*



*Figure 3: Undated drawing*

A prospective title page I found in the archive (Figure 4), ‘Poems and Doodles by Gloria Anzaldúa,’ suggests that she wanted to link the work of the visual and the work of language. If the images illustrate any point from Anzaldúa’s written words, that point might be that our imaginations are limited by status quo stories; the images supplement our imaginations with shapes unknown, shapes that cannot be glossed over or translated into anything familiar. The image on the title page inserts what seem to be faces into a non-representational maze, but it also makes us wonder how we recognize a face as such. How do we know that these are faces? They are all different shapes, so why do we put them into any single category? Is it because they seem to have eyes? But what makes us think they are eyes? The dots in the apparent faces don’t all come in twos. How do we know which is figure and which is background, since the boundaries of each curve around the other? And were we even thinking about species?

A final doodle from the archive (Figure 5) has a similar maze-like pattern with words embedded within and around it. The shapes tempt us to compare them to familiar terms and objects (like brains, titles, and calendars), but they are really beyond recognition. We might assume that W. stands for ‘Wednesday’ because it appears above ‘7:30’. But it also appears next to a 4 and a letter I don’t recognize and below ‘Home Girls’, which could be a reference to the Barbara Smith’s (1983) edition published by Kitchen Table Press or something else. The butterfly-like image at the bottom defies symmetry by having ‘Wed’ in one wing and ‘Thu’ in another, and the small head with cat-like ears has what looks like an ‘M’ inside it



rather than anything resembling a cat face. Perhaps the clearest and most resonant point in this drawing is 'caramba' (on the left) –surprise, exasperation, frustration, or wonder. (Wow: what do we have here, and what assumptions are we bringing to it?)

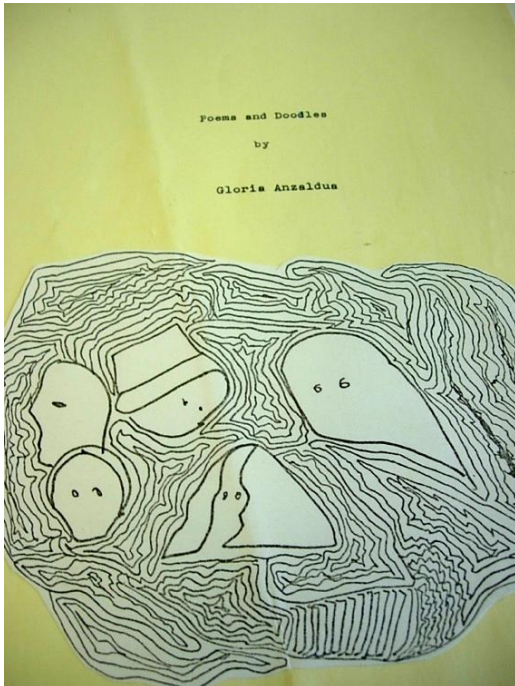


Figure 4: Undated drawing

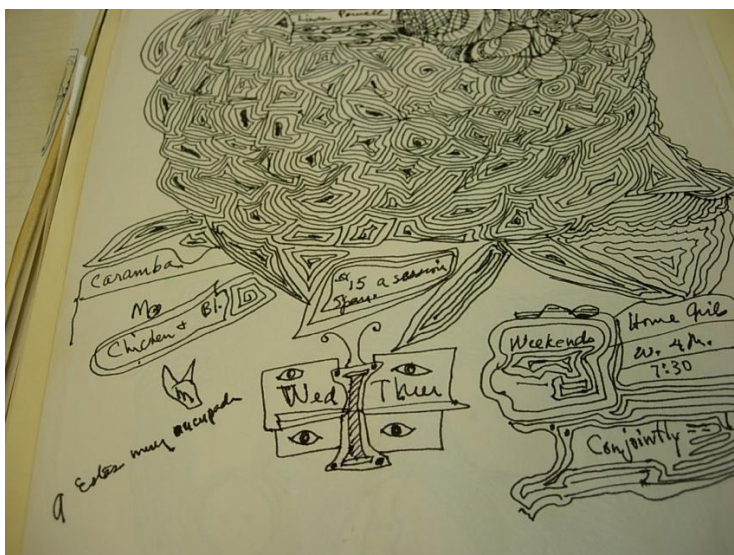


Figure 5: Undated drawing

These images ask us to jettison the filters through which we have been taught to perceive and conceive the world. In particular, they ask us to let go of the expectation that a figure (human,

animal, or plant) should be at the center of our epistemologies or our ontologies; we can think and be without ‘man.’ In her call for a truly post-human posthumanism, Claire Colebrook (2014) suggests that feminists need to question not just the male subject at the heart of Humanism but also the ways in which life under Humanism was configured around human thriving. (One should extrapolate from this point that critiquing the universalization of any dominant identity under Humanism – like whiteness or able-bodiedness – would not be sufficient either). As Colebrook (2014:9-10) speculates: ‘the very question that enabled women to challenge the rights of men, will lead to a full-scale destruction of any assumed right whatsoever...Feminism’s critique of man will not only transform humanity and its milieu but will open up a new thought of life’. Colebrook notes the turn to life in general in eco-feminism and concludes that ‘what needs to be thought today is that which cannot be thought, lived, retrieved, or revitalized as the saving grace of man or woman’ (17). I would argue that these archival doodles enact just this sort of ‘thought experiment’ that Colebrook calls for ten years after the Anzaldúa’s death. Although one might be inclined to read these images as derivations of the human figure, they not only resist being pinned down by one life form but lead us to question our rationale for finding a ‘figure’ in the drawing. I could find nine or ten eyes in doodle #4 and two heads in doodle #3, but why? What might I see if I was looking without anthropocentrism?

Imagination is an important tool for Anzaldúa in her attempts to prod the limits of human life. In the memoir, she uses imagination to challenge the narrative form of human life; in the doodles, she challenges its visual coherence or recognizability. Imagination does not have to abide by established realities, reason, or empiricism. In her un-defended doctoral dissertation, published by AnaLouise Keating as *Light in the Dark: Luz en los oscuro* in 2015, Anzaldúa (2015:36-37) discusses imagination as a creative force that generates life forms: ‘The imaginal’s figures and landscapes are experienced as alive and separate from the dreamer.’ But these works of the imagination are not therefore ‘fantasy, not reality’; rather, ‘we must redefine the imagination not as a marginal nonreality nor as an altered state, but as another type of reality’. The works of imagination help to create the reality we live in; they give form to our feelings and mold our perceptions.

Yet creating alternate life forms requires us to suspend not only our disbelief (in the ‘reality’ of imagination), but also our belief in the reality we perceive ourselves as inhabiting:

To change or reinvent reality, you engage the facultad of your imagination. You must interrupt or suspend the conscious ‘I’ that reminds you of your history and beliefs because these reminders tie you to certain notions of reality and behavior...We must empower the imagination to blur and transcend customary frameworks and conceptual categories reinforced by language and consensual reality (44-45)

If reality is ‘consensual,’ it is continually being enacted and configured by all of its



participants (human and nonhuman). Choosing to alter one's relationship to reality would challenge those with whom one shares the world to shift in response. (If we believe, for instance, that there is a spike in violent crime in our city, we will react in fear, avoiding others and thereby creating disconnections and hostilities. If we believe that our world is a safe place, we will approach all that we touch with greater sensitivity and openness). If we open our imaginations to other modes of relating, our relationships will change— as will the entities with which we relate.

As Keating (2012: 53) writes in her essay on Anzaldúa's 'poet-shaman aesthetics':

While it might seem to be common sense to dismiss this discussion as 'simply' metaphoric and thus limited exclusively to the power of disembodied, intangible words, to do so overlooks the possibility that language's causal power can provoke additional material levels of transformation. According to Anzaldúa, these linguistic images, when internalized, can trigger the imagination, which then affects our embodied state—our physical bodies—at the cellular level.

Keating derives her argument from indigenous theories of the causality of language (theories with which Anzaldúa was familiar), and she describes writing and reading as enacting a form of alchemy, citing her own experiences of transformation in response to reading Anzaldúa's work (59). Anzaldúa describes this process in her essay '*Tilli, Tlapalli*': 'The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic' (1987:66). These experiences are difficult to measure, too personal to be objective, and they challenge the bounds of rational academic discourse. And this is precisely what Anzaldúa wants to do: to make us question the limits we impose upon knowledge and upon life (our own and that of our entire ecosystem).

In the spirit of expanding what we deem thinkable, Braidotti (1994:173) critiqued the dismissal of monstrosity. Disability studies have likewise been dedicated to eradicating the view that deviations from the norm are 'eminently disposable'. Anzaldúa's imaginative figures help to expand the shape of what we regard as a viable life. She does this by reaching outside of secular individualism and by forcing readers and viewers to confront the violent exclusions committed by imperial Humanism. As Chen (2012:237) concludes:

I wish for an ethics of care and sensitivity that extends far from humans' (or the Human's) own borders. It is in queer of color and disability/crip circles...that I have often found blossoming this ethics of care and sensitivity, queerings of objects and affects accompanied by political revision, reworldings that challenge the order of things.

By looking before, after, and beyond Humanism, Anzaldúa's work resonates with the subjects

of disability studies not just in a biographical sense, but also in a theoretical sense. Her other-than-Humanist sources provide vivid examples and alternate epistemologies to enact the reworlding Chen calls for.

## **Conclusion**

In an emblematic passage from 'La serpiente,' Anzaldúa addresses her relationship with nonhuman life:

She was not as she appeared to be to others. She was the wolf in the woods, the vulture circling overhead. She was the hemlock pine, the wood wind and the night. Beneath the human mask was the animal face and under the animal was the 'thing,' the non-human face. And she was terrified of that third face...The only way not to fear the non-human world was to embrace the non-human in herself. If she let her being flow into the white pine and the spider and the night wind and if she allowed their spirits to come into her, then nothing supernatural could harm her for she too would be supernatural. (n.d.1:182)

This blending between self and wild(er)ness is presented as a form of safety: embracing the other as a part of oneself erases the distinctions between self and other and renders fear meaningless. There is no predatory, supernatural power over the human because the human has blended with the supernatural. Yet this safety is bought at the price of a loss of individual coherence and recognizability. The ethical conclusions of this sentiment are wonderful, but this blending is generally demonized in modern cultures, regarded as madness, 'the shock of two worlds merging' (Anzaldúa, n.d.1:183). Embracing such madness places Anzaldúa's worldview outside of contemporary critical or political discourse— yet also within contemporary disability discourse. I think here of Rosemarie Garland Thomson's (1996:3) embrace of the term 'freak' as still redolent of its pre-modern legacy of 'revelation' and 'awe'. Using the terms 'freak' or 'mad' in the age of neo-liberal medicine, points out radical otherness that our current institutions cannot handle.

The risk of these wild/undomesticated imaginings is that readers might not take them as seriously as Anzaldúa's better known theories (like the borderlands and mestiza consciousness), which were often embraced to the degree that they resonated with the academic discourse of liminality and hybridity. Amputated agency, inter-species shape-shifting, and supernatural bodies challenge our thinking about human subjectivity at a deeper, more fundamental level than racial hybridity, linguistic mixture, or blurring national borders. Their ethical potential, I would say, is thereby greater. Rethinking the shape of human life takes us outside of the hierarchies instituted by colonialism and contemporary sociopolitical mappings. Anzaldúa's intellectual bravery enables her to think big and to believe that our

world could be otherwise. Surely many scholars will think that these ideals are too remote to spend time on, but I think that today's status quo stories run too deep to be uprooted by anything but radical digging. The meaning of the human, itself, underlies not just hierarchies among sociopolitical identities, but also the violent exclusion of bodies that deviate from the norm. We need writers and artists to depict alternate beings and agencies that move us beyond the single-minded focus on the autonomous individual. Gracias, Gloria.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Bost (2015) for an analysis of the form and function of this archive.

<sup>2</sup> See Bost (2009) and Keating (2012) for a discussion of Anzaldúa's creative deployment of pre-colonial indigenous traditions.

<sup>3</sup> In an essay on spirituality and decolonizing the heart, Laura E. Pérez (2014) also draws a comparison between the boundaries instituted by colonialism and those instituted by the Enlightenment. In this light, decolonization must take on Humanism too. Pérez (2014: 23-24, 25) describes 'the historically specific aftereffect of colonization of the Americas and the rationalization of racialized, gendered, and sexed hierarchical orders in post-Enlightenment thought— that we are unrelated, gulfs apart from nature, from other people, even from parts of our own selves, as if our interdependence on all these levels were fantasy, delusion, superstition, or the demonic' as a 'crumbling faith act,' a fragmentation associated with our 'interpellation' 'within modern western(ized) culture that consents in various degrees to the interests of dominating economic, political, and social classes'. Embracing interdependence – with other humans as well as with other-than-human nature – would help to topple this false ideology.

<sup>4</sup> See especially the chapter 'Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan' in Anzaldúa (1987) for a discussion of sex/gender mixture and fluidity.

<sup>5</sup> The exact number of deaths varies depending upon how one defines life and how one interprets the text, but there are at least four. (Chapter Five, narrating her experience of having tumors growing in her womb and her subsequent hysterectomy, is called 'Death Four'). The first death is presumably the issuance of her birth certificate, which misspelled the names of both parents and the baby and erroneously indicated that she had been born dead (Anzaldúa, n.d.1:9). She claims the onset of menstruation at three months as a second death (271).

<sup>6</sup> In a 1975 journal entry incorporated into the manuscript of *La serpiente*, Anzaldúa (n.d.1:68) writes of tripping on magic mushrooms in order to tap into this larger 'spirit-body thing': objects in the room begin to glow and to smell, taking on a kind of vitality of their own. She begins to hear sounds from far away and to see the unconscious thoughts and fears of others (88-89). While examining her own image in the mirror, she sees her face as layers of masks. From this experience, she develops her idea of 'La Gloria Múltiple' (also

discussed in Anzaldúa, 1987: 44), a ‘Cubist-like’ self with multiple angles and many orientations at once (n.d.1: 88-90).

<sup>7</sup> Anzaldúa writes of this experience in *Borderlands*: ‘I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside’ (1987:43).

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s embrace of the term ‘freak’ and its valuation prior to the advent of Humanist thought.

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